

## **SOWERS OF PROPHETIC HOPE**

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The echo of the XXI Plenary Assembly of the UISG that was held in Rome from 6 to 10 May 2019 continues resonating. The theme “Sowers of Prophetic Hope,” which the participating Superiors General faced and developed from different points of view, is the theme of this issue of the Bulletin as well.

Through reflections and experiences, we will see how we can be “sowers of hope” in areas such as interculturality, interreligious dialogue, welcoming migrants, missions in conflict-ridden lands, the Synod for the young.

**Sr. Adriana Carla Milmanda, SSpS**

***Intercultural Life as a Sign of Prophetic Hope***

The good news of the Spirit is that the historical conjuncture in which we find ourselves today invites us to assume the multiculturalism of our communities, societies, and pastoral services as a possibility for conversion and transformation instead of seeing it as a problem to be solved. It is not and will not be easy; it will not give us the security and stability that we have lost and long for. There are no recipes to ensure success. However, if interculturality, as a radically inclusive Project of the Kingdom that Jesus inaugurated, captures our imagination, it will have the extraordinary power to make our communities into the sign that today’s divided, fragmented, and conflictual world needs and is calling for.

**Prof. ssa Donna Orsuto**

***Sowers of prophetic hope: The call to interreligious dialogue***

Religious have a particular responsibility to foster a love that casts out fear. Some scholars say that the phrase “do not be afraid” occurs in one form or another 366 times in the Bible, one for every day of the year including leap year! We see that a culture of encounter and dialogue flourishes when people are not paralyzed by fear. It takes incredible courage to risk reaching out to the other, especially after experiences of extreme violence, but when people have had the the courage to move beyond their fears and risk reaching out to the other, the results have been transformative.

**Dewi Maharani**

***Diversity is nature but tolerance and respect should be nurtured***

“Diversity is nature but tolerance and respect should be nurtured” These words spoken by an Indonesian diocesan priest strike me as so true. The question that faces us today is this: how can you and I nurture tolerance and respect of others in those around us?

**Elena Dini**

***Experiences of Interreligious Dialogue***

I hope that we will increasingly be able to be positively challenged by our non Christian brothers and sisters. I hope we will be willing to discover God's action in their life because the Spirit blows beyond the boundaries of the visible Church.

**Samantha Lin**

***Reflections on Interreligious Dialogue***

Dialoging doesn't just mean talking about your faith in a room for a set period of time – dialogue means being willing to share your life, all parts of it, with someone of a different faith tradition and being open to *learning* from them.

**Suor Elvira Tutolo, SDC**

***Sowers of Hope in Berberati, Central African Republic***

I am here bringing you the cry of a people and a martyred Church. This is the situation of the man attacked by the brigands and left half dead on the road leading down from Jerusalem to Jericho... from Bangui to Bossangoa, from Bambari to Alindao, from Berberati to Gamboula. I have come from the Central African Republic, which has been awaiting the "Good Samaritan" since the beginning of 2013.

**Sr. Elisabetta Flick, SA**

***Sowers of Hope in the Context of Migration***

To patiently and tirelessly sew the thread of hope back into the fabric of the current context of migration and to be women who sow hope, we are invited, like Mary of Magdala, the first disciples, invited as Abraham and the prophets, to cultivate faith that is capable of hoping against all hope.

**Sr. Sally M. Hodgdon, CSJ**

***Seeds of Hope from the 2018 Synod on Youth***

My experience of the Youth Synod was truly a grace as I saw the Spirit move among all of us, youth, sisters, priests, bishops, cardinals, opening our hearts to new perspectives and new hope. I would like to share with you Four Seeds of Hope I saw emerging from this Synod.

# INTERCULTURAL LIFE AS A SIGN OF PROPHETIC HOPE

Sr. Adriana Carla Milmanda, SSPS

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*Original in Spanish*

Dear Superiors General,

It is an honor for me to be speaking today before you, who are the representatives of so many Congregations and so many Sisters dispersed throughout the whole world. This is certainly a situation and an experience that I never imagined, and I appreciate the confidence that the UISG shown me by inviting me. I, therefore, thank the organizers for granting me this honor, and I thank God for making my adolescent dream of “reaching the ends of the world” a reality. God, sooner or later, fulfills our deepest dreams... though in His own way and in His own time! ... Instead of reaching every corner of the earth, He brings those corners to me, through you and so many other encounters that I have lived because of the theme of intercultural life and mission, which I have been deepening in a special way for a few years now.

As a Missionary Servant of the Holy Spirit, I belong to a Congregation where multicultural and international life and mission are an essential part of our founding history and of our charism. However, my particular interest in this topic was really sparked by my personal experience of joy, frustration, pain, and learning when I was sent to launch a new missionary presence in the Fiji Islands (in the Pacific). We belonged to our Congregation’s Australian province, and I had to live—in a span of 5 years—in community with Sisters from Papua New Guinea, Germany, Indonesia, India, Benin; and I am from Argentina. Most of the time, we

were only 2, and only one remained for 2 years. At the same time, we were advancing on our path in a country that, in turn, is composed of the local population and an almost numerically equal group of people who have come from India. Motivated by this experience, full of joy, discoveries, pain, misunderstandings, frustrations, and much learning, I then decided to study the topic of cultures and mission from the academic viewpoint in order to process and learn from the experience that supports me in the present situations and encourages me as I look towards the future.

Contact and exchange between cultures of the most diverse corners of the world are increasing and being imposed on us in a progressively accelerated way. Favored by our globalized era's means of communication and transportation, today, there are indeed very few groups that remain isolated from contact with others. The phenomena of migrations and massive displacements that are compulsive or provoked by violence, the climate change, political or religious persecution, poverty, xenophobia or the lack of opportunities, means that every day millions of people are moving from one side of the world to the other.

In the last 20 years, multiculturalism and interculturality have become a cross-cutting issue that is debated in fields as varied as education, health, philosophy, and the business world, among others. At the theological level, we have been concerned for many years with the "inculturation" of the faith, the Gospel, the liturgy, the missionaries, and so on. Inculturation answers the question of how to incarnate the faith, shared by the missionaries coming from the "outside" or "ad-gentes," in the local culture in such a way that the transmitted faith can become part of the local culture and be expressed through the symbolism, values, and imagination of that culture. This question responded to an ecclesial context where the mission was predominantly one-directional: from the "evangelized" countries to "non-evangelized" countries or pagans (as they were called). Today, the reality is much more complex and multidirectional, so that in missiology we have already begun to speak of the Church's "inter-gentes" mission (instead of ad-gentes) and of inter-culturation, which, without canceling the still existing challenge of inculturation, incorporates the challenges and opportunities of the new multidirectional context in the world and the Church today.

Through the consecrated life, called to be at the margins of the Church, this reality also reaches us, makes us move, impacts us... within our communities and beyond, in the mission and the apostolates. However, I am convinced that we have a "treasure" of lived experience of which we are not even aware. Many of our Congregations were already at the forefront of multicultural life for nearly a century before the world started talking about it. For others, the experience is more recent. However, it is this capital of experience and knowledge that we are called today to share with one another and to put at the service of humanity and the Church. On the other hand, in order to capitalize on this wealth of experience, we are challenged to open up to the tools that other, more specific fields are developing on the basis of philosophical thought, communication sciences, education, sociology, etc.

This combination of life experience, theological reflection, and the indication of possible tools is what I am going to try to present today in the short time that we are going to share. Can intercultural life become one of the seeds of the prophetic hope that we, as consecrated women, want to sow in today's world? I am convinced that the answer to this question is positive and that it is urgent for each of our Congregations and the entire Church to consider it.

Yet, the most pressing issue, about which most Congregations are concerned, is how to live it and how to do it. I will, therefore, try to present this topic in four steps:

1. Clarification of the concept of interculturality and related concepts
2. How to live in an intercultural key
3. The weakness and power to become a sign
4. The urgency of an intentional choice based on prophecy and for hope

## 1. The Concept of Interculturality and Related Concepts

We cannot approach the concept of interculturality without clarifying other terms that are related and/or frame what interculturality means and proposes:

*Multiculturalism:* When we talk about a multicultural group, event or life, we are highlighting the fact that its participants or members come from different cultures; for example, a parish, a company, a city, and even a country, can be multicultural. To emphasize the fact that people also come from different nationalities, we will say that the group is multicultural and international. However, this fact, in itself, does not imply any relationship or interaction between its members. I can live my whole life in a city inhabited by neighbors of different cultural origins, but this will not necessarily lead me to want to learn their language, taste their food, understand their values, etc. Using a diagram, we could represent the situation as follows:<sup>1</sup>



*Trans-cultural experience:* Now, let's say that a person of culture "A" decides to move to the neighborhood of culture "B." The person would be going into a cross-cultural experience. Note that we are talking about a "move" for a certain extent in time and not a mere tourist visit. The move, in this example, implies a degree of commitment and risk that is not assumed when we are just passing through and consider ourselves tourists, visitors, explorers or, at worst, conquerors or colonizers...

On a diagram, it would look like this:

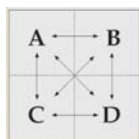


This experience of learning and adapting to another culture, different from the one in which we have been socialized, is called acculturation. Acculturation is, in itself, a challenging and enriching experience once we have overcome the stages that normally occur to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the magnitude of the cultural difference and a person's personality and/or preparation. In general, these stages go from a first idyllic love of the "different," to a deep rejection of that same "difference," until a balance is reached between the appreciation for the qualities and the recognition of the shadows of the other culture and of one's own.

When that balance is not reached, a person risks being stuck in a dream that does not correspond to reality (Sisters who "maternalize" the assumed culture and, then, act and speak of "them" as "poor little ones..." or who are unable to develop relationships with the local people, while all their friends and references continue being, despite the passing of time, those of their place of origin and they maintain excessive contact with them and/or with the news from home). Or, on the contrary, they suffer a cultural shock that plunges them into depression, apathy, hypochondria, excessive concern for their health and/or cleanliness, excessive sleep or food, etc. These are "symptoms" of a cultural shock to which we should pay close attention when they continue in time after a transcultural transfer.

I mention these processes that occur in transculturation because they often coincide with the formation of the multicultural community. It is, therefore, very important to bear in mind that in many cases people are not only adapting to the culture of a new place and perhaps also learning a new language—which, in itself, is already highly demanding—but are also, at the same time, interacting with multiple cultures within and maybe also outside of their community. Sometimes, when forming multicultural communities, we do not take into account or adequately accompany the personal processes of transculturation and inculturation that each of the Sisters is going through, on a personal level in parallel with communitarian and pastoral challenges. In fact, truly intercultural processes can only be initiated with people who have already lived through at least 3 years of transculturation.

*Interculturality:* Let us now use the diagram of cultures A, B, C, and D to illustrate the difference between multiculturalism and interculturality.



While the first diagram outlined the coexistence of different cultures in clearly demarcated compartments, in this second diagram we see arrows coming out of each group or person in the direction of the other groups or people, thus illustrating the interrelation between them. At the same time, the arrows do not indicate a single direction but rather a round trip. Going to meet the other person and the other's welcome. Moreover, the dividing lines are not continuous but punctuated, thus indicating that the boundaries between some cultures and others

are no longer sharp and clear.

However, this diagram does not yet illustrate the intercultural community. Good relations, communication, and good coexistence—although very important and necessary—are not enough. The intercultural community is called to take a step beyond the tolerance of differences and to live a process of transformation or conversion that challenges it to create, as a result of this interrelation, a new culture.



