AN INTERFAITH ASHRAM: A description
John Dupuche

For the last eight years Father John Dupuche, a priest of the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne, has lived in an interfaith household – in fact, the parish house – with Swami Sannyasanand, a yogi of the Satyananda lineage, and Venerable Lobsang Tendar, a Tibetan Buddhist monk of the Gyuto tradition. His experience in this context and his wider interfaith activities in Melbourne have led him, together with Father Michael Mifsud, an Oblate of the Camaldolese tradition, to wish to set up a fully fledged interfaith ashram. They have drawn up this "rule" and would appreciate comments from readers.

Their experience in November 2010, also reported in this issue of Dilatato Corde, has shown the immense spiritual value of such a context for opening up the Christian mystery in ways we had never imagined possible. It will also show how humans can live together in unity and diversity.
Preamble:
This proposal is not written from the viewpoint of any one tradition. Rather, it seeks to provide a common basis for all. The appendices give the characteristic orientations.

1) Aims
We come together so as to enter more fully into our truth and become a blessing for all.

a. Gathering

• We withdraw from a frantic pace of life and focus more freely on the grace that has been received. We forget all that once enticed us but is now seen to be irrelevant. We enter into solitude so as to reach the fullness of contemplation. The ashram is a place of mindfulness and awareness, seeking to discover the truth that lies within and let it manifest itself fully. In this way, we embody the goal we seek.

• This style of life involves a careful fidelity to one’s tradition and an exact adherence to its doctrines. It involves a commitment to practice. It makes every effort to achieve the aim of one’s tradition and eschews every form of indolence or complacency.

• There is a focus on the goal, an eager striving, even though we know that there are many hindrances both outer and inner, many distractions and obstacles. It is assisted by a salutary fear of succumbing to weaknesses of character and any difficulties of the situation.

• The constant memory of the grace that is at work in us leads to the discovery of the heart of one’s heart, to one’s truest nature where at last we come to peace and
the fullness of joy. It leads to the discovery of the fountain of living water, the expansiveness which comes from total openness, the enlightenment which comes from the ultimate light, the fullness of consciousness. In this way the ashram becomes a place of wonder and expectancy, a paradise.

- This ashram leads to freedom from illusion but not escape from hardship, for it is also a place of dryness and even of a sense of uselessness. It is a place where we come more closely in contact with the unresolved issues that hamper our progress. It is a place of conversion and purification.

- Although it is a withdrawal from the world, it leads to a fullness of presence both to oneself and to others, to the world and every living creature, a presence that involves every aspect of one’s being, body, mind and spirit. It is a sanctification, perceiving this material order as the divine sanctuary.

- It is a place of silence and seclusion, not in the desert or the forest, but in complete detachment from all that can disturb or prevent the fullness of presence that occupies the heart. It is a place of equanimity, openness to all, an absence of conflicting emotions.

- It is a presence of one to the other, without self-preoccupation. In this stillness of mind and body and heart we recover the divine image which is present in each one of us but has been obscured for a while.

b. fellowship

- We care for each other, not only for the physical and emotional needs, the social and intellectual needs, but we also take care that all should have the freedom and energy and encouragement to pursue what is best in them, whatever their path. It involves humility and
generosity, perception and confidence, open hearts and open minds.

• Ashram life is not a masquerade for selfishness, but a service done for each other and for the benefit of all creation. Thus, members do not impose themselves but rather give way to each other in humility. Each takes into account the disposition, and measure of grace of the others, with great patience and forgiveness and a sense of harmony.

• It is an opportunity also to become aware of our strengths and weaknesses, the pitfalls and the advantages that are special to each person, seeking wholeheartedness and balance at every moment, fully aware.

• Obedience to the structures and purpose of the ashram is a sign of wisdom and true self-worth. Obedience to those who have authority in the community is a sign of enlightenment.

• We come in order to be affirmed and enlightened, challenged and inspired, in all humility and respect. We have come to share our gifts, not to impose them.

• We wish to learn from each other, but not to mix traditions uncritically, to enhance our own practice in the light of the practice of others, but not to create a mish-mash. We have come together to hear from each other but not necessarily to agree.

• We become disciples of each other and at the same time appreciate all the more fully the specific character of our own tradition.

