

Interreligious Dialogue in Practice. Letter to a New Bishop

Felix Körner SJ

koerner@unigre.it

Gregorian University



Felix Körner was born in 1963 in Offenbach, Germany. He studied philosophy in Munich and theology at the Heythrop College. He holds MA and PhD in Islamic Studies (thesis under prof. Rotraud Wielandt, Bamberg) and STD in dogmatics (paper under prof. Barbara Hallensleben, Fribourg). From 2002 to 2008 he taught Muslim-Christian dialogue in Ankara. At present, he is a professor of dogmatics and theology of religions at the Gregorian University in Rome. His research covers Koran hermeneutics, contemporary Turkey, ecumenism and sacramental theology.

The present paper is the result of a meeting with newly ordained bishops, organised by the Pontifical Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, on September 19, 2014.

I. Mission

The Church's mission today is reconciliation, healing and making the Kingdom of God present in the world¹. In other words, the Church has to evangelise; and "inter-religious dialogue is a part of the Church's evangelising mission"². This formula is a theologically profound affirmation; it requires unfolding in the light of five questions.

¹ Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* (176).

² John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio* (55).

1. What is evangelisation? With the erection of a new dicastery and the “Year of Faith”, perhaps too much has already been said on “New Evangelisation”. If one explains New Evangelisation as a regaining of lost Church territory, one is reducing its theological depth to a revivalism or *reconquista*. “Evangelisation” needs to be treated as the Catholic alternative to evangelism. As opposed to any type of activism which would only count faith change successes, evangelisation considers the Good News to be the powerful inspiration to shape all human living conditions in the sense of the Gospel³. Evangelisation in its full sense is also directed towards the Church itself, because God’s pilgrim people, too, is in need of conversion⁴. Therefore, true evangelisation is also a self-critical re-reading of what we have done so far under the label of the Gospel of Christ.

2. What is dialogue? Dialogue, before being a particular type of activity among others, is the mode that needs to mark all our doing and being⁵. It is the humility to accept that my interlocutor is already touched by God’s Spirit and that through him or her, Christ is communicating something new to me. That is true also of interreligious dialogue: it is a chance of mutual “purification and enrichment”⁶.

³ II Vatican Council, *Apostolicam actuositatem* (2) gives a soteriological description of what lay Christians, here lay believers in particular, do: “They exercise the apostolate in fact by their activity directed to the evangelisation and sanctification of human beings and to the penetrating and perfecting of the temporal order through the spirit of the Gospel. In this way, their temporal activity openly bears witness to Christ and promotes the salvation of humanity”.

⁴ John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio* (57) envisages a mutual advancement for those who encounter believers of other religious traditions; for the Church, that is a positive challenge, says John Paul II: “Dialogue leads to inner purification and conversion which, if pursued with docility to the Holy Spirit, will be spiritually fruitful”.

⁵ Secretariat for Non-Christians, *Dialogue and Mission*, 1984 (29): “Before all else, dialogue is a manner of acting, an attitude; a spirit which guides one’s conduct. It implies concern, respect, and hospitality toward the other. It leaves room for the other person’s identity, modes of expression, and values. Dialogue is thus the norm and necessary manner of every form of Christian mission, as well as of every aspect of it, whether one speaks of simple presence and witness, service, or direct proclamation (CIC 787, n. 1). Any sense of mission not permeated by such a dialogical spirit would go against the demands of true humanity and against the teachings of the Gospel”.

⁶ Benedict XVI, in his final Christmas discourse to the Pontifical Curia, December 21, 2012. Pope Francis uses the formula, which goes back to *Dialogue and Mission* of 1984 (21), [in:] *Evangelii gaudium* (250).