In this diagram, we will call “E” the new culture that is the fruit of intercultural living. The “E” culture will be made up of a new and unique combination of some elements from each of the participating cultures, making each person feel at the same time “at home” while facing something “new.”

This combination will emerge as an always dynamic result of the process of interaction and of agreements reached between the parties. In this process, each community enriches itself with the values and lights brought by the other culture, but both also take on the challenges and face their respective shadows and blind spots (e.g., victimization, superiority or inferiority complexes, imperialist mentality, racism, historical prejudices, and so on). This model of community interaction between cultures, on a level of symmetry and equality, is diametrically opposed to the assimilationist model that prevailed (and still survives?!!) in groups where minority or presumably underdeveloped, uncivilized, cultures or “pagans” had to adapt, conform, and assume the superior or majority culture while abandoning their own. This assimilationist model is what governed most of our Congregations in the “recruitment” of vocations in the so-called “mission countries.” This assimilationist model is framed in an approach that implies integration as a hegemonic affirmation of the host country’s culture. According to this model, it is expected that the immigrant or the trained person, in our case, behaves and assumes the culture of the receiving society or community, putting aside or nullifying his/her culture of origin.

On the contrary, instead of seeking the “assimilation” that denies and wants to erase the differences, the model presented by interculturality seeks to know, value, deepen, and integrate these differences. As a result of the interrelation and encounter between cultures, we are invited to create a new “E” culture, in which we can all give the best of ourselves, share our gifts, and let ourselves be challenged by the encounter and the relationship with the “different,” so that our obscurities may be converted in the light of the Gospel. Humanly speaking, interculturality is a counter-cultural movement in which few people would feel comfortable or for which they would have to be prepared. Our cultures “program” us in such a way that we tend to relate to “ours” to defend ourselves from “the others,” “those who are different,” and their potential threats. On the basis of the



faith and the power of grace, however, inclusion in equality is the Project of the Kingdom that Jesus preached and, as such, it is the work of the Holy Spirit.

*Cultures:* The terms just presented, in turn, lead us to briefly deepen our understanding of the term “culture.” This concept of anthropological origin does not have, as such, just one definition; it has been evolving over time and can be analyzed from hundreds of different perspectives. However, for our purposes, we are going to take the definition that presents “culture” as

a way of life of a group of people—the behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next.

Culture, as such, does not exist; but there are people who embody a certain culture or use certain “cultural lenses” that give meaning to their lives and allow them to communicate with each other and to organize themselves. My culture is the best way that “my” people found to survive and develop in the context and place where we live. Therefore, no culture can claim the right to become the universal “norm” of other cultures. Our challenge, in the Church, is that, for centuries, our faith has been confused with the culture that mediated its transmission (both the cultures that mediated the writing of our Sacred Texts and the Western culture that later extended the implantation of the Church).

Let us look at some characteristics of culture: culture is learned and transmitted through socialization in the primary and secondary groups in which we have grown up (the family, the clan, the neighborhood, the school, the city or the countryside, social class, religion, profession, and the different groups of identification and belonging in which we have been formed). Culture is stable and dynamic, it changes very slowly, but it is so much a part of ourselves that we do not know it until we “leave” it.

Only in contact with the “other,” with what is “different” do we begin to know our own culture and that of others... this knowledge is, then, given by comparison with the “others,” those who are “outside” our group. This division between “us” (women, Catholics, religious, professionals, Latin Americans, Argentines, southern, northern, etc.) and “them” (those who are not like “us”) protects us and gives us a sense of identity and belonging, but it also isolates us, challenges us, and fills us with fear in the face of the “unknown.” There are no higher or more developed cultures and less developed or inferior cultures, but different cultures. And each culture believes that it is the best because it is the best form that has allowed its group to adapt to the context in which it developed.

Getting to know a culture is very difficult. To illustrate this difficulty, it is compared to an iceberg of which we can only see the protruding surface, i.e. 10%, while 90% is below water. In the same way, the material elements of each culture (like clothes and typical foods, traditional artifacts, dances, etc.) constitute only the 10% that we can see, feel, hear, smell and name with ease. In the remaining 90%, which corresponds to the immaterial elements, we can distinguish in turn 3

levels: the first, partially visible, level to which we can access when we seek it intentionally (what is behind the language, communication styles, leadership, conflict resolution, etc.); the second level (one of the central values) is much more difficult to reach and examine; and the third level (that of the basic suppositions) is so deep and unconscious that we cannot really get to know it: this is what we take as “normal,” “given.”

From this brief terminological framework, I will strive to make it clear to us that living interculturality is a vocation and a counter-cultural option, and that, as such, it appeals to the faith and to the life of grace. Humanly, we all tend to seek and interact with those with whom we feel identified and, therefore, understood, included, accepted. Conversely, what is “different” tends to scare us, challenge us, and make us distrustful. This distrust, especially for cultures that suffered the experience of the colonization or the invasion of their nations, is not unjustified or minor; on the contrary, it is a collective wound that lasts for generations and must be healed personally before engaging in a project of intercultural life and mission. Intercultural life is not automatically the result of the mere coexistence of people of different cultures; on the contrary, it must be intentionally constructed and assumed as a process of personal and community conversion. Unlike transnational companies that seek to use interculturality as a tool for improving their sales, we are invited to transform it into a way of life that makes us more faithful in following Jesus and building the Kingdom.

## 2. How to Live in an Intercultural Key?

Culture, as we have been able to outline it, is something that goes beyond all the areas, aspects, and facets of our life. It is the very medium through which we organize our perception of reality, build a collective sense of the world that surrounds us (material and immaterial), and communicate. Hence, culture is compared to the lenses through which we look. At the same time, it is also compared to an iceberg, because culture permeates our life so intimately that it becomes impossible to know it objectively and to reach the deepest tones that give our lenses their color. Our values, moral codes, preferences, sense of respect, sense of authority, sense of order, our management of time, etc. ... everything is crossed by the culture and the cultures of the groups of belonging in which we have been socialized. For me, this was a fascinating discovery that I was only able to recognize when I found myself in Fiji, in a culture so different from own.

How, then, can we open ourselves to this reality of multiculturalism and start living in the key of interculturality? How can fear or the dangerous mere tolerance of “different” be overcome so that we can begin to go out to meet other men and women? Interculturality, more than a topic, is a process; it is a new paradigm that wants to respond to the reality that surrounds us and imposes itself on us; it is a key from which to re-read our life and mission as consecrated persons in today’s world.

Within the time at our disposal, I would like to highlight at least three elements

that, according to my experience, are essential when it comes to finding ways to begin to introduce this new paradigm in our communities:

1. *Preparation*: since it is a counter-cultural option, intercultural life requires dedicating time and effort to the preparation of the Sisters. This preparation includes:

- Basic knowledge of the traits and salient characteristics of the interacting cultures (nationality, ethnicity, generation, education, socio-economic origin, etc.). Instead of focusing only on what unites us (which is very good, and it is very good to nurture it), interculturality also challenges us to explore, value, and capitalize what differentiates us.
- The creation of a “safe space” of trust and mutual care, where one can express oneself freely without fear of being judged and/or labeled.
- The use of various strategies that help to maintain the motivation that leads to going out to meet and to welcome the “difference” by overcoming the difficulties that will occur in communication.

2. *Intentionality*: prior motivation is an element that must lead us to sustain, over time, the intentional effort to build on the basis of the differences. Intentionality requires growth in intercultural sensitivity by looking for:

- tools that favor
  - communication (verbal and non-verbal) and
  - the resolution of both expressed and latent conflicts.
- personal and community work that strengthens and develops
  - resilience capacity and
  - detects in time the dangerous conformist attitude that is content with a simple “tolerance” of the difference.

3. *Spirituality*: intercultural life, as a proposal that emerges from our “Catholic” (i.e., “universal”) faith, is a life-long personal and communitarian process of conversion. Ethnocentrism (taking our culture as the center of the world and the norm for measuring other cultures), cultural stereotypes and their consequent prejudices are present in the world, in the Church and in each of us. Recognizing this and opening, ourselves personally and as a community, to deconstruct them implies setting out on a path of transformation or conversion. As a spiritual path, intercultural life and mission is not so much a goal but rather a search and a process. There are no recipes, nor are there quick solutions to the conflicts that it entails. Rather, interculturality challenges us to live with the paradoxes and the gray zones of the liminal spaces that open us to transformation and growth. This is precisely why intercultural life has the fragility and power of a “sign.”

### 3. The Fragility and Power to Become a Sign

Signs give us clues, call our attention and point us to something that goes

beyond themselves. They are concrete, they are temporary, and they must be correctly interpreted and decoded. Now, for all these reasons, signs are fragile and limited... but they also have an extraordinary symbolic power that can capture our imagination and connect us with the transcendent, with the unseen values, the meaning of life, utopia, hope, and faith.

In this sense, the contribution that the consecrated life can make to the reflection and praxis of interculturality in today's world is unique and urgently needed. In fact, interculturality, devoid of its symbolic potential and its horizon of a Project that transcends it (the Project of the Kingdom), runs the risk of becoming a new colonialism, a new form of manipulation in the hands of the most powerful of the day. It can be used as an instrument in the service of the logic of an economic and political system that is inherently exclusive and imposes itself without measuring costs or consequences for the most vulnerable, broken, and humiliated cultures of millions of people who are "crying out" to survive.

On the contrary, interculturality, as a spiritual path, can give us and the world a totally different alternative. Today, religious life, immersed as it is in an increasingly globalized world, is called to respond to the signs of the times, by becoming a cross-cultural and intercultural sign of the radically inclusive and egalitarian Project of the Kingdom of God:

*<sup>26</sup> for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. <sup>27</sup> As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup> There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:26–28)*

This was the founding and revolutionary experience of the first communities and of the first disciples of Jesus! The radical and egalitarian inclusiveness of Jesus' proclamation and praxis was the characteristic identity of the first communities that gradually separated them from Judaism. However, this path was and remains a path of progress and setbacks made of key moments of personal and communitarian conversion. Let us remember, as one of the paradigmatic cases, for example, Peter's "conversion" in the text known as the "Conversion of Cornelius" (Acts 10:1–48). In this extraordinary account, preceded by the vision of the cloth in which Peter is "challenged" by God to eat animals that, for him, are culturally and religiously impure, he ends up breaking a whole series of taboos (receiving and lodging pagans, eating and fraternizing with them, entering their home and baptizing people who have not been previously circumcised) to state, to their total amazement and awe, the fact—which he himself had just grasped—that God shows no partiality:

*<sup>34</sup> Then Peter began to speak to them: I truly understand that God shows no partiality, <sup>35</sup> but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. (Acts 10:34–35)*

In Jesus himself we can trace his personal "conversion" from ethnocentrism, which he humanly shared with us, in his encounter with the Canaanite or Syro-

Phoenician woman where Jesus lets himself be challenged and interpellated by her until he accepts to abandon a first, clearly excluding position. In this account, we see how Jesus lets her teach him that the Good News of God and of the Kingdom that he came to inaugurate was not limited only to the people of Israel (cf Mt 15:21–28; Mk 7:24–30).

The good news of the Spirit is that the historical conjuncture in which we find ourselves today invites us to assume the multiculturalism of our communities, societies, and pastoral services as a possibility for conversion and transformation instead of seeing it as a problem to be solved. It is not and will not be easy; it will not give us the security and stability that we have lost and long for. There are no recipes to ensure success. However, if interculturality, as a radically inclusive Project of the Kingdom that Jesus inaugurated, captures our imagination, it will have the extraordinary power to make our communities into the sign that today's divided, fragmented, and conflictual world needs and is calling for.

