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Interfaith
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Interfaith Dialogue: Speaking with One Another

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As a chaplain in a third level setting I see the value of religious belief and practice in the lives of many students. The day is gone when a third level college can disregard the role of faith in the personal and social well-being of its student population. In short, it is time for Ireland to get over its black and white attitude to religious belief and begin to ask how its institutions can support a more diverse, pluralist, and varied population. When diversity and equality are spoken about today one is generally presumed to refer to sexual diversity and sexual equality. Religious diversity and religious equality do not receive the same attention or energy.

Furthermore, following many years of pastoral connections with Irish emigrants abroad and immigrants into Ireland, I am convinced of the value of a person's personal faith and the membership of Churches and places of worship in their path towards integration. This is not given the recognition it deserves. The Irish establishment refers to the growing numbers of people who profess no faith in the Irish Census. There are many reasons why people tick this box. However attention to this category fails to take account of the resurgence in religion and religious belief which is largely due to globalisation. Globalisation has created situations whereby people of different faiths now live along side one another and occupy the same public space. In places where there has been an occurrence of terrorist activity people from different faiths have joined together to advocate for peace and to offer support and solidarity to those affected by these tragedies. As a result of these events and from a general desire by others to live in an environment of peace and understanding there is a presence and role of interfaith dialogue.

Ireland is relatively new to interfaith dialogue. It is only since the mid 1990's that we have experienced net immigration bringing with it people from many diverse cultural and faith backgrounds. I have been fortunate to work with two Interfaith groups in Ireland; *The Midwest Interfaith Network* and *Dublin City Interfaith Forum*

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(DCIF). Both groups aim to explore the faith of the other and seek a path of harmony and understanding without causing any member to compromise their individual beliefs. In their activity they show the importance of faith and dialogue. Their home cities recognise their importance while at times not fully understanding what they do but they are prepared to support them. The value and example of DCIF has been recognised in Europe and by groups who are working towards greater understanding in the Middle East. Interfaith activity has many expressions. Some groups focus on specific common objectives such as Peace or the Environment. Others choose the path of mutual understanding and dialogue. It is this aspect of dialogue that I wish to focus on in this article as a testament to the journey of both groups mentioned above.

As we witness an increasing number of polarizing political contexts emerging there is reason to be anxious about the implications for our societies. With this backdrop any activity that promotes pluralism and not polarity is to be welcomed. Interfaith activity fits this category while showing the transformative nature of faith in the personal and social domains. Furthermore, interfaith activity reveals the power for reconciliation and understanding among peoples and also reveals the desire among people of faith for a mature, cohesive society where diversity is a lived reality.

The healthiest way to promote faith, religion and belief today is through dialogue. It is incumbent on faith leaders to embark on programmes of interreligious dialogue and interfaith activity to show that faith is not a cause of discord but a foundation for cohesion. Pope Benedict underlined and spelt out the importance of interreligious dialogue as a necessary expression of the Church's work for the salvation of humanity. Furthermore, these interfaith initiatives offer support to many people of minority faiths who feel they have to hide their light under a bushel.

The concept of dialogue is currently at the heart of the European social project and the dialogue of faith needs to be associated with this project. It should not set itself apart from any dialogue that seeks to promote a fairer, more equitable and peaceful society. Those who ponder the future of Europe constantly refer to the importance of dialogue. Among these are people such as Jurgen Habermas, Ulrich Beck and Zygmunt Bauman. They share three specific characteristics. Firstly, and rather obviously, they emphasise the importance of dialogue in society. Secondly, none of those mentioned profess a strong personal religious belief but all have underlined the importance and significance of the role of religious belief, both personal and public, within Europe. Thirdly, they all believe in a healthy, cohesive, and pluralist society.