3. What is the relation between interreligious dialogue and proclamation? It would counter the all permeating character of dialogue to distribute some of our time and energy to it and other to proclaiming the Good News of Christ. It is helpful to reflect on how we are using the word “and” in such cases. While titles like “Dialogue and Mission” or “Dialogue and Proclamation” imply an interpenetration and mutual illumination of the two dynamics, a formulation like “Dialogue in Truth and Charity”⁷ should not make us believe that sometimes we need to resort to Charity (dialogue), when what we really want is impossible: Truth (proclamation). The point of being Christians has never been an attempt to balance charity and truth like a pair of values; rather, the Church strives to always live out Christ fully, who is truth and love. That is why Ephesians speaks of an ἀληθεύειν ἐν ἀγάπῃ (being truthful in charity - 4,15) and Benedict XVI of *Caritas in Veritate*⁸. The “and” in “Dialogue in truth and charity” is perhaps not as innocent as it looks. For interfaith encounters, the relation between dialogue and proclamation means this: it is a unique liberation to accept Christ’s Paschal mystery and we want everybody to come to know it – but many will not accept it – now, this is not the end of our relationship with them – rather, new areas of encounter, interaction and collaboration are, thus, opening up.

4. What is the goal of interreligious dialogue? Rather than talking of our “agenda” in dialogue, it is better to what our *hopes* in it are. Five can be listed: we hope to find practical solutions in issues of conflict – we hope to understand our fellow human beings’ background and foundation of their needs better – we hope to discover our own faith and tradition better – we hope that others might discover Jesus Christ – we hope that even with those who do not join the Church we can formulate and live truly humane values. This list also shows that, as opposed to ecumenical dialogue, the point of interfaith encounters, including theological exchanges, is not to find formula to express our common faith. Difference in religious belonging and theological divergence do not impede a constructive societal togetherness. To put it simply, we can be friends in difference.

⁷ That is the name of a 2014 document of the Pontifical Council of Interreligious Dialogue.

⁸ Cf., also *Ecclesiam suam* (82, in several other languages – 85): “In a dialogue conducted with this kind of foresight, truth is wedded to charity and understanding to love”. And, more recently, *Evangelii gaudium* (250): “An attitude of openness in truth and in love must characterize the dialogue with the followers of non-Christian religions”.

5. What, then, to do? Here, I want to make some suggestions to the local Churches' bishops; I will proceed in three steps: person-time-place.

II. Action

1. Person. Every diocese should have a representative for interreligious relations. Titles like "Interlocutor for interfaith relations" or "Director of the office for interreligious dialogue" are just as apt as a more specific "Officer for Christian-Muslim contacts". Persons responsible in this area need a special formation and/or a long-standing experience in friendly relations with neighbours from other religious traditions, sound theological competence, a healthy judgement and a mature spirituality: the representative must be a person of peace. It is not necessarily a priest. The person should not be given the office if she/he cannot develop a certain enthusiasm for interreligious dialogue. It is unwise to mix your interfaith representation with any ecumenical office; but Jewish-Christian relations can, differing from the Roman division, come under interreligious dialogue. The representative needs to be in exchange with his/her colleagues from the other dioceses of the same Bishops' Conference, for feedback, criticism, discernment, inspiration and encouragement. It is easily possible that she/he will be criticised by a certain type of Catholics for being too close to "those others", for being a traitor of the Church's cause or for not having a clear identity and solid doctrine. Therefore, she/he needs your special support. The representatives are supposed to work on seven levels:

- a) Acquaintance – they need to have friendly contacts with leaders of other religious communities and be able to judge which occasion they might be invited or addressed to. Also, they might suggest to those leaders to install, on their side, an analogous representative like themselves and care for natural, friendly relations with their counterparts.
- b) Advice – they need to have a basic knowledge on the theological, canonical, legal and pastoral problems that arise in interreligious situations, especially in interreligious partnerships, and be able to give competent counselling, or refer people in need to a specialised counsellor.
- c) Inspiration – they can encourage local, e.g. parish groups, to interfaith relations. Often, these groups need to be sustained and given new ideas after the first enthusiasm has evaporated. They can also motivate schools to have interreligious awareness days, churches to orga-