Let us imagine how our charisms can be re-founded through the encounter with the values of other cultures. Let us perceive the multifaceted wealth that they would acquire. Yet, this Easter will not come without a cross. Giving a real place to the intercultural implies “letting go” of that for which we, as an institution, have perhaps given our life and our passion for many years, in order to make room for the newness that is emerging. The “E” culture is the fruit of a process of synergy, where the result is greater than the simple sum of the parts.

#### **4. The Urgency of an Intentional Choice Based on Prophecy and for Hope**

Like any vocational process of call and conversion, interculturality is not only destined to our personal and/or communitarian growth, which only leads us to seek a more peaceful, comfortable, and tolerant life. Today, intercultural life and mission will become a sign of prophetic hope, if they are constructed as a new alternative lifestyle. The re-foundation of religious life today is impossible without interculturality as a sign of the times of the contemporary world.

Because humanity has become so scandalously divided and conflictual, we (individually and corporately) must make a choice. Either we prefer to continue sinning—through exclusion, separation, and the maintenance of limits—, daily eating and drinking our own trials... or we resolve to accept, today, God's radical option for humanity and, with His help and our firmness, change our lives. There is no third way. Both, the future of humanity and the Church depend on this. (Anthony Gittins)

Intercultural life as an intentional option for religious communities that cross borders and open up to the “different,” deconstructing the “pretended” and anti-evangelical superiority of some over others, by becoming a “workshop” where, through life itself, different relationships between cultures are tested: relationships of service characterized by equality and not domination, mutual empowerment without hierarchies that belittle or stifle life, dialogue and not assimilation,

encounter and not colonization, inculturation and inter-culturation.

Yet, embracing interculturality based on the Project of the Kingdom is not just an intra-community exercise. The true fruitfulness of this praxis, which is daily at stake in the ad-intra life, is the potential prophetic impact that will turn it into hope for today's world. Interculturality will be a sign of prophetic hope for humanity, if our own experience of living together, valuing and giving a mutually transforming place to "difference," with the doors opening inwards, puts us on the path to go out to meet those who are different, marginalized, invisible, and exploited today.

Only those who have gone through the personal conversion from ethnocentrism to intercultural sensitivity will have eyes to see and care about the suffering of those who are invisible and excluded from the contemporary world. As in the parable of the "Good Samaritan," only the "foreigner," from whom nothing was expected, was the first to be able to see and then help the man lying on the roadside, renewing his hope and denouncing—implicitly and prophetically—the blindness of the Levite and the priest who had passed by... (cf Lk 10, 25-37).

We, too, if we let ourselves be challenged and enriched by the "foreign" and culturally "different" gaze, we will allow the re-foundation of our charisms, broadening the vision of our founders in a way that we cannot even perceive today. This is not an easy path nor will it be free of challenges, but if we respond to the signs of the times, confident that the Spirit is at work, then we can announce the good news of interculturality and denounce everything that denies it, with the strength and the richness of the radically inclusive Project of the Kingdom that Jesus inaugurated.

<sup>1</sup> The following diagrams and the general way of presenting them are taken from Anthony J. Gittins, *Living Mission Interculturally: Faith, Culture, and the Renewal of Praxis*, Liturgical Press, 2015, 621–746 [Kindle].



# SOWERS OF PROPHETIC HOPE: THE CALL TO INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Prof. Donna Orsuto

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*Original in English*

“Here we are, you and I, and I hope a third, Christ, is in our midst.”

Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*

“Interreligious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world, and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities.”

Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 250

“When we choose the hope of Jesus we find that the successful way of life is that of the seed... to give life, not keep it.”

Pope Francis, *Wednesday Audience*, 12 April 2017

Thank you for the invitation to reflect with you on the theme “*Sowers of Prophetic Hope: The Call to Interreligious Dialogue*”. I would like to begin with an image that you see projected on the screen. Entitled “Followers of God”, it was painted in 1978 by the French artist Dolores Puthod.<sup>1</sup> It depicts Pope Paul VI standing in St. Peter’s square with his arms raised to welcome various religious leaders. Such a meeting actually never took place in that year<sup>2</sup> and if you read the official Church documents focused on interreligious dialogue in 1978, you would have to say that such a meeting of the Holy Father at the Vatican with leaders of world religions would have seemed almost unthinkable. It is true that *Nostra Aetate* had been promulgated, and Paul VI had called for dialogue in *Ecclesiam Suam* and was practising it himself on his apostolic journeys, but the time was perhaps not yet ripe for leaders of world religions to be welcomed in the Vatican. Yet, over the years, many people had the prophetic courage to let their imagination envision a future different from the past. Along the way, these women and men quietly, gently, and patiently worked to make that dream a reality. *Today such*



*meetings between the pope and leaders from other religions are seen as quite normal both in the Vatican and on apostolic journeys. A recent example is Pope Francis' visits to the United Arab Emirates and Morocco.<sup>3</sup> A hallmark of his pontificate is a dialogue of fraternity with people of other religions.*

The seeds for Francis' approach to dialogue were sown during the Second Vatican Council. They were nurtured during the pontificates of Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Recognizing this progression is important because it encourages us as we embrace our call to engage in interreligious dialogue. We are invited to walk together in communion with our Church leaders. As the African proverb goes, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

The first part of this presentation will highlight some key insights from the Magisterium during these decades of dialogue that help us to understand the context of our call to be prophetic sowers of hope today through our participation in interreligious dialogue. In the second part, I will attempt to answer the questions: why does Pope Francis reach out to people of other religions? Why should we do the same? How can we become sowers of prophetic hope as we embrace this call to be involved in interreligious dialogue?

## **I. From *Nostra Aetate* to Pope Francis**

An anchor for our contemporary call to engage in interreligious dialogue is the Second Vatican Council's Declaration "*Nostra Aetate*".<sup>4</sup> This dynamic (and I would say prophetic and courageous) document of 1965 does not focus on dialogue in an abstract way, but rather reminds us that encounter among peoples is at the heart of dialogue. The purpose of this encounter is to grow in mutual understanding. For example, specifically with respect to Christian-Muslim dialogue, *Nostra Aetate* 3 states,

Over the centuries many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. The sacred Council now pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding (NA 3).

One of the ways of growing in mutual understanding is through participating in interreligious dialogue.

Paul VI's first encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, a document that greatly influenced Pope Francis,<sup>5</sup> still has much to say about dialogue in general which can also be applied particularly to interreligious exchange. For Paul VI, *we enter into dialogue because our experience of God's love encourages us to do so. We were created in the image and likeness of God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—for communion and dialogue.* Salvation history is the unfolding of that dialogue. The history of salvation narrates exactly this long and changing dialogue. It is a conversation of Christ with humanity. It is above all a dialogue of love, for this is how God is known. We honour and serve God through sharing that love with others. Authentic dialogue cannot exist without love.



In *Ecclesiam Suam*, Paul VI suggests that there are four key characteristics of dialogue.<sup>6</sup> Though underlined more than fifty years ago, they are immensely useful for today and are worth remembering. First of all, dialogue must be marked by *clarity* [*Primum omnium perspicuitate colloquium praestae aequum est. . .*]. Is my language understandable, acceptable, and well chosen when I enter into dialogue with others? One might add that clarity also implies a clear sense of personal identity. For example, over the last twenty-five years, I have had the privilege of living with people from various religious backgrounds: Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu brothers and sisters. In living this dialogue of everyday life, it would be a disservice to them to pretend that living my faith as a Roman Catholic Christian is not central to who I am. Similarly, their religious belief and practices are integral to their lives and deserve to be respected. It is precisely because we are clear about our personal religious identity that we can really enter into dialogue.

The second characteristic suggested by Paul VI is *meekness* (*lenitas*). Meekness is not usually talked about much today, but it is a vital attitude for genuine dialogue. I notice that often in English translations of *Ecclesiam suam*, the word *humility*, is used instead of meekness. The exemplar of both of these attitudes is Christ himself who is “meek (*mitis*) and humble (*humilis*) of heart” (Matt. 11:29). The meek are free from haughtiness and resentment, even when they have experienced injury or reproach. Meekness is incompatible with violent methods of acting (whether physical or psychological). It calls forth a gentleness which would mean that one would never impose or force oneself or one’s way of life on another.<sup>7</sup> When we truly live this beatitude (Matt. 5:4), we also learn not to take ourselves too seriously. We begin to acknowledge that God’s providence is at work in surprising ways in our lives and this consequently flows into our attitude towards dialogue.<sup>8</sup>

The third characteristic is *trust or confidence* (*fiducia*). This implies not only a confidence in one’s own words, but also a recognition of the good will of both parties involved in dialogue. Trust enables us to speak the truth to one another with frankness, but this truth is always spoken in charity (Eph 4:15).

The fourth characteristic is *prudence* (*prudentia*), which encourages us to adapt ourselves to those around us. It means, to learn the sensitivities of his [or her] audience.” It encourages us to truly learning to listen to the other. It is, though, a listening that requires one *to listen at times to the words behind the words*, as one of my friends likes to say. What people are trying to communicate is often veiled. Behind a clumsy word may be hidden a gesture of love. An angry word may mask pain and suffering. A timid word may be a cry for love and acceptance. Until we learn to listen to the words behind the words our dialogue will never reach the level of depth that leads to the transformation of ourselves and of others. This is not easy because often we are trying to formulate our response even as the other person is speaking. I find the first lines of the Rule of St. Benedict helpful in trying to figure out how to learn to listen. In the prologue, St. Benedict says, “Listen carefully . . . to the master’s instructions, and attend to them with

the ear of your heart.”<sup>9</sup> First, there is an invitation to “listen carefully” (*obsculta*) and second there is call to listen to the other with “the ear of your heart” “*inclinare aurem cordis tui*”.

St. John Paul II was deeply influenced by *Ecclesiam Suam* and he put into practice what St. Paul VI said about dialogue.<sup>10</sup> He fearlessly and prophetically forged a path to greater understanding with people of other religions. Who can forget that historic 1986 meeting in Assisi where he first met with religious leaders from around the world? And in 1999, he hosted a similar meeting, an Interreligious Assembly, in St. Peter’s Square.<sup>11</sup>

In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II also reminded us that dialogue and proclamation are intrinsically intertwined and mutually support one another.<sup>12</sup> He also distinguishes various types of dialogue. The first sort of dialogue that probably comes to your mind is the so-called *dialogue of experts or of theological exchange*. This official dialogue is conducted globally, through the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and locally, through regional dialogues organized by Bishops’ conferences and dioceses. In recent years, the circle of participants, in most cases, at least internationally, has broadened to include women, including women religious, who bring their expertise also to the table and participate fully in both the dialogue and drafting of official texts.<sup>1313</sup> For example, women have participated, albeit in limited numbers, in the official dialogues organized by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. A good starting point is to review the various volumes of *Pro Dialogo* that regularly lists various dialogues and sometimes includes the names of the participants.

There are other forms and expressions of dialogue, including the dialogue of life, the dialogue of action and the dialogue of religious experience.<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis has recently spoken of a dialogue of fraternity, but more on that later. One point is clear: *Interreligious dialogue is not an optional activity in the church*. I would go so far as to say that dialogue is meant to be a way of life *for us all*.