Habermas said, 'it makes a difference whether we speak with

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one another or about one another'.¹ Beck said that 'even the Chinese regime of authoritarian state capitalism has discovered the meaning of religion and religious education as an antidote to the moral anarchy that is breaking out with 'predatory capitalism'² and 'predatory communism'. And finally Bauman, influenced by the philosopher Gadamer, tells us that the 'Europe's task ... consists of passing on the art of everyone learning from everyone' ... of which the '*sine qua non*', for the solution of life problems of the contemporary world is friendship and 'cheerful solidarity'.³

This may be a somewhat academic framework but it certainly validates the need for dialogue among people of varied faith backgrounds. Furthermore, the characteristics of the two interfaith groups mentioned are alluded to in the previous quotes. At their various meetings and when they visit one another's places of worship they 'speak with one another and less about one another'. Having participated in and facilitated many gatherings one can see that they are characterised by friendship and cheerful solidarity. In order to assist in an understanding of the work and challenges of interfaith dialogue and reflecting on my experience I have created the following categories; *Dialogue with Self*, *Dialogue with Others*, *Dialogue with Society* and *Dialogue with Values*.

As one examines the origins of interfaith dialogue one cannot but pay tribute to *Dialogue with Self* that many members have undergone. The personal challenges arising in a person's deepest self when they embrace what is strange cannot be overstated. Before one can reach out to the other, a person has to take stock of what they truly believe themselves. Dogmas and beliefs that one could previously put on a shelf and ignore may be brought out in the open and put under the spotlight. The challenge of gentle inquiry by the other may pose a far deeper challenge than the regular disagreements I encounter with those with whom I share the same faith and beliefs. These encounters create dialogue with self that demand examination and exploration. This is not a new phenomenon. Throughout scripture we witness various people make this same journey. For example, Elijah was asked in a moment of encounter 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' (1 Kings 19:13). A simple question but it is one that cuts through to the heart and begs questions about personal faith and belief. In an earlier verse we are told that Elijah was afraid 'so he fled for his life' another translation of this verse by André Chouraqui is that he fled 'towards his being'. New situations ask new questions about our

1 This theme is developed in *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in Post-Secular Age*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

2 Ulrich Beck (2010), *A God of One's Own*, Polity Press, Cambridge, p.126.

3 Zygmunt Bauman (2011), *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*, Polity Press, Cambridge, pp. 84-5.

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manner of 'being' in the world. Moving away from what is safe, predictable and comfortable unsettles our 'being'.

Secondly, there is *Dialogue with the Other*. At times this involves sitting with those for whom there might be a historical difficulty or even animosity. There are other groups who may have an undue or even unjust dominance that they may have misused. Yet this is the 'other' that I am asked to sit with, share with, and engage with in new and imaginative ways. Furthermore, those who were once at one with me may become the 'other'. This happens when those who share my own tradition or belief system scorn me and taunt me for my willingness to engage with those who share a different belief or faith to my own.

The dialogue with others is not just a journey of personal enjoyment. Sociologists of the calibre of those mentioned earlier see dialogue as essential to the future well-being of our society. The Old and New Testaments reinforce the importance of dialogue with the stranger; one who is a stranger to me and my beliefs. We have forgotten that the whole Christian event took the form of an encounter with others in culturally diverse settings. 'Being Christian is not an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction'⁴.

Thirdly, there is the *Dialogue with Society* which is of the utmost importance and in this field the two interfaith Forums referred to earlier have made significant progress. They have convinced bodies like the City Council of the value and relevance of their work and their mission. Many of their events to date are evidence of this progress. These events may be welcomed because they highlight the importance of religious faith and interfaith activity within the spheres of identity, citizenship, cohesion and tolerance. This is all very well and worthy of note, however, and more importantly, interfaith activity requires a cultural setting, a place in the public square where it is supported and contextualised. Faith in any form, without a cultural setting, without a vision for social cohesion and solidarity is, according to one of the world's leading experts on faith and culture Olivier Roy, an expression of fanaticism.⁵ The dialogue between faith and society is a necessary two way process where one supports and validates the other.

Lastly there is a *Dialogue with Values*. One might be led to believe that interfaith dialogue is not value based. An observer might think that in order to work together values have to be put to one side. Nothing is further from the truth. In order to grow

4 Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 1.