- nise a “day of open doors,” and, for example, the youngsters preparing for confirmation to visit their peers from another religious community.
- d) Information – they can provide a database and basic library to facilitate understanding of what is going on in other religious communities; but he/she will often also be the first to be asked by non-Christians about the Catholic faith. There is a rich, solid and multilingual website that responds to theological questions from one particular religion: the “Muslims ask – Christians answer” service launched by Christian W. Troll SJ⁹.
- e) Mediation – they will also be the first person to be called to act in case of a grave problem. The question is always, how can a next step towards peace be walked together? Since often the interfaith representative is a young person, it is wiser if the bishop himself takes the lead in a moment of traumatising conflict; but his interreligious expert is called to mark out such situations, give advice, and already in calmer times, prepare a scenario.
- f) Formation – they will also have to give impulses for the continued education of protagonists and parishioners. In a catechists’ or priests’ meeting it may be sometimes them to give a talk, sometimes, they might find a representative of another community to speak there, or invite a Catholic expert.
- g) Feedback – they must also point out to their bishops where they feel – even in the bishop himself – a lack of interfaith sensitivity, by explaining how a gesture or word might be understood by others; further, they are to identify which other fields of interreligious attention need a diocesan commitment. For example, often a check-up is needed in what textbooks, teachers and classroom atmospheres transmit about religious variety, respect for difference and strategies of conflict resolution.

A larger diocese or, at least, the Bishops’ Conference in places where a non-Christian religion is a major factor for Church life, there ought to be an expert who has studied at doctoral level that other religion, with linguistic research, knowledge of story and texts, but also in

⁹ See: www.antwortenanmuslime.com (German); www.answers-to-muslims.com (English); www.islamacevaplar.com (Turkish); www.asilatulmuslimin.com (Arabic); www.porseshhayemusulmanan.com (Farsi); www.reponsesauxmusulmans.com (French); www.menjawabmuslim.com (Indonesian); www.risposteaimusulmani.com (Italian); www.otvety musulmanam.com (Russian); www.respuestasalislam.com (Spanish); www.muslimsawalmasihijawab.com (Urdu).

contact with contemporary members of another religious tradition. No living religion is a static set of doctrines. There are movements of modernisation – sometimes simplistic or radicalising – and movements of a serious rethinking within the formative systems of the other religion. Therefore, an expert-to-be should also be aware of, and in dialogue with, the contemporary schools of thought and development within the religious community to be studied. Such a Catholic expert will, as a theologian acquainted with historical criticism and hermeneutic questions, often be able to challenge and accompany such rethinking movements in a helpful way.

III. Time

1. Feasts. Every year, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue writes a letter to the Muslims on the Occasion of the end of Ramaḍān, for Buddhists on Vesakh and for the Hindus on Deepavali. Mind that the dates are shifting; but they can be found online. If the local ordinary does not transmit the letter from Rome, the addressees will hardly receive it. Why not take the opportunity? Also, you can write your own letter.

2. Invitations. Muslims will also want to invite you to an Iftār meal. It is the evening “break fast” during the month of Ramaḍān; other religious communities have similar occasions and invitations. It would be very good for your own flock, for your non-Catholic neighbours – and often also for your own spiritual enrichment – to accept such an invitation. You may think of Christ, who accepted invitations from others, too. It is normally not at all embarrassing to ask whether you might bring another person, which might, then, be your interfaith responsible. During the meal, you will usually be expected to give a speech. In a Muslim setting, you can always quote *Nostra aetate* (3). Also, speaking about Jesus and Mary is highly appreciated; and Pope Francis is a convincing witness for many non-Christians. A quote from *Evangelii gaudium* 250sq. is clearly in place.

3. Call. Muslims structure their days with five prayer times; a call to prayer is sounded today via loud-speakers. Since the first daily prayer is at sunrise, the call can be disturbing. Good will and patience is required for a sound mediation here.