It has been suggested that if Pope John Paul II planted seeds for promoting dialogue, Pope Benedict XVI pruned the plants<sup>15</sup>, and Pope Francis has harvested them. It would be beyond the scope of this short reflection to focus on the various dimensions of Pope Benedict’s approach to dialogue. I would like to mention just one point from his pontificate: namely the important role he gives to cultivating friendship with people of other religions. If you read through his discourses on interreligious dialogue, the theme of friendship consistently emerges.

Friendship is also an important dimension for Pope Francis’ approach to people of other religions. His approach is best understood in the context of his invitation to create a culture of encounter. He explains,

For me this word is very important. Encounter with others. Why? Because faith is an encounter with Jesus, and we must do what Jesus does: encounter others. We live in a culture of conflict, a culture of fragmentation, a culture . . . of waste. (. . .) [W]e must create a ‘culture of encounter’, a culture of friendship,

a culture in which we find brothers and sisters, in which we can also speak with those who think differently, as well as those who hold other beliefs, who do not have the same faith. They all have something in common with us: they are images of God; they are children of God.<sup>16</sup>

This quotation brings out two important points. First of all, encountering others is Jesus' way of being and acting. At the root of our encounter with others is the deep experience we have each had of an encounter with Christ. As Christians, we are invited to be in dialogue with others, but always with a third person, Christ, who is always present. As Aelred of Rievaulx once wrote in his classic book *Spiritual Friendship*, "Here we are, you and I, and I hope a third, Christ, is in our midst."<sup>17</sup> Christ is the foundation, the centre, and the final end of all dialogue with others. In our dialogue with others, we are invited to seek and to recognize the face of Christ in our midst. Second, Pope Francis reminds us that we all have something in common: we are all created in the image and likeness of God. A consequence of this teaching is that we are all brothers and sisters to one another. We are called to "be there" for one another.<sup>18</sup> We are "beings of encounter".<sup>19</sup>

In this first section, I have briefly set the context for why dialogue is an integral part of our call as Christians. We have seen that it is not an optional activity for us. As Religious Women called to be Sowers of Prophetic Hope, you are invited to embrace this call. You might ask, especially in the context of the many other challenges you face, *why should we follow the example of Pope Francis and commit ourselves to interreligious dialogue?* How can we prepare ourselves to embrace this call? What are some practical steps that we can take to respond in a prophetic way to this call? This will be my focus in the second part of this reflection.

## II. Becoming Prophetic witnesses of hope

Even if we leave official Magisterial documents aside, we need only to browse social media to realize the urgency of engaging others in dialogue. With so much conflict in the world today, we simply do not have the luxury to stand by and pretend that dialogue does not concern us. *All of us are co-responsible for the Church's mission in the world and all of us are called to be protagonists of interreligious dialogue.* As Pope Francis has said, "Dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities."<sup>20</sup> Each of us, in our own small way, can make a difference, if only we are courageous and prophetic enough to risk engaging the "other". *We engage in interreligious dialogue quite simply because we must.*

In this section, I would like to propose five practical ways to engage in interreligious dialogue today.

***First, recognize that many of you are already directly involved in interreligious dialogue and strengthen these relationships***

Many of your religious congregations are already sowing seeds of prophetic hope: your schools, hospitals and institutions serve people of other religions and have been doing it for years. Many of you have worked side by side with people of other religions in your apostolates. The impact you have had cannot be underestimated. I heard recently about how, for example, in Palestine, a religious congregation, that takes care of children with disabilities from different religious and cultural backgrounds, created an environment where it became normal for parents and children from different religions to gather for birthday celebrations. This might seem like a small gesture, but such sharing transforms a culture of suspicion into a culture of encounter.

Many Religious women have shown solidarity with people of other religions in harrowing situations of suffering. In war torn countries, many Religious women have chosen to stay. I think for example of the recently beatified 19 Algerian martyrs among whom there were six religious women.

As you recognize and thank God for what you are already doing, you might also ask the question: are there ways to strengthen the bonds that are already present?

### ***Second, reach out to your neighbours***

Pope Francis encourages us to not merely encounter others, but to forge relationships of friendship with them. Concretely, this means that we do not wait for tragedy to strike—a terrorist attack or a natural disaster—to reach out to others. We need to ask the question *now*: who is my neighbour? Who are the people from other religions in my neighbourhood, in my city? Though medical experts might not agree today, perhaps we could apply Aristotle's advice that friendship takes time and therefore we need to eat the proverbial peck of salt together. We do not need to take the proverb literally, but everything that table fellowship suggests is necessary for engaging in interreligious dialogue.<sup>21</sup> There is something sacred about hospitality and table fellowship that breaks down barriers and opens up communication. It is no surprise that the Gospels often portray Jesus at table with others and that it is in the context of a meal that Jesus chose to mark the gift of himself to us in the Eucharist.<sup>22</sup> Practically, this can mean knowing when my neighbor's religious feasts are celebrated and reaching out to invite them, to perhaps invite them for a meal or to join them in celebrating. I know of Religious women in countries where they are a minority who regularly join Muslim families for Iftar, the daily feast that breaks the Ramadan fast.

### ***Third, cast out fear through knowledge: learn more about people of other religions and their beliefs***

Religious have a particular responsibility to foster a love that casts out fear. Some scholars say that the phrase "do not be afraid" occurs in one form or another 366 times in the Bible, one for every day of the year including leap year! We see that a culture of encounter and dialogue flourishes when people are not paralyzed by fear. It takes incredible courage to risk reaching out to the other, especially

after experiences of extreme violence, but when people have had the the courage to move beyond their fears and risk reaching out to the other, the results have been transformative.

One of the ways of combatting fear is through a deeper knowledge of the other. Knowledge can eradicate the false perceptions we may have of them and their religion. For this reason, Pope Francis highlights the importance of suitable training, especially for promoting dialogue, for example with Muslims. He says,

In order to sustain dialogue with Islam, suitable training is essential for all involved, not only so that they can be solidly and joyfully grounded in their own identity, but so that they can also acknowledge the values of others, appreciate the concerns underlying their demands and shed light on shared beliefs. We Christians should embrace with affection and respect Muslim immigrants to our countries in the same way that we hope and ask to be received and respected in countries of Islamic tradition. (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 253)

Though many in your congregations are already involved in a dialogue of life with Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and others, one might ask the question: how many Sisters have received formal training in other religions?

Basic knowledge of other religions for all of us is important, but I would go a step further: we need well-trained Religious women sitting at the table when official dialogues are taking place.<sup>23</sup> This will imply investing significant resources in the education and formation of your sisters for interreligious dialogue. There is a growing recognition that a community of ongoing spiritual and professional support is critical in sustaining and nurturing leaders trained in interreligious dialogue not only during their years of education but also throughout their professional lives. Conferences and seminars, formal and informal gatherings, retreats and the use of social media are essential for sharing information, sharpening insights and supporting each other.

The assumptions and demands of interreligious dialogue are becoming more rigorous than ever. Effective dialogue requires not just acknowledging all participants to be sincere and of good will but also includes the careful examination of differing positions and the discerning exploration of the assumptions behind them. To do this the whole array of modern scholarship and science must be brought to the dialogue. Making a commitment to prepare more religious women to competently participate along with men in dialogue would both enhance the quality of the dialogue and give more credible witness to the Church's teaching on the equality and complementarity of women and men.<sup>24</sup>

There are numerous educational institutions and opportunities in Rome and in other parts of the world, where scholarships are available to support sisters who could be trained for interreligious dialogue (Just ask Sr. Pat Murray for more information!).

***Fourth, pray; pray for peace between people of different religions***

In his address to the Fraternity Conference in the United Arab Emirates, Pope Francis said,

... *[P]rayer* is essential: while sincerely intended prayer incarnates the courage of otherness in regard to God, it also purifies the heart from turning in on itself. Prayer of the heart restores fraternity. Consequently, as for the future of interreligious dialogue, the first thing we have to do is pray, and pray for one another: we are brothers and sisters! Without the Lord, nothing is possible; with him, everything becomes so! May our prayer – each one according to his or her own tradition – adhere fully to the will of God, who wants all men and women to recognize they are brothers and sisters and live as such, forming the great human family in the harmony of diversity.

[Pope Francis continues] There is no alternative: we will either build the future together or there will not be a future. Religions, in particular, cannot renounce the urgent task of building bridges between peoples and cultures. The time has come when religions should more actively exert themselves, with courage and audacity, and without pretence, to help the human family deepen the capacity for reconciliation, the vision of hope and the concrete paths of peace.<sup>25</sup>

Here Pope Francis is encouraging people of all religions to pray for peace. I would make an appeal to you, Religious Superiors. I know that many of your congregations mission elderly members to pray for certain persons or apostolates. Would it be possible to mission some sisters to pray, for example, for people of other religions in your part of the country and for peace among peoples of different religions in troubled parts of the world?

### ***Fifth, see the other with the eyes of God: contemplation and dialogue***

My final point focuses on a fundamental attitude of dialogue: namely gazing at the other with the eyes of God. It is no surprise that interreligious dialogue has flourished especially among those who share with one another a dialogue of religious experience. Contemplation as a way of life leads one not only to see God, but also to see others as God sees them. In an account well known to us all, the martyrdom of the seven Trappists in Algeria and the moving testament of Dom Christian de Chergé, there is an insight into what this can mean. His *Testament* has a subtitle *Quand un À-Dieu s'envisage* or “when a farewell is contemplated”. Much stronger than the English equivalent, “farewell” adieu, A-Dieu literally means “to God”. The word *en-visagé* means envisaged or contemplated, but it can also mean something that has received a *visage* or has been given a face (in line with the philosophical thought of Emanuel Levinas). So the subtitle could mean “Contemplating when God has been given a face.”<sup>26</sup>

In this context, we can perhaps understand the depths of Dom Christian’s words:

And also you, the friend of my final moment, who would not be aware of what you were doing. Yes, I also say this *Thank You* and this “À-Dieu” to you in whom I see the face of Christ.<sup>27</sup>

In commenting on this passage, Dom Armand Veilleux notes that “this capacity of seeing God’s face, God’s incarnation, in the person who is slitting your throat is certainly the fruit of a profound contemplative life lived in deep relationship with a group of brothers, with a Church and with the whole human family.”<sup>28</sup> If “dialogue is the new name for charity” (VC 74), then what greater expression of charity is there than to lay down your life for others? As I read this moving account, it is a reminder that *the best preparation for dialogue is a life of contemplation*. This is what enables us to see the face of Christ in the other and what will lead us into a dialogue without frontiers.

In conclusion, I would like to cite the words of Sr. Yvonne Gera, a Franciscan Missionary of Mary, who worked for twenty-two years in Algeria and who knew personally all of the recently beatified Algerian martyrs. When asked about what to say to religious living in crisis-ridden countries, she replied:

We are missionaries. Whatever happens, we are missionaries. We know that that is our vocation and I say one thing, “you will receive more than you give”. It is sometimes difficult, yes but the Lord has called us. If the people suffer, we suffer with them. It is our vocation and the Lord is always there to help us. Even in suffering or in martyrdom. These 19 martyrs knew that they were targeted but they remained. Don’t be afraid, the Lord is there to help you.<sup>29</sup>

“Don’t be afraid, The Lord is there to help you”: these are encouraging words also for you and for me as we embrace the call to engage in interreligious dialogue. As we courageously sow seeds of prophetic hope in the world today, remember these words: “Don’t be afraid, The Lord is there to help you.”