5 Olivier Roy, *Holy Ignorance; When Religion and Culture Part Ways*, C. Hurst and Co., London.

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and develop *DCIF* and the *Mid-West Interfaith Network* subscribes to a set of values and principles that guide their membership, interactions and conduct with one another.

On some occasions those who have not undertaken the dialogue with self or others, as previously outlined, can unconsciously or consciously try to impose their values on the group. Sweeping statements like ‘a sure you are all the one anyway’ or ‘religion is a private matter’. Some who have not undertaken the same journey may see the interfaith groups as political platforms and push the group into a direction that is not at the heart of its mission. These challenges are ones that force interfaith groups back to the values by which they operate. Though the groups are informed by various belief systems they are governed by values that are common to all. One of the most difficult and discouraging experiences of interfaith groups comes from engagement with other non-faith agencies. There are some agencies who promote integration, cohesion, diversity and such policies but they may have a certain intolerance for bodies who promote faith and belief, and even interfaith activity. To dismiss any one or any group on the basis of one characteristic of that person or group is a form of racism.

These four avenues of dialogue have an underlying pastoral outlook. These expansive and progressive dialogues that have been developing in Ireland provide a living antidote to many of the problems emerging in our world today. Interfaith dialogue is a radical step in today’s society for those involved bringing a new level of awareness which in its turn is an enormous personal challenge. Let’s be honest: sometimes we’d love to just hunker down and avoid what’s going on. According to the sociologist Robert Putnam this is what most people do in the face of a changing society; he coined the term ‘hunkering down’ in his work on diversity entitled *Bowling Alone*.

I preached a sermon recently and some commented afterwards, ‘you talked about community’, I replied, ‘Yes’. They then said, ‘there is no longer any community only individuals who choose to help you and individuals who choose not to help you’. It was hard for me to admit it but there is a lot of truth in what they said. There is no doubt that we can consider that dialogue with others is no longer the default position in a society where outlooks may be more individualistic and where there is evidence of an accompanying lack of social structure. But can we develop diverse, pluralistic societies without dialogue? Most contemporary pastoral settings, even the parish, today require a commitment, knowledge, and fluency with interfaith and interreligious dialogue. There have been persistent and gentle calls from Pope Francis and Pope Benedict XVI for more engaging dialogue with other faiths and cultures in a variety

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of pastoral settings. In an article on how religion is confounding the world today Charles Mathewes points out that our fixation on religious decline has led us to largely ignore the ways in which religious faith and belief remain active in the world today. He said, 'Religion is not going away; belief is not withering with the expansion of voting or antibiotics or gender equality. Our societies are not secularizing so much as pluralizing, becoming sites that host multiple and quite radically different ways of being human in our common world, many of them religious'.⁶

Interfaith dialogue is an example of a radically different way of expressing what is important. We'd be wise not to just welcome it but to engage in it. Too many religious conversations in Ireland today are fuelled by narcissism and fear. Fr. Luigi Guissani, who founded *Communion and Liberation*, said that if we engage in such conversations we end up suffocating our own being. It is time to generate conversations of hope, to breath in the fresh air of renewal and one way to achieve this is to engage in dialogue with others who believe in the importance of faith and belief in our world today. After all, in the words of Pope Francis in Assisi last September, 'Our future consists in living together'.

6 Charles Mathewes. 'Can You Change Your Life?' *The Hedgehog Review*, Vol. 17, No. 3, p.39.

Towards inclusivity. "If someone is gay, and searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge? We shouldn't marginalize people for this. They must be integrated into society". With this single, seemingly spontaneous press conference comment, Pope Francis decisively moved official Catholic discourse on LGBT persons away from what one high ranking prelate had called "a theology of contempt" for gay persons. Yet, this papal intervention was immediately characterized as signalling no change in official church doctrine, but only a more compassionate and pastoral tone in its presentation.

- BRADFORD HINZE AND PETER PHAN, (ed.), *Learning from all the Faithful*, Pickwick Publications, OR, 2016, p.170.