IV. Place

1. Territory. Help people to get beyond a territorial way of thinking. There are no “Christian”, “Muslim” or “Buddhist” countries defined by geography. Many believers of all religious communities are open to the argument of religious liberty: faith is a loving selfgiving; therefore it presupposes freedom; forced love is simply not love.

2. Violence. Also, most non-Christians living in your diocese will want to live in peace and security; they will disapprove of violence committed in the name of their religion. They cannot be held responsible for the injustice of what is going on, say, in Saudi Arabia or the brutality of the so-called “Islamic State”. We do not want to be accused of the Christian (!) atrocities of, e.g., recent U.S. administrations, like the Abū Gayb torture prison, either. It is also important to know that others hardly ever hate Christians but typically identify Christianity with Western successes and look at us with an inferiority complex or in fear of losing their own identity. – It is always wise to present yourself in honest humility, in Jesus’ own style, and to point out that human beings realise their identity precisely in friendship with others. If an incident of violence has happened, religious leaders need to condemn such deeds convincingly. Keep in contact with them especially in such times of crisis; and remind the Christians entrusted to you that Jesus gives the example and the courage for a non-violent peace building.

3. Prayer. There are good occasions for praying in the presence of non-Christians. We distinguish between interreligious prayer – recited by members of different religions together and multi-religious prayer – different prayers for each religion, recited subsequently in an interreligious gathering with the others attending in respectful silence. The Assisi style is multireligious rather than interreligious prayer. For public occasions, that is the right orientation. In a private occasion, when, for example, a sick Muslim you visit asks you to pray with him, you will, of course, not prevent him, e.g., from repeating your words¹⁰. Public prayer by a Church representative is automatically a witnessing to our faith, especially to what prayer is, for us. In prayer we – at least implicitly – always acknowledge that we can only truly pray because of God’s gracious gift of communion; our prayer is founded on the history

¹⁰ During a private occasion, when, for example, a sick Muslim you visit asks you to pray with him, you will, of course, not prevent him, e.g., from repeating your words.

of salvation testified to by the Bible¹¹. An interreligious prayer cannot witness to this gratitude of our prayer “through Christ”.

4. Churches. Our churches are, already as buildings, excellent occasions to explain our faith. Some churches have written sheets that do not only inform about the history and architecture but also respond to the typical perplexities of non-Christians concerning the religious meaning of the spine and the gate, the holy water and the collection box, the stained glass windows and the pews, the pulpit and the altar, the tabernacle and the cross, the red light and the candles, Our Lady and the Stations of the Cross. Also, some churches have good experience in forming “church guides”: faithful who find an accessible language to open up to outsiders the significance of our symbols.

5. Hospitality. Letting individuals or a group of a non-Christian religious community pray in a Catholic Church is not problematic. It should be a gesture of hospitality, e.g., for people travelling or while their own house of prayer cannot be used. Such hospitality has its own rules and an exceptional character. Of course, this is a sensitive subject because some Catholics might fear that the others are claiming Christian territory. Such preoccupations can be discussed with the parties involved¹².

6. Liturgy. Believers of other religions can attend our liturgies, and they are welcome. They should however be told that Holy Communion will not be administered to them, which is not a lack of hospitality: rather, receiving the body of Christ is an act of confession of one’s belonging to the body of Christ, the Church – a confession the visitors surely do not want to make. If they want to belong to the body of Christ, there is catechesis. Also, Christians can visit non-Christian prayer services. They can pray in silence or watch in respect; repeating the gestures of the others is inappropriate; even where it is not insulting but encouraged, it is a sign of belonging which the follower of Christ does not want to give.

¹¹ The other argument, that we cannot pray with non-Christians because we have a different understanding of God (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue in Truth and Charity. Pastoral Orientations for Interreligious Dialogue* 82) is less convincing; my understanding of God may also be fundamentally different from another Christian. After all, according to this criterion, I could not even pray with Mother Mary.