<sup>1</sup> To see a copy of this image, click here: <https://www.google.com/search?q=followers+of+god+puhthod&tbm=isch&source=univ&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjy16n-krnhAhWFyKQKHS5PDQAQsAR6BAgJEAE&biw=1440&bih=757#imgdii=tLny2VjRZJzCM:&imgsrc=CwqPAAG1G—fUM:>

<sup>2</sup> It was only in 1986 that a Pope encountered leaders of world religions in this way— and the historic meeting between St. John Paul II and religious leaders took place not in Rome, but in Assisi. An interreligious meeting did take place in St. Peter’s Square, but only in 1999 in preparation for the Great Jubilee Year of 2000.



- <sup>3</sup> See the important document, a result of Pope Francis' Apostolic Visit to the United Arab Emirates: *Human Fraternity for World Peace and Working Together*: [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190204\\_documento-fratellanza-umana.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html).
- <sup>4</sup> For an overview, see Michael L. Fitzgerald, "Nostra Aetate, a Key to Interreligious Dialogue." *Gregorianum* 87, no. 4 (2006): 699-713. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.georgetown.edu/stable/23581614>.
- <sup>5</sup> See Pierre de Charentenay, *Alla radice del magistero di Francesco: L'attualità di Ecclesiam Suam ed Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Vatican City: LEV, 2018).
- <sup>6</sup> For the description of the four characteristics of dialogue, see *Ecclesiam suam* 81.
- <sup>7</sup> Cf. "Meekness" in *Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by Xavier Léon-Dufour (Boston: St Paul Multimedia, 1995<sup>3</sup>) which suggests that in the Old Testament, Moses is a model of meekness that was not based on weakness but on submission to God. Moses was docile and trusted in God's love (Nm 12:13, Si 45:4, 1:27) and consequently was meek towards others, particularly towards the poor (Si 4:8). In the New Testament, Jesus reveals the meekness of God (Mt 12:18).
- <sup>8</sup> Cf. Simon Tugwell, *Reflections on the Beatitudes* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1980), esp. Chapter Four (pp. 29-41), which focuses on meekness.
- <sup>9</sup> *Rule of Benedict 1980*, Prologus, "Obsculat, o filii, praecepta magistri, et inclina aurem cordis tui..." Edited by Timothy Fry et Al. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1981), p. 156.
- <sup>10</sup> For an excellent overview, see John Borelli, "John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue." In *New Catholic Encyclopedia Supplement, Jubilee Volume: The Wojtyla Years*, edited by Polly Vedder, 81-88. Detroit, MI: Gale, 2000. *Gale Virtual Reference Library* (accessed February 2, 2019).
- <sup>11</sup> On the Interreligious Assembly, see *Pro Dialogo* 2000, pp.7-16.
- <sup>12</sup> See John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 55: "Inter-religious dialogue is a part of the Church's evangelizing mission. Understood as a method and means of mutual knowledge and enrichment, dialogue is not in opposition to the mission *ad gentes*; indeed, it has special links with that mission and is one of its expressions . . .  
In the light of the economy of salvation, the Church sees no conflict between proclaiming Christ and engaging in interreligious dialogue. Instead, she feels the need to link the two in the context of her mission *ad gentes*. These two elements must maintain both their intimate connection and their distinctiveness; therefore they should not be confused, manipulated or regarded as identical, as though they were interchangeable."
- <sup>13</sup> For example, women have participated, albeit in limited numbers, in the official dialogues organized by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. A good starting point is to review the various volumes of *Pro Dialogo* that regularly lists various dialogues and sometimes includes the names of the participants.
- <sup>14</sup> John Paul II mentions these types of dialogue in *Redemptoris Missio* 11.
- <sup>15</sup> See the balanced article by Emil Anton. "Mission Impossible? Pope Benedict XVI and Interreligious Dialogue." *Theological Studies* 78.4 (2017): 879-904.
- <sup>16</sup> Pope Francis, *Vigil of Pentecost with the Ecclesial Movements*, May 18, 2013. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130518\\_veglia-pentecoste.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco_20130518_veglia-pentecoste.html)  
See also Diego Fares, *The Heart of Pope Francis. How a New Culture of Encounter is Changing the Church and the World* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company/A Herder&Herder Book), 2015), p. 17.
- <sup>17</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1977), p. 51.
- <sup>18</sup> For an excellent article on this topic, see James Fredericks, "The Dialogue of Fraternity. Pope Francis' Approach to Religious Engagement", *Commonweal* (March 21, 2017) <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/dialogue-fraternity> Accessed November 13, 2018).
- <sup>19</sup> Farres, p. 22, quoting Francis.
- <sup>20</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 250.
- <sup>21</sup> S ee Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics* VIII, 4, 25 where Aristotle emphasizes that that friendships take time to develop. People need time to grow accustomed to one another, for, "as the proverb says, they cannot know each other before they have shared the traditional [peck] of salt, and they cannot accept each other or be friends until each appears lovable to the other and gains the other's confidence."
- <sup>22</sup> See Eugene Laverdiere, *Dining in the Kingdom, The Origins of the Eucharist According to Luke* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994).



<sup>23</sup> When organizing interreligious events, it should be normative that women and men work together in the planning, execution and evaluation of the program. In this regard, religious men and women have set an excellent example in establishing the UISG-USG Commission for Interreligious Dialogue. Since 2002, this commission of sixteen women and men meets regularly to “stimulate awareness and develop understanding among Religious Congregations resident in Rome of the importance of the ministry of interreligious dialogue.” Another example is the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue where for more than forty years, monks and nuns have been in dialogue with Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims.

<sup>24</sup> See Kathleen McGARVEY, OLA “The Church and Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa In service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace. *Gender: Where are the Women in Interreligious Dialogue?*”, Paper presented at the CAFOD/ Heythrop conference October

28th and 29th 2009, London. [http://www.olaireland.ie/files/9714/1933/2213/The\\_Church\\_and\\_Christian-Muslim\\_Relations\\_in\\_Africa.pdf](http://www.olaireland.ie/files/9714/1933/2213/The_Church_and_Christian-Muslim_Relations_in_Africa.pdf) See also her book, *Muslim and Christian Women in Dialogue: The Case of Northern Nigeria* (Bern: Brill, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> See [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/february/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190204\\_emiratarabi-incontrointerreligioso.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/february/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_emiratarabi-incontrointerreligioso.html)

<sup>26</sup> Armand Veilleux, “Community, Church and the Contemplative Life,” in *The Gethsemane Encounter. A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics*, Edited by Donald Mitchell and James Wiseman (New York: Continuum, 1999), p. 133.

<sup>27</sup> As quoted in Veilleux, p. 133.

<sup>28</sup> Veilleux, p. 133.

<sup>29</sup> Interview, December 7, 2018 <https://zenit.org/articles/franciscan-sister-recalls-algerian-martyrs/>

# DIVERSITY IS NATURE BUT TOLERANCE AND RESPECT SHOULD BE NURTURED

Dewi Maharani

*Dewi Maharani was born the fourth of five children in Semarang, a port city in Northern Java, Indonesia. As a Muslim, she has experienced encounter and dialogue with people of different religions from a young age. A number of her extended family members profess different faiths, including the Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian faiths, both Catholic and Protestant.*

*In 2017, just before beginning her master's in Environmental and Urban Studies at Soegijapranata Catholic University in Semarang, Central Java, a friend asked her to join a national organization focused on tolerance, humanity and attention to minorities, centered on the example of the late Indonesian president Gus Dur (Abdurrahman Wahid). She would later participate in various inter-religious activities in Indonesia as a way of being a bridge between people and counteracting intolerance.*

*She was invited to participate in the 2018 Pre-Synodal meeting in Rome on the experiences of young people and faith; this trip would be her first time in Rome, but not her last. In February 2019, Dewi joined The Lay Centre at Foyer Unitas as a resident scholar after receiving a the Pontifical Council for Interrreligious Dialogue's Nostra Aetate Foundation scholarship. She studies at the Angelicum.*

*Original in English*

***“Diversity is nature but tolerance and respect should be nurtured.”*** These words spoken by an Indonesian diocesan priest strike me as so true. The question that faces us today is this: how can you and I nurture tolerance and respect of others in those around us?

Today, I will briefly share some of my journey, offer a few ideas, and then make three practical suggestions on how together we can sow seeds of peace and dialogue in today's troubled world.

## My story

I am a 23 years old Indonesian Muslim. I am in Rome since last February because I received a scholarship from the Nostra Aetate Foundation. This scholarship, which is under the auspice of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, enables me to study here for one semester so that I can learn more about Christianity. I fully agree with what the Pope Benedict XVI Emeritus who said: "Those who are involved in interreligious dialogue should be well formed and well informed." I take courses on the Bible and Theology at the Angelicum University and at the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI), as well, and I live with an international group of students at the Lay Centre, the centre for lay students. During these months, I have built up friendships and networks with Christians, particularly with Catholics, that will surely help me in my future work and service in the field of interreligious dialogue, as I prepare to go back to Indonesia by the end of June.

My country has a Muslim majority with Catholics being 3.7% of the populations. Though most of the time, Catholics can freely practice their religion and live peacefully with their Muslim neighbors, there have been times when Christians have been discriminated against and persecuted. Radical fundamentalists, have misinterpreted the Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet Mohammed — may peace be upon him—This is a big challenge for us.

I am truly sad about that. I am also sad that many Christians associate Islam with terrorism. Islam is a peaceful religion and the Holy Qur'an teaches us to love and respect those who embrace other religions: "To you be your religion, to me be mine." For us Muslims, you, my dear Christian friends, as written in the Holy Qur'an, are "People of the Book". You are considered the nearest to us Muslims, as among you there are Monks and priests, and they are humble people.

My own personal experience with Christians, particularly Catholics, has been very positive over the years, and most particularly in Rome. I come from an interreligious family with both Christian and Muslim members. I had Christian friends at school and even dated a Christian when I was in Junior High School. I would go to Mass with him and he would go to the Mosque with me.

I was really happy to come to Rome for the first time last year when I participated in the Pre-Synodal meeting on the experiences of young people and faith. I found that Catholics are very open and welcoming, inclusive and embracing towards diversity. With regards to youth, we all, Christians and Muslims, face similar social and cultural challenges. But one thing is sure: young people have to be prepared to be the protagonists of interreligious dialogue in order to promote peace and harmony now and in the future.

I especially appreciate the kindness of the religious sisters who have befriended me while in Rome since last February. I think of the Sisters who spontaneously share their classnotes with me each week; the Indonesian Sisters who regularly eat

a Chinese meal with me (we need to eat some rice sometimes!); and the Motherly Sister who sits next to me in one of my classes and who never fails to give me chocolate at the coffee break. These may seem like small gestures, but they go a long way to help me feel at home in new environment.

### **What I have learned.**

Though I am young and I still have much to learn, I would like to share with you a few ideas about interreligious dialogue based on my experience.

**First of all, Interreligious dialogue is more than talking about religions, it is about encountering one another and recognizing our common humanity.** Pope Francis has set a good example. One thing that really touched my heart was his conversation with the young child whose atheist father had died. Crying, the young boy asked the Pope: “will God accept my Father in heaven?” And Pope Francis replied, “God will never abandon His people.” This is the starting point for us all: God is with us and will not abandon us.

**Second, we will succeed in Interreligious dialogue only if we emphasize our common humanity and nurture strong bonds of human relations with others by following the example of Pope Francis.** Dialogue is not only about discussions religious similarity or differences. To me, Interreligious dialogue means something more concrete: it enables us to live together. For example, we can help each other take care of the poor, the sick and the vulnerable and we can work together to care for the earth, our common home.