• Faced with the diversity of incompatible diversity of traditions, we are purified from illusion and fear and come to equanimity. This is possible only if we are at peace with ourselves and with all.
• Our very diversity allows us to see beyond the superficial aspects of things into the depths, going beyond all mental constructs and customs, entering to the heart.
• We become aware of the paradox of incompatible diversity and the community itself becomes a paradox. And so we enter into the fullness of knowledge and light.
• It involves an emptying of the self and a turning to each other and in this way to penetrate beyond thoughts and words, beyond desires and ambitions, to their source. By becoming more fully present to each other, we enter into the Heart, the Void, the Silence, however we may express it.

c. blessing

• This form of life is both a withdrawal and an expansion. The ashram is like a flame, still and calm, from which an unfailing stream of light flows for the benefit of all. The ashram is a source of light and nourishment, a witness to truth and bliss, an unfailing presence. From our life together blessings will flow to others in peace and healing, as fire spreads from fire. We shall constitute a stabilising force in an uncertain world, a rock of faith, authentic and real.
• This form of life does not signify a sadness or denial of human pleasures. It goes hand in hand with a sense of enjoyment, indeed delight, in all that is good. It involves the joy and humour which come from the experience of freedom.
• We wish to live obscurely and without drawing attention to ourselves. At the same time, we will provide teaching within the context of the ashram, each singly, as desired, and all together in our witness of unity. We may
also, depending on circumstances, travel elsewhere to give teachings.

- In this way, as well as giving witness to the value of our individual traditions we will show the value of the interfaith spirituality, in all its wisdom and balance.
- We will welcome people to come and stay with us for longer or shorter periods of time. They may wish simply to join us in the pattern of our life for a while before returning to their homes, or may even wish to set up other places that further something of what we are trying to live.
- We will welcome others, also, who may wish to join us on a permanent basis. This will involves a period of discernment and evaluation on both sides.
- In these various ways, we will journey together on the path to ultimate Truth.

2) Timetable

a. A shared meal at least once a week.

b. Meditation

   i. Members gather at sunrise and at sunset and again before retiring into the Great Silence.
   ii. During night ritual, a period of time is devoted to reviewing the day.
   iii. While these are scheduled times, their purpose is to acquire a sense of unceasing mindfulness.

c. At least once a week: a listening in humility and respect to texts each other’s which lead us into the Silence from which they have sprung.

d. At least once a week: a time of discussion on a text, and a review of life, with great openness and trust.
e. Once a month: the community spends a day together in another location, a sort of ‘Day in the Desert’, to spend time in prayer and solitude; taking what food is necessary, to be alone with the alone.

f. Once a year: the community spends time a week in retreat at some suitable location;

g. Rituals:

i. Members attend each other’s rituals, but partake in them only if allowed by the respective tradition.

ii. In particular, they take attend the major feasts of each other’s traditions.

iii. There may be a diversity of images and ritual objects displayed in the house. There is also provision, for example for the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament and the worship that is due.

h. silence

i. The Great Silence lasts from the night ritual till morning meditation. Its purpose is to free the heart from the busyness of the day and enter into the freedom of Silence.

ii. This Great Silence applies not only to conversation but also to the use of emails and the internet.

3) Lifestyle

a. Members have come freely; they are also free to leave.

b. Mentor

i. Each member is expected to have their teacher, or guru, the guide or ‘soul friend’ who can assist them along the path.

ii. They also take responsibility for their own progress in spiritual life.

c. The ‘Ashram’
i. Members live in individual hermitages.
ii. There is a common room for meditation and ritual which is kept as a sacred space and is not used for any other purpose.
iii. Those who have begun to live this life-style do not have their own hermitages but live in the main house. When they have shown due maturity they may be given permission to live in a hermitage.

d. Members participate fully in the joint activities.

e. Holistic life style

i. Members integrate all aspects of life: spiritual, material, social.
ii. Members engage in that level of exercise and body training which is best suited to their spiritual path.

f. The environment

i. Members live simply, without wastefulness.
ii. The ashram makes a point of being environmentally friendly.
iii. and close to the rhythms of nature

g. Meals are an issue of particular difficulty which needs to be handled with mutual respect. Members would need to agree on the arrangements before they join the community.

i. Meals are held in common
ii. One or other of the members consecrates the food once all sit down to table.
iii. Meals are received as a gift.
iv. The food is seasonal and local, frugal and nutritious.

h. Conduct
i. Nothing is done which could bring ill-repute to the Ashram.
ii. Members allow others their freedom and dependence. There is openness and courtesy, self-control and peace, patience and lack of pretention.

i. Grievances

i. If there are grievances, these should be worked out with the offending party in the first instance.
ii. If this is not resolved, it should be taken to the responsible.

j. Sanctions

i. If a member falls behind in their rental agreement to the extent of a year’s contribution, they can be asked to leave and if necessary evicted.
ii. If members do not abide by the purposes of the ashram, they may be dismissed.