¹² Again, *Dialogue in Truth and Charity* is alarmist here (84).

7. Caritas. Christian charity work is by definition a service given independent of religious belonging. In our hospitals, chaplains and other pastoral staff can acquire deeper competence in how to help non-Christian patients and their families. In a more structured ambience, it may be a good idea to establish a pastoral care in coordination with the relevant non-Christian authorities. In many religions, there is no, or no established, reflected, tradition of pastoral care. Traditionally, the *imām* or rabbi, for example, may have judicial and liturgical, rather than pastoral functions; but recently, there has been a change of role expectation and self-understanding. Other communities might be helped with our experience and formative structures for pastoral care.

8. Education. A formative aim for our schools and seminars is “interreligious competence”. That presupposes a spiritual grounding in the friendship with Christ; from there, good formula to express and verbalise the mystery of Christ will develop. In seminaries and other places of theological education, one teacher should have particular interreligious expertise. It is risky to send, for example, a young priest for a deep study of another religion. Not that, normally, his Christian faith is in danger; but his colleagues and many lay people will challenge him for not doing what a shepherd should do. Also, his future integration into the regular teaching curriculum of theology often proves difficult. Still, there are very good reasons to invest quality people in this mission. One reason is that the whole of a theological institution will get new inspiration from such a teacher; and interreligious competence does not primarily refer to knowledge about the doctrines of others – it is, rather, an occasion to clarify Catholic reflection. After all, non-Christian fellow believers¹³ ask us, often, the most interesting questions. Interreligious dialogue is, in this sense, a *locus theologicus*.

V. Contradiction

A bishop open to interreligious dialogue will be in trouble. Recurring objections to interreligious dialogue are the following four:

1. Lack of genuine interlocutors. Other religions have – one hears – no theologians; or, they may have a theological tradition but the representatives we get to speak with lack theological training; or, our interlocutors are the softies, while those who stand the true line would

¹³ Benedict XVI used the word *autre croyant* for the fellow Muslim and Jew in *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente* (19).

never dialogue; or, people in dialogue come to us for selfish purposes; or, they represent only a small minority of the other religion.

It is true that sometimes other religious leaders try to instrumentalise a multireligious alliance for purposes that only apparently square with the Gospel. For example, at times we are invited to “condemn homosexuality” together. We can then explain the Catholic view that homosexuals are to be respected. Further, in response to the objection, one can point out that it may take time to find truly influential interlocutors; but also, the friendship with a person of limited representativity and repercussion can prove to be a bridge to more understanding. Furthermore, a professionally conducted diocesan interreligious programme often also challenges the other side to set up a clearer, and more representative, structures.

2. Lack of staff and time. We have – this is another objection – more important things to do. The option for the poor or for the youth is priority, and one cannot do everything. Interreligious dialogue is for dioceses that have excess human resources.

A reflection starting from this doubt should take into account that the responsibility of the Catholic Church present in any part of the world is to be the leaven for God’s Kingdom, is to be the bridge builder for understanding, reconciliation and peace. If the Church is not taking on this responsibility, it is betraying its mission for selfish concerns.

3. Lack of success. At least since Vatican II, the Church is involved in interreligious dialogue. What is the result? More Christians are persecuted, more religious violence is undermining formerly harmonious societies: in short – one might conclude – dialogue simply does not function.

In reaction to that objection it is, first of all, worthwhile pointing out that one can make a similar objection to the whole existence of the Church: it has been around for 2000 years, and humanity still lives in selfish greed exploiting each other. Both remarks, the one questioning the effectiveness of dialogue and the one questioning the effectiveness of the Church are helpfully considered together. Of course, we have not done all the good we should have done; but some good has come about – compassion, for example, is a value in many cultures now, and astonishing friendships have grown. We need to improve our activities, but human weakness does not disprove the necessity of the institution. On the point of Christians persecuted it is also worthwhile remarking that the Catholic Church wants to raise an awareness of the problem of discrimination against any religion.

