

## **Integrity of our evangelizing mission “in a globalized pluralistic setting”**

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Our duty, mission, to proclaim Jesus Christ is obvious from today’s Gospel reading. This is not the point at issue; it is rather in how do we go about carrying out this mission in a “globalized pluralistic setting,” as your General Secretary, Birger Nygaard, wrote in his letter of invitation to this international conference, where we encounter people of other faiths. I can only share with you my Catholic-Christian and personal experience of my evangelizing mission.

In order that I can get a person to buy my product, using a commercial language, I must first know how my product is different from products of other people and know also the needs of the person before I can effectively sell my product. Although this is common sense, it is, in fact, not that common.

Transposing the principle to evangelizing mission, the question is: how can I bear witness to J. Christ to persons, who do not know or have not come to accept Him, if I do not know these persons with whom I am communicating – i.e., if I do not know their religious and cultural background? I shall confine myself to religion even though aspects of religion and culture are often intertwined. Therefore, my approach to the topic of “Integrity of our evangelizing mission in a globalized pluralistic setting” is to compare what I believe in and what others have faith in.

Living in a multi-religious society, have I ever asked myself what makes me, a Christian, different from people of other faiths, e.g., from the Buddhists, the Hindus and the Muslims? Comparison, as is commonly said, is odious. It is offensive only when my aim is to put someone down and to raise myself up as better than others. It is not odious if I want only to know who I am in relation to others, as they are, different from me. In fact, it is in comparing me with others that I know more precisely and clearly who I am. I do not have a high huge nose but a rather small nose because I am a Chinese and not a European. I respect and obey my elders more than the Europeans who care more for their individual freedom. By this, I am not degrading the Europeans or looking down on myself. In fact, I really only got to know myself better when I left my country and met people of other cultures. It is like placing a rather dark picture against a white background. The dark picture becomes clearer and more beautiful. Hence, I will compare what it is to be a Christian with people of other religions so that we may appreciate more being Christians and may be able to present Jesus Christ more effectively to people who have not yet come to accept Him. This is done with great respect for and acceptance of the freedom of others to choose what they want to believe in.

Note that this is not an inter-religious discourse. It is a faith sharing on my evangelizing mission. Nevertheless, it is not out of the point to say that true inter-religious dialogue, which is part of my evangelizing mission, demands a clear knowledge of who I am and what I believe in before I can dialogue meaningfully with the other. It calls also for an objective and sincere understanding of the beliefs of the other.

By telling a person of a different belief who I am, a Catholic-Christian, and why I believe in what I believe does not imply that I want to make him or her to be like me. Not at all. The other is absolutely free to accept what he or she wants to believe in. But, if he or she accepts Jesus Christ, I rejoice and thank God for it. But if she or he prefers to remain in his/her belief, I also thank God because conversion is the work of God, not of me. I have done my duty and it is up to God to want or not to want the concerned person to be a Christian. So, let me share with you **my understanding** of who Christians are in relation with people of other faiths in order that we may more effectively bear witness to Jesus Christ.

First of all, Christians believe in a God who is very involved in their history, their lives of sorrows and joys on earth to a point that HE came down to earth to be like us in all things except committing a sin (2 Cor 5: 21). God became Man in the person of Jesus who suffered, died, buried and rose from the dead to save us, and for Catholic-Christians, He continuously gives **His** life to us as food in the Eucharist to strengthen us to live a life more like Him – fully human, fully divine. Having Jesus Christ and living in Him here and now is what makes us different from people of other faiths.