**Finally, Interreligious dialogue stretches our minds and hearts. We need to have open minds and a capacity to enter into healthy relationships with one another.** We will discover new realities through our encounters with each other. For example, at the Lay Centre, I respectfully watch as my Christian friends gather for Mass. Likewise, my Christian friends are learning about and supporting me while I fast during Ramadan. They remain close to me in these days as each evening I break my fast, with the Iftar meal.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Beloved Sisters, I want to say to you, **please don't be afraid to learn about other religions and to encourage members of your congregation to do so.** I assure you that I have been enriched by what I have learned about Christianity in these months. I will be a better Muslim because of my encounter with other religions. By learning about and teaching especially young people about other religions, you and I can make a difference and fight against those who would use religion as an instrument for evil.

Secondly, **let's commit ourselves to stand together, side by side, with courage—not afraid of what others will think of us.** Some Muslims criticize me for building bridges with Christians and for having Christian friends, but I think

they are wrong. We can make a difference in our troubled world if we commit ourselves to work together.

Finally, **let us pray for one another and for our troubled world.** Let's pray, each in our own way, for peace in the hearts of all people, for peace in our communities, for peace in the world. If we work and pray for peace, we will, with God's help make a difference.

Thank you for your attention.

Salaam alaikum. Pace a Voi. Peace be with you, salam sejahtera!

# EXPERIENCES OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Elena Dini

*Elena Dini works in the field of communications for religious organizations and she is involved in interreligious dialogue both at the academic and grassroots level.*

*She continues her studies in Theology of Religions at the Faculty of Missiology of the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. She is a Peacemaking Fellowship Alumna at Hartford Seminary in the USA (2013-2014) and a Russell Berrie Alumna at the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas in Italy (2014-2015) for Certificates in Interreligious Dialogue. Elena has taught modules on Islam and on Interfaith Dialogue at different academic institutions and centres.*

*She is responsible for the interreligious meetings at the Sacred Heart Basilica in Rome within a larger project addressing young refugees and Italians that she represents at the newly launched Network 4 Dialogue gathering European associations working for social inclusion of migrants and refugees. She was the organizer of a training course in Rome for teachers of religion on how to teach religious and cultural diversity (2017) and she is working now on a booklet presenting Experiences of encounter between Jews, Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land. She is a member of the steering committee of the International Abrahamic Forum.*

*Original in English*

It's such a privilege to be here with you this morning and share a few thoughts about interreligious dialogue. And it is such not only for the honor you give me but also because this is a way of giving back what I received throughout the past 20 years from religious women who prepared me for the adventure of encounter with people of other faiths.

I come from a family with mixed roots - religious and cultural ones - and where religion was not a main topic of discussion because believers were considered a bit weird people. However I did not feel my family background had a major impact on myself until I was a teenager.

When I was 16 I met a group of youth forming a community with some young consecrated women and this increasingly changed my perception about people of faith and dragged me into a personal faith journey. For a number of years I was so concerned with my own discovery of Jesus that I started dedicating all my time to go deeper into what became my faith.

It took me some time to shape what I perceived as a new worldview and I wanted so much that my faith would be a comprehensive and integral part of myself that I thought about studying theology. However finding a job in this field afterwards looked like a real challenge for a young lay woman so I ended up studying languages and inspired by my mom's personal story I took Arabic. This increasingly opened me up to another world, the world of Islam.

What a surprise when I discovered that there were people in the world who did not recognize my Jesus' divinity and still...they looked like they were having a relationship with God. More than a surprise, what a challenge! How to reconcile that in my newly shaped very Catholic worldview?

I started meeting more and more Muslims and have meaningful conversations with them. And I slowly returned to my idea of studying theology and more than that, my field of study became theology of religions and interreligious dialogue. I eventually found myself in the United States living with Muslim flatmates, especially a dear friend who used to work at Al-Azhar University in Egypt.

We spent so many mornings, afternoons, nights getting to know each other. At the beginning, both of us were cautious in our opening to the other, careful not to offend the other. Slowly we started asking more questions, then sharing more and more about our stories, life and faith. And a step further, we started sharing secrets that maybe we were not brave enough to share with our coreligionists.

We were witnessing major events happening in our life and I still remember one night when we both had an important choice to make and we decided to take a moment to pray. I used to attend the Friday prayer with the Muslim community living on campus and I used to see my flatmates praying every day but that night, after sharing concerns, fears and tears, it was different. Each one of us was praying in her own way but we were keeping the other person in our heart, thought and intercession while we were addressing our prayer to God.

We had so much in common, and maybe the most important thing we had in common was the love we had for each other pushing us to invite the other person into our relationship with God. But that night, during that intense prayer I also realized that some of our ideas, theological conceptions, and ways to look at God were different. And those differences needed to be acknowledged if we wanted our relationship to be real.

I met again this dear friend a few months ago: right now she lives in the UK and I am back to Italy and we got the chance of spending some time together during a conference. It was moving to see how much our lives were shaped and informed by and because of our interfaith experience: our professional lives, the

people we befriend but even the way we live our respective lives as married couples. Because of this attitude to dialogue, the willingness to welcome the other person and learn from him/her has the power of transforming a person's life. Our friendship goes on teaching me the beauty of seeing how much we share with people from other faiths but also the importance of celebrating differences: this is where I learn, where I am challenged to go out of my comfort zone and meet you to welcome you and being welcomed.

But my interfaith journey has also another aspect. When your worldview is so much challenged, you cannot but go back to your faith community and share what became so important in your everyday life because of your studies and of the encounters you made. Because right now you just cannot pray to God without having in your heart and mind a larger world than just your Catholic community.

And guess what... for a number of years I was the interreligious and maybe a bit bizarre girl in my community but year after year this interreligious sensitivity grew in our community. And I'm not saying that this was only because of me but in one way or the other I was part of this process.

And I found a receptive world, not only in my small community but in many other Catholic groups, movements, and congregations. I am thankful to Pope Francis for how he always reminds us about the importance of dialogue and I very much feel that part of my mission is to witness my experience. I owe that to my Jewish and Muslim friends and I owe that to God too because of the wonderful chances He gave me to receive and share with them. We use to read the parable of talents thinking about how much we received from God... when I read it, I think about these people I was lucky to meet and who shaped my faith and life.

Right now my community - together with the Salesian community who runs the parish church where we are hosted - runs a project targeting young Italians and young refugees here in Rome and I am in charge of the interfaith gatherings. Most young refugees are Muslim while we evidently are a Catholic organization. It unfortunately happens often to me to hear stories of the long way Muhammad, Osman, Alhajie, had to walk to reach Italy, the people they lost on the way and the times they thought they were going to die. And when I am told that "I was continuously praying to God because I knew He was going to take care of me, if I was living or if I was dying, He is the Merciful, the Compassionate", I just realize how much my own faith is in need of purification, above all when the question "where is God?" pops up to my mind when something is not going the way I want.

It is so rewarding when I hear these friends saying that when they come to our place they feel at home and welcomed as Muslims. Some of them use to join us for Easter or Christmas celebrations and they do that just because they know it's important for us. The month of Ramadan just started a few days ago and we are organizing an iftar (the moment of interruption of fasting at sunset) to celebrate it together. These are just small things compared to global situations but I believe and I can witness that it's these small acts of presence and kindness that change individual people's life.



A couple of weeks ago we celebrated the wedding of two of our friends: a young Muslim refugee from Afghanistan and an Italian Catholic young lady. They met because of our project. During the homily the priest reminded the bride: “God wants to love you through your husband” and the bridegroom “God wants to love you through your wife”. This is definitely true for them but it is also true for each one of us and in our communities.

Let me just end with a dream I have whenever I look at our local communities: I hope that we will increasingly be able to be positively challenged by our non Christian brothers and sisters. I hope we will be willing to discover God’s action in their life because the Spirit blows beyond the boundaries of the visible Church. And I hope that we do that not only because we think we will be building a better society by doing it (which I think we will) but because we believe that God speaks to us and love us as well through the people we come across, through our neighbours who worship God in different ways. If we believe that, we do not want to close the door in front of God knocking at our heart and life.

Thank you for all the work you do, thank you for your witness in the world and I wish you all the best for this important conference. Please keep praying for us.

# REFLECTIONS ON INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Samantha Lin

*Samantha Lin is the Executive Director of Kids-Lift, a US charity that supports underprivileged children. She has been involved with interfaith dialogue in both academic and lived settings for over 15 years. As a student at Georgetown University, Samantha both studied Muslim-Christian dialogue and lived in a Muslim community. She worked at Seeds of Peace, a peace-building camp for teenagers from the Middle East, South Asian, and the US for three years and served a religiously diverse community of clients as a refugee resettlement worker for Catholic Charities Refugee Resettlement Program in Chicago. After the year-long Russell Berrie Fellowship in Interreligious Dialogue, Samantha continued studying Jewish-Christian dialogue at the Pontifical Gregorian University and organizing the Interfaith Café a series of encounters between experts and young people on diverse topics in interfaith dialogue at the Lay Centre at Foyer Unitas.*

*Original in English*

Thank you for the privilege of participating in this panel on Interreligious dialogue. It is an honor and a joy to be here today. I do not think I have ever been in the presence of so many religious women. Thank you for your witness!

I have three stories for you that have greatly impacted my own faith and my views of others of different faith traditions.

## **My first experience**

I graduated from Georgetown University – a Jesuit university in the US. While an undergraduate, I lived in a community of Muslims and shared an apartment with two Muslim women. Sharing a life together meant experiencing the rhythms of life of my Muslim friends and sharing my life as a Catholic with them. My roommate Noor wore the *hijab* – the head scarf – while Khadijah, my other roommate, did not.

Sharing daily life with Muslim roommates was a powerful witness to the power of prayer *across* religion. Because our apartment was in the center of campus, they would invite other Muslim students to come and pray in our large living room in between classes – if I was home, they often invited me to pray with them.

I felt shy at first because I wasn't familiar with the Muslim prayer and didn't want to offend anyone by doing something stupid! But Noor stood beside me and

explained as they stood, knelt, and bowed before God. As I prayed my Christian prayer, but closely united with my Muslim friends in the same space, I was touched by the powerful example of 10 young college students, stepping out from our busy schedules, to universally genuflect to God.

Because of my willingness to meet the Muslim community and the campus *imam*, a religious leader, Noor and Khadijah wanted to come with me to church. When they came with me, Noor in her headscarf, I stood beside them and whispered the explanations of *our* ritual rising, standing, and kneeling. We were all struck by the shared power of *movement* in our respective services.

On April 15<sup>th</sup> of that year, two men who claimed to be Islamist terrorists set-off bombs at the finish line of the Boston marathon. What followed were days of fear. As the Islamophobic voices grew louder in the aftermath of the attack, Noor grew afraid of the backlash – as a woman who chooses to wear the *hijab*, she was a visible Muslim. That evening, Georgetown planned a Catholic prayer service for peace in the university chapel – I volunteered to read the prayers of the faithful.

The chapel was dark and quiet as students sat stunned and praying for an end to violence. I climbed to the ambo to read the prayers and scanned the crowd. Among the pews, crowded with students, I spotted a familiar pink *hijab* and joined Noor as we each prayed our prayers for peace.

## My second experience

After I graduated from college, I served as a Jesuit volunteer in Chicago and worked with the Catholic Charities Refugee Resettlement program. 95% of the clients we served were Muslim. One such family, I'll call them the Kon family, had recently arrived from Sierra Leone and were preparing to welcome their daughter – the first baby to be born in the US. Little Sarah Kon was born two days before Ash Wednesday. My fellow co-worker and I went to do a home visit with baby Sarah and her family but we stopped at mass first and showed up at their home wearing thick ashen crosses on our foreheads.