4. Loss of missionary conviction. In the eyes of its critics, a commitment to interreligious dialogue is a sign of – or path towards – fading vigour in trying to win others for Christ.

A profound answer to this will take the worries seriously; the driving force behind any missionary activity must be the hope, nourished by the Spirit of Christ, that things can become better, and that we have a role to play in this history. The spiritual energy nourishing any Catholic commitment – also the commitment to interreligious dialogue – is, however, precisely this: the hope that God will be transforming this world into a better place, and that he calls us to collaborate in this transformation. So, the vigour for dialogue and the vigour for proclamation are no alternatives. Those who really pray and work for evangelisation, are also sincere in their relations with other believers. Pope Francis gives a great example here. Another aspect should be added; a Christian coming to know other religions discovers more clearly the joy and liberation of living in Christ.

Conclusion

Dialogue criticism is interestingly common also in Church contexts. When you do your first steps as religious leader in interreligious dialogue, you risk to be scolded by your adversaries, and even by your friends, for being naïve and a weakling, for betraying your own mission, indeed your own religion, and for not seeing the real agenda of others. It may help you to remember that Jesus has been accused of all that, too, by adversaries and friends. Jesus obeyed and trusted his Heavenly Father and therefore led the risky life of meekness.

“Our dialogue must be accompanied by that meekness which Christ bade us learn from Himself. ... It is peaceful, has no use for extreme methods, is patient under contradiction and inclines towards generosity”¹⁴.

¹⁴ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam suam* 81 (in several other languages, 83).



FELIX KORNER SJ

**How Interreligious Dialogue can be Christian Witness.
Letter to a New Bishop****Abstract**

How can a local Church be, at the same time, a credible, convincing witness to Christ's Kingdom and pro-active in the attitude of openness, reconciliation, understanding and collaboration? In other words, how to be God's people in mission and in dialogue? *Letter to a New Bishop* offers theological grounds and provides some suggestions and material for a truly Catholic encounter with other believers. It begins with a brief overview of the relevant terminology: mission, evangelisation, interreligious dialogue and proclamation. It then proposes several concrete propositions of how to set up and run a diocesan office, or an organisation, charged with interreligious dialogue and related matters. The *Letter* addresses also some common misconceptions about the idea of interreligious dialogue, and encourages its advocates to carry on this difficult, but so desperately needed, work.

Keywords: Interreligious dialogue, theology of religions, Christian-Muslim encounter, pastoral programme.

FELIX KORNER SJ

**Chrześcijańskie świadectwo w dialogu międzyreligijnym.
List do Nowego Biskupa****Streszczenie**

W jaki sposób Kościół może praktykować postawę otwartości, pojednania, zrozumienia i współpracy, niosąc zarazem wiarygodne i przekonujące świadectwo o Królestwie Bożym? Innymi słowy, w jaki sposób winniśmy być chrześcijanami, a przy tym ludźmi misji i dialogu? *List do Nowego Biskupa*, teologicznie spójny, stanowi zaproszenie do skorzystania z kilku propozycji w tym względzie. Po krótkim przeglądzie terminologii tematu jak misja, ewangelizacja, dialog międzyreligijny i proklamacja, jego autor przechodzi do konkretnych sugestii dotyczących ustanowienia i prowadzenia specjalnej komórki, lub organizacji diecezjalnej, obciążonej zadaniem prowadzenia dialogu międzyreligijnego i zajmowania się wszelkimi innymi związanymi z nim tematami. W dalszym ciągu Listu jego autor zmierza się z kilkoma najbar-

dziej rozpowszechnionymi błędnymi mniemaniem na temat dialogu międzyreligijnego, oraz zachęca jego zwolenników do kontynuowania tego trudnego, ale jakże potrzebnego, dzieła.

Słowa kluczowe: dialog międzyreligijny, teologia religii, relacje między chrześcijanami i muzułmanami, program duszpasterski.