Buddhism teaches that in each person there is a “Buddha” in him. So, he does not have to rely on God but only on himself to attain to “enlightenment” leading to “nirvana” or, in Christian terminology, “heaven.” This is why Buddhism, strictly speaking, does not have God or an understanding of God. Christianity differs radically from this teaching. Christianity teaches that we rely completely on God, especially on Jesus Christ, without whom we cannot attain salvation. St. Paul writes:

... it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith; not by anything of your own, but by a gift from God; not by anything that you have done, so that nobody can claim the credit. We are God’s work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning he had meant us to live it. (Gal 2:8-10)

For Buddhists, they try to get into themselves where they touch the Buddha in them from which they radiate compassion, goodness, kindness, etc. For Christians, it is getting out of ourselves and going **in faith** to God, who is **Love** (1 Jn 4: 8, 16), that we receive an abundance of grace to reach out to others in loving service of them. Through this, we are fulfilled and saved. Hence, Jesus said, “...for those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” (Mt 6:25) We have just to look around us and at ourselves to realize how weak and poor we, human beings, are. The hatred, the jealousies, the cut-throat competition, the corruption, the killings and mass murders surely will convince us that human beings by themselves cannot achieve salvation. We need God; for us Christians, specifically, it is Jesus Christ, The God and Man, whom we need .

We have Muslims in our Malaysian society. In fact, they are now everywhere in the world. They believe that Allah is transcendent, i.e., above all, completely beyond creatures and, hence, before Him, all must bow down in total submission and obedience. This is, in fact, the meaning of “Islam” – total submission in good and evil to the will of God. This understanding of God is very close to the Old Testament concept of God. Because God is beyond everything, He communicates with humans through His prophets and angels, His messengers. The communication is basically on what humans must do and not do to be saved – in other words, laws to be obeyed. Therefore, obedience to the law of God, the “Shariah,” is essential to Islam as obedience to the “Torah” to Judaism. The Koran, believed by the great majority of Muslims, as word for word revealed by God through Archangel Gabriel to Mohammad, is central to obedience to God’s law. We can understand why Muslims try to implement the “Shariah,” or Islamic Law everywhere.

Christians have also this concept of God as transcendent. He is God the Father, creator of all things, the Almighty. But the Transcendent is revealed to us by God Himself as love manifested in the person of Jesus Christ, His Son. So, God is transcendent, yes. But He is also love. Thus, for Christians, if a law does not enhance and enrich love in us and for others, then, the law is of no use, at least, defective. Legalism in any form is not in tune with true Christianity. St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians (5: 14) says: “Serve one another, rather, in works of love, since the whole of the Law is summarized in a single command: Love your neighbour as yourself.” Love snips off legalism from the edges of law.

Jesus Christ, the infinite love of God made manifest, is for us what the Koran is for the Muslims. The latter is a book to be followed; the former is a person whose unconditional love pours life into us; and “life to the full.” (Jn 10:10)

We have Hindus also in Malaysia. Their religion is in complete contrast to Islam. The Hindus believe in the immanent presence of God in everything to such an extent that the Almighty Immanence is in the heart of everything. A Hindu mystic can say: “I am God” because his soul is identical with God or in their own language,

“Atman (soul) is equal to Brahman (God).” This is why Hindus can worship a tree or a snake because they are really worshipping the Immanent Almighty manifested in a man or a tree or a snake. The appearance of the Immanent Almighty in a human person is called “avatar.” So, we have a Sai Baba claiming to be god.

Christians have also the concept of God as being immanent. He is in everything in the sense that without Him everything will disappear into nothingness. But this immanence does not make Him a tree or a man or a snake. A Christian mystic in complete union with God will never say that he or she is God. There is always a distinction between God and creature even when a Christian mystic is in full union with God. For Christians, this Immanent God is the Holy Spirit who is in everything and continuously works in them.

As you can see, this is why I am proud to be a Catholic-Christian. Not that I am better than people of other religious beliefs; but I have a loving God who is Almighty and above all things (Transcendent – God the Father), who is also in all things (Immanent – God the Holy Spirit) and who is especially with us as a human being in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, sharing everything in our lives except sin. Our understanding of and sharing in the life of God is indeed great! His love is unlimited and unconditional.

When you have something wonderful, you want to share it with others. So, **SHARE** your faith with others by your life and words!