Sarah's family opened the door and, puzzled, invited us in before politely inquiring as to exactly *what* we had on our foreheads. It's a big feast, we explained, it's the start of our Lent where we fast as you do in Ramadan.

"Ah," the family responded, "We understand." "So, you cannot have the lamb we killed in celebration of Sarah's birth?"

"No," we replied, "we can't." So we watched over the newborn while they cooked the meal to share with their extended family– Here we were, Muslims and Catholics, celebrating in two different and sacred ways.

## My third experience

I worked at a summer camp for kids for the Middle East, South Asia and the US. The idea behind the camp was that if you could bring kids together from "the other" side, Israelis and Palestinians, Indians and Pakistanis, you could help them to see the humanity in one another and mutually encourage young people to work towards peace.

One summer, Ramadan took place over August, in the middle of camp. During

Ramadan, Muslims neither eat nor drink while the sun is in the sky. As a counselor, I was worried and anxious about the campers who would be partaking in Ramadan. Worried that they would get dehydrated, worried they'd be too exhausting from fasting to be able to participate.

As I worried about the camp, one of the Muslim girls in my bunk described her excitement for the coming of Ramadan. Ramadan, she explained, was a month in which her family spent time together at night breaking the fast and in the pre-dawn hours preparing for the fast. Through her eyes, Ramadan, fasting, was not a burden, but a beautiful time of closeness for her family and a time of quiet and prayer with God. She didn't focus on "giving up" food, but on the ways she could change her life during their holy month.

Because of her, I began to think of "fasting" in a different way. There was so much beauty in her fasting for Ramadan, it made me reconsider how I approach Lent. For me, Lent had always been a burden, something to dread as I contemplated giving up chocolate or TV. But this whole new conception of fasting *changed* the way that I approach Lent. I think of it less in terms of "what I have to give up" and more as a way to *change* my life to be closer to the things that matter – my family and God.

These three stories highlight the three-part lesson I have learned from interreligious dialogue:

1. Recognizing the power of our prayer, and
2. Shared celebration
3. Can lead to greater understanding and appreciation of your *own* tradition.

Dialoging doesn't just mean talking about your faith in a room for a set period of time – dialogue means being willing to share your life, all parts of it, with someone of a different faith tradition and being open to *learning* from them.

Dialogue isn't confined to one hour or one room – dialogue is lived with our whole lives. I have found that an openness to learning about others and their traditions has served as an invitation for others to learn about me and my religion as well.

And the two fundamental aspects of true life-long dialogue have been a willingness to appreciate each other's prayer life and to share celebrations – even if there are still different *ways* of doing each, there is a beauty and a grace in doing them together, each in our own way. It was a powerful reminder of companionship when I saw Noor's *hijab* in the darkened chapel that April evening. I was touched when Sarah's family invited us to join in their celebrations. And I allowed myself to change my own perspective on Lent thanks to the honesty of a Muslim girl.

I am grateful for the people I have met and the ways they have served as companions on my own faith journey. Some of the most influential people have been priests and sisters but I also count Noor and baby Sarah and her family among them.

Thank you for your attention today and I wish you all much grace as you continue your Assembly and prepare to go forth Sowing Seeds of Prophetic Hope.



## SOWERS OF HOPE IN THE CONTEXT OF MIGRATION

Sr. Elisabetta Flick, SA

*Sister Elisabetta Flick is a member of the congregation called 'Hermanas Auxiliadoras del Purgatorio'. She served as Superior General of her congregation between 2002 and 2013. Since 2014 she has been working in UISG as Executive Vice-Secretary and she is in charge of the Migrant Project in Sicily.*

*Original in French*

For two days now, we have been trying to open horizons so that today's and tomorrow's religious life will always be a seed of hope in a world where there is a great risk of reducing the scope of our hopes.

When I think about the context of migrations in the world, many words that have accompanied me throughout this Easter time resonate within me, words of hope that can also spring up in this context, where we can only hope against all hope. I make mine the words written by Angelo Casati in his book *The Days of Tenderness*: "Life seems made to diminish our hopes: each day reduces them, accommodates them according to the events. Inevitably, each of us gradually reduces the horizon of hope.

There is a great need for hope today. We have become brittle, easily broken, and vulnerable. Speeches without hope circulate. Some say that everything is lost, that everything is over. And this creates paralysis, paralyzes the fantasy, the imagination, and creativity.

*So, you who believe in the resurrection, stay—at all levels—close to the men and women of this time to rebuild, patiently and tirelessly, the hope that today has become fragile, weak, defenseless, and risks being overwhelmed by fear."*<sup>1</sup>

To patiently and tirelessly sew the thread of hope back into the fabric of the current context of migration and to be women who sow hope, we are invited, like Mary of Magdala, the first disciples, invited as Abraham and the prophets, to cultivate faith that is capable of hoping against all hope.

Here are some forms of presence and gestures that, day after day, give life to small seeds of hope in the immense and desperate field of migrations, gestures inhabited from within by the attitudes to which the Beatitudes invite us.

**Welcome:** I met and saw at work so many religious communities who, in response to Pope Francis's appeal, opened the doors of their homes to welcome entire families, women, and children, thus allowing them to continue to hope that another life can open before them.

This welcome is vital for those who have had to leave everything with the only hope of finding a place that welcomes them and allows them to live. If this hope is most often disappointed, there are nevertheless still, everywhere in the world, men and women who are able to open their hearts, their arms, to welcome, at least some of those who have been forced to leave their country because of wars, hunger, and persecution.

*Blessed are the poor at heart, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.*

**Meekness:** I know many Sisters, who without understanding nor being understood, manage to communicate with a smile, a look, the tenderness of a gesture, in refugee camps in Kenya, Congo, in Lebanon, Turkey, France, Spain, Greece, or Sicily, in reception centers, and on the road, on the beaches near ports, at border-crossings, thus strengthening the hope and trust of so many fleeing migrants. In a context of violence (violence that has made people flee, violence that is done to them throughout their exodus by those who claim to help them to reach the destination they hope for, the violence of false promises...), the smallest gesture of tenderness (the warmth of a look, a smile, an outstretched hand...) can become seeds of hope that bring life and awaken, resurrect the treasures of tenderness hidden deep even in the heart of bitterness, disillusionment, frustration.

*Blessed are the meek because they shall inherit the earth.*

**Compassion or the ability to stay with those who suffer:** being there, in silence, close, to walk with... hand in hand... to accompany the fleeing of desperate people who have lost everything means letting hope sprout. I know, a good number of Sisters, many inter-congregational communities who, on different continents, are present where the migrants arrive; and their presence is a precious testimony of compassion.

The Gospels show how difficult it is to stay close to those who suffer. At the foot of the Cross, there were only three women with the disciple whom Jesus loved (Jn 19:25). While the women who had followed Jesus (Mt 27: 55-56, Mk 15: 40-41) and "*all his friends*" (Lk 23:49) stood at a distance. In fact, compassion requires not only being touched by the suffering of others but also consenting to not being able to do anything else but be there, disarmed, and remain in that presence, even though it seems to bring neither improvement nor any kind of consolation.

*Blessed are the afflicted because they shall be comforted.*

**Hunger and thirst for justice:** How can we not see the seeds of hope sown by the groups of Sisters who do not hesitate to take a stance, as they recently did in Italy and have been doing in many other countries in America, Asia, and Europe for a long time? Sisters dare to raise their voices in the face of their governments which, in the name of security, close ports, build walls, transfer hundreds of people from one center to another, with no regard for human dignity or for the whole path of integration already begun.

In a context where the only thing that seems to count is the profit that can be drawn from others—no matter how poor they are—who are then abandoned as soon as they stop being profitable, all over the world men and women, not paralyzed by the fear of consequences that their commitment could have on them, have enough faith, courage, and hope to draw attention to the voice of those who have been denied the right to speak and to denounce the countless injustices that these people endure.

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satiated. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.*

**Mercy:** Being there also means upholding hope against all hope. This is the case of small groups of Sisters present for example, in Ceuta (Morocco), in Calais (France), in Ventimiglia (Italy), on the Mexican borders, and in many other places, where they welcome those who cannot climb over walls, get on a truck, those who are chased back, wounded, and bruised. The Sisters are there, ready to welcome, to heal physical and moral wounds, to give courage and hope to start the adventure again.

*Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.*

**The construction of peace:** in a context of mistrust and distrust justified by all the betrayals endured by those who are condemned to roaming around the world because of indifference, selfishness, the reign of individualism..., working unceasingly to build and rebuild human relationships of trust and solidarity, without being discouraged by the fragility and multiple failures of these reconstructions, is one of the modest means of being a peacemaker and plowing the ground where seeds of hope can sprout.

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.*

**The purity of heart:** Gratuitous gestures made without seeking anything in return is one of the manifestations of God's gratuitous love lived by thousands of Sisters all over the world.

The purity of heart makes it possible for those who truly love and go on loving even when they cannot hope for anything in return to discern God's presence even in midst of the deepest darkness and, so, to discover the seeds of hope.

*Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.*

In the meditation for the Way of the Cross, celebrated on Good Friday at the Coliseum, Sister Eugenia Bonetti, missionary of the Consolata wrote: *“We want to walk this ‘via dolorosa’ in union with the poor, the outcast of our societies and all those who even now are enduring crucifixion as victims of our narrow-mindedness, our institutions and our laws, our blindness and selfishness, but especially our indifference and hardness of heart.”*<sup>2</sup>

These experiences I have just mentioned and that express the power of the Beatitudes in their very modesty, show that, all over the world, men and women, religious and laity, are daily going down this “Via dolorosa” to sow seeds of hope there. They are today’s new Samaritans, who do not turn their heads to look away when they encounter injured people abandoned on the roadside, but stay close to them and take care of them without counting and without worrying about what others might think of them.





## SOWERS OF HOPE IN BERBERATI, CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Sr. Elvira Tutolo, SDC

*Sister Elvira Tutolo, born in Termoli (Campobasso), is a Missionary of the Sisters of Charity of St. Jeanne Antide Thouret. After serving in Italy in the field of drug-addiction recovery of young people, she has been a missionary in Africa for 25 years, first in Chad and since 2001 in Berberati in the Central African Republic. On 5 March 2019, President Sergio Mattarella awarded her the honorary title of Commander of Merit of the Italian Republic.*

*Original in Italian*

*“... I didn’t want to kill, but my Boss forced me to... my job was to tear the corpses to pieces... I stayed in a container for several days without eating and drinking, I saw my companions die one after the other... I was tied up and they killed my parents before my eyes... the white soldiers offered me chocolate, then they wanted to do those things I can’t say... I had to go and steal, and prepare food for the fighters who came back in the evening... one of them took advantage of me... now I have a baby! We were all vaccinated to be strong and fearless... they took my brother and tortured him, we found him with broken arms and his penis cut off... my son’s body came back to shore from the river with his arms and legs bound, his face was unrecognizable...”!*

I was the witness of all this violence, of which I preferred to report what was said by the boys and girls now separated from the armed bands, those whom we are trying to help to recover their lost dignity, to find the meaning of life, and to regain hope in a better life.