4) Management

a. roles

i. The ‘responsible’ 1. is chosen by the community for a determined period of time until he or she chooses to resign.

2. The responsible has oversight, aware of the various situations and issues, of the needs and condition of the community, with a sense of the whole. Failure to fulfil this role properly will result in a whole series of obstacles both for the responsible and for the community.

3. Decisions are made by the responsible in consultation with the community.

ii. The manager
1. organises the general conduct of the ashram and
2. is elected for a period of time;
3. he or she is responsible to the leader

iii. The finance officer
1. manages the financial aspects of the community and
2. is elected for a period of time;
3. he or she is responsible to the leader.

b. The ashram conducts monthly business meetings.

c. The sign of a well-run community is its good order and its peacefulness.

d. Ownership
i. The ashram and land on which it is built ……?
ii. Any structures built by members with permission ……?
iii. Members may bring their own possession to their rooms but these should not be extravagant.

e. Financial matters
i. Members are self-supporting, supplying their own food etc;
ii. Members contribute to a common fund for common purposes.

f. There is a common kitchen which at the same time allows for the diversity of dietary requirements.

g. Manual work.

i. All members are involved in maintaining the good order of the ashram. This involves both work inside the ashram and in the grounds outside, in one’s own dwelling and in the common areas. The manager will arrange the duties.
ii. These duties are done with full in a spirit of service, with equanimity and without attachment.
iii. All jobs are of equal value; no one should be ashamed of doing the most menial of tasks.

5) Hospitality

a. the ashram provides ministry of hospitality where people can come and spend time with us

6) New members

a. discernment
b. probation
c. formation
d. acceptance

7) Associate members

a. There will be provision for associate members, who will not live at the ashram but will have a close and formal relationship with it.

APPENDICES

A Christian approach

I Departure:
Abraham heard the call to leave for an unknown land (Gn 12.1), and the Hebrews were led through desert places to the mountain of covenant (Ex 3.12). So too, the first stage in this journey is to venture into the unknown. We daringly leave all that is familiar so as to come to what is most dear. We discover the inmost Voice, the deepest Truth, the Fountainhead of our very being. We discover our path: unique, surprising, captivating. It is an enticement into the waters of baptism, the muddy depths of the Jordan (Mk 1.9), so as to come into union with the Christ who most perfectly entered death. And there, in the darkness, we come to the
brilliant darkness. The advice given to Abba Arsenius is seen to be valid: “Flee, be silent, be still”. No longer tossed by the waves of desire or aversion, we descend into the abyss of interfaith relations, and there experience the universal expansiveness which seeks - not uncritically, not unwisely - to embrace all creation and all manner of people.

II Encounter
The accompaniment of others who follow different paths is vital. They purify us of the accretions of time and history, of all that is not essential, in a ‘pruning of the vine’ (Jn 15.2).

We experience not a loss of self-identity but its true discovery. We begin to perceive not only the truth of others but also the real truth of our own tradition so that, in the end we exclaim ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’ (Is 6.3).

We acknowledge the commitment, the vigour, the energy welling up in each other, the clarity of mind and the absence of illusion, the freedom from craving or resentment, the purification from all vice and error, of every shred of egoism and arrogance. We begin to perceive that the others are acceptable to God (Acts10.35). It is a journey of enlightenment.

All are welcome into our company, all are cherished, all find a home. There is no concern for the imperfections but only for the possibilities that lie hidden in each one, a perception of the glory that is waiting to be revealed (cf. I Jn 3.2).

By sharing times of meditation and conversation, by taking part in meals and work we encourage each other and assent to our essential immortality. We allow the truth of one to dispel the errors of another. We make allowances for each other, patient and appreciative, “forgiving each other as soon as a quarrel begins” (Col 3.13). Like Jacob we
stand in amazement and say, ‘Little did we know, this is the House of God, the Gate of Heaven’ (cf. Gn 28.16). We realise that God has indeed “spoken in many ways in times past” (Heb 1.1).

In this way our ashram becomes like the great tree welcoming the birds of heaven into its branches (Mt 13.32). “Tyre and Ethiopia, all will be called her children.” (Ps 87.4) “From north and south, from east and west” (Lk 13.29), all will be welcomed into our company, to be with us without judgment, without resentment.

The encounter takes place in deepest faith which is the perception of things unseen (Heb 11.).

It leads to the identity of heaven and earth, the union of the divine and human, the reconciliation of sin and grace, good and evil, joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain. All is non-dual in Jesus the one Lord.

III Blessing
All this involves a profound change of heart, a metanoia. We move from ideas to experience; from nostalgia to anticipation; from repetition of the past to imagining things new; from subservience to freedom; from