I am here bringing you the cry of a people and a martyred Church. This is the situation of the man attacked by the brigands and left half dead on the road leading down from Jerusalem to Jericho... from Bangui to Bossangoa, from Bambari to Alindao, from Berberati to Gamboula. I have come from the Central African Republic, which has been awaiting the “Good Samaritan” since the beginning of 2013. In November 2015, Pope Francis, pilgrim of Peace, came to open the Holy Door in Bangui to begin the Jubilee Year of Mercy. With this choice, he gave so much hope back to people. Unfortunately, five years later and after 8 signatures and Peace agreements, 80% of the territory is still under the control of the armed

groups, the same ones—even if we call them ex—as in March 2013.

Their goal and sole interest is to be able to continue tearing the country's riches to shreds with impunity, especially diamonds, gold, and so much more! Religions have nothing to do with this, and it was only a coincidence that the Seleka were Muslims. The real problem is this: the wealth of the subsoil and the unbridled, competitive CUPIDITY, without any respect for justice on the part of international powers.

Sixty years after the proclamation of independence, we are still without roads, without electricity, without water, without schools, without hospitals that can be defined as such. A people with so many potentials is still humiliated, plundered, impoverished!

The military missions called to defend the population have failed and engaged themselves in much complicity. There are many, too many contradictions. I will mention only two: the UN has once again extended the arms embargo and, for this reason, the national army, which is trying so hard to rebuild itself, does not have the necessary equipment. At the same time, armed groups continue receiving weapons! There is an embargo on diamonds, yet, at the same time, their leakage is out of control!

The Catholic Church, in its structures and especially in the person of priests and religious, has paid and continues paying a very high price to defend the population. This young Church, already very lively, is a seed of hope that is awakening and growing, even in the midst of so many difficulties.

We Sisters of Charity of St. Jeanne Antide Thouret arrived in August 1960, at the moment of the proclamation of independence: 60 years have gone by... We have Central African blood! Together with the other Congregations present in the territory and with the population, we work among the poorest, the small, the sick, the young. We try, with them, through educational and development projects, not to let our hope be stolen.

The Central African sisters are involved in accompanying the girls who left the armed bands or prostitution.

My experience began, groping in the dark, with the children and adolescents who were living on the streets... because, as they themselves said, "I could no longer live at home; I preferred to be on the street"... Their parents are separated, and their fathers work as slaves in diamond yards. Misery, polygamy, accusations of witchcraft, violence... these kids never set foot in a school, their love has always been betrayed, and they are left to themselves. On the road, exploited by adults, they find themselves easily in conflict with the Law and, consequently, end up in prison with adults.

What answer can be given to these adolescents? How can we help these young people to grow? How can we help them to hope for a better reality? We have said "NO" to the Institute, to the "boarding-school" (as they say), and "YES" to the Family.

Once there was awareness and the “Formation for the Couples” in this place was started, we succeeded in creating a fraternity, later recognized as a National NGO: Kizito (the name chosen by the children themselves) for the reception, protection, and social reintegration of minors. So, couples now have natural children—those said to be “from the belly”—welcomed as children “of the heart.” Very often, given the number, we even have football teams, including with reserve players!

“We don’t have husbands... they are not our children... this is not a task for Sisters”: a provocation gave birth to availability and love for all, hope has begun to be reborn!

Then the war started. We lost so many children, adolescents, young people! We have witnessed terrible acts of violence, torture, assault, and sexual violence.

Serge... I couldn’t find him, I hadn’t seen him for a few days... they called me to tell me that there is a corpse already in a state of decomposition near the airport’s runway... “Sister, maybe it’s one of your boys”... says the voice on the telephone. I called the Doctors Without Borders who were in Berberati then; they cannot leave the hospital limits, so I called the doctor who directs the hospital... the police and Gendarmerie was inexistent... no one wanted to move... I went on my little Suzuki, a white towel hoisted on it... and... Yes, it was Serge: his body had been torn apart, there were clear signs of torture, and it was riddled with bullets. I still have the bullets, I don’t know why I kept them... I cried... together with other boys we dug a pit... a prayer, a salutation. We just had time to get back to the center and a car full of rebels was already coming in our direction!

Just a few days ago, one of the boys at the Training Center told me that his mother was pregnant. “They had arrived in their village not far from Berberati, they had taken all the women and with their machetes they cut their bellies. The Mungi-white soldiers offered us chocolate and then asked us to do things I can’t say... Impossible to forget... very difficult to forgive... and that’s why I then joined the Antibalaka, to avenge my mother...”

The young people tried to organize themselves to form a militia against the Seleka: Violence provokes violence!

Thanks to their stay in this center, these adolescents are slowly beginning to smile and the desire to start again, to dream. And we, with them, do not stop being Samaritans, together with the God of Hope, of Resurrection, and of Life!

# SEEDS OF HOPE FROM THE 2018 SYNOD ON YOUTH

Sr. Sally M. Hodgdon, CSJ

*Sister Sally M. Hodgdon, CSJ, Superior General of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Chambery, and vice president of the International Union of Superiors General during 2016-2019.*

*Original in English*

Good Afternoon. I was privileged to be one of the three sisters from UISG invited to participate as auditors in the 2018 Synod on Youth. The other two were young sisters, Sister Mina Kwon, a Sister of St Paul di Chartres from Korea and Sister Lucy Nderi, a Salesian from Kenya, both of whom work with youth. We worked closely with 2 other auditors, Sister Alessandra Smerilli, a Salesian from Italy and Sister Nathalie Becquart from France.

“Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment” was the theme of the Synod.

In January 2017, when Pope Francis **announced** that there would be a Synod on Youth, he directed his comments to Youth saying, “I wanted you to be the centre of attention. ...A better world can be built as a result of your efforts, your desire to change and your generosity...make your voice heard, let it resound in communities and let it be heard by your shepherds of souls”. This proclamation became a reality through the process of preparation and throughout the Synod in October. In fact, it was a joy to hear the voices of the 35 youth participants, resounding daily in the Synod Hall. Certainly, it was a new experience for those walls!

The Synod on Youth was intended to be an experience of synodality, in which the members listened to the truth of the lived reality of young people in our Church today through the voices of the youth, not only through sociological studies. The young people shared their life experiences, dreams and questions; their search for how best to follow Jesus; or how to encounter God in a real way.

The **methodology** used included meetings in large Assemblies in the Synod Hall where everyone, whether a delegate or an auditor, was given four minutes to share their reflection on topics within the working papers. We participated in small work groups consisting of a mixture of delegates and auditors. It was in these small groups where we, the sisters and youth, as non-voting participants, had a great impact.

The two published documents from the Synod are the Final Document, voted and approved by the Synod on October 27, 2018 and “Christus vivit” or Christ Alive, Pope Francis’ post synod Apostolic Exhortation. Pope Francis includes much of the Final Document in his Exhortation. If you have not already read this or the Final Document, I encourage you to do so. They are very good.

My experience of the Youth Synod was truly a grace as I saw the Spirit move among all of us, youth, sisters, priests, bishops, cardinals, opening our hearts to new perspectives and new hope. I would like to share with you Four Seeds of Hope I saw emerging from this Synod.

**The first seed of hope is that of attentive listening.** I saw a new paradigm developing in the process used by those planning this Synod, a process that emphasized **listening** as the main preparation. For two years prior to the Synod, through gatherings of youth, ages 19-29, at all levels in various countries, through the use of online questionnaires and pre-synod meetings, young people shared their family situation, political realities and experiences of Church. Using online technology this allowed more than 200,000 youth to be heard. Much of the material in the working papers, is a result of this global participation.

Inherent in this type of attentive listening is the ability to listen in a new way. I experienced this spirit of openness to listening in a new way among most of the Cardinals and Bishops. They were trying to hear the realities of the youth and to understand them. Many were very good about taking time to enter into dialogue with the youth, encouraging them to share their ideas, and making the youth feel welcomed in the working groups. They even went on a pilgrimage together one day, walking 7 Kilometers!

**The second seed of hope is the young people’s authentic search or seeking for God.** This search for God and for their place in our Church was repeated throughout the working papers, but more importantly I experienced it in the faces of the young people and in their sharing both in the Assembly and in the work groups. Many of our youth come from tragic social, political and family situations. They have lived through harsh experiences, and continue to desire to know what is God’s will for them, what is the gospel path they are to follow for their future. They have deep faith and wish to use their energy, passion, creativity and diverse ideas to build our Church and to move it into the future. They are dedicated, resilient and hope-filled women and men. One of the most poignant moments was near the end of the Synod when the youth thanked Pope Francis and told him, we will be with you and our Church in the good times and in the bad times.

**The third seed of hope is that the youth are waiting to hear our dreams.**

Pope Francis, reminded us of the words of the prophet Joel, that “we know that our young people will be capable of prophecy and vision to the extent that we, who are already adult or elderly, can dream and thus be infectious in sharing those dreams and hopes that we carry in our hearts” ( cf. *Joel* 2:28.) This is a call to each of us to take the time to be with our younger members and to share the dreams and hopes we have in a way that is contagious and that creates space for them to develop their own dreams. If we do not share our dreams or have stopped dreaming, what can we expect from them?

Many of our congregations have ministries that involve youth. We are called to nurture the seeds of hope and the dreams within these young people. Do we need to develop new models of presence consistent with today?? Some of the dreams the youth shared are similar to ours. They, too, hope for a church that is all-inclusive, one that allows the gifts of women and men to be incorporated at all levels including in decision-making. They want to help restore our planet. They ask that we listen and dialogue with them, trusting that they are not too young to be responsible or to be leaders within our ministries or within the Church. Young people are thirsting to deepen their faith, to know more, to try more within the Church. What do they expect from us...they ask for our respect, acceptance, transparency, authenticity, and some time spent with them.

Many of our congregations began with educating young children and we built schools and other institutions. We may no longer have these large institutions involving youth. Have we developed alternate ways to serve the youth or did we, in some sense, abandon them? Can we see new ways to be a presence to the young people who are searching for their place in the Church?

Sisters of all ages can be a listening presence to the young, to those who wish to share their journey, their dreams. Young people are looking for safe places where they can gather and be with other youth for conversation and company, to voice questions, even if we do not have the answers. Can we find an empty room or two in our convents for such gatherings? Our elder sisters are great listeners and often still carry many dreams. They can be a resource to the youth in a new way.

**The fourth seed of hope, follows from our ability to engender dreams. It is the seeds nurtured in the Emmaus Story,** offering a model for accompanying youth on their faith and vocational journey. As leaders we often speak of preserving memories, of recalling those moments when our own “hearts were burning”. These memories help all of us as leaders continue to walk our path of service.

Can we, like Jesus, walking on the road to Emmaus, meet not only our own members, but other young people on their road and ask them **“What is this conversation which you are holding with each other as you walk?”** Can we be fully present and tune into their conversation?

Our sisters engaged in youth ministry can use this same Emmaus model to help the youth nurture their abilities to dream, to plan, to discern and to move forward with God. Often we ask the sisters to do this important youth ministry after their full-time ministry is over each week. Is this fair to the sister and to the young people? As leaders it is important to let our sisters know we value their work with youth and that we are grateful for it.

The Youth at the Synod repeatedly expressed the need for spiritual accompaniment. A recommendation from the Synod is that more religious and lay people be trained as spiritual accompaniers. We have trained sisters and also, have training centers within some of our congregations. Will we consider offering accompaniment to more Youth and increase the number of lay persons in our spiritual direction courses?

All of us are invited to nurture the seeds of hope from the Youth Synod. One way to do this is by being the “dangerous memory” in each of our dioceses and parishes, in case some Bishops or Pastors do not choose to move forward the spirit and recommendations of the Synod. We may need to remind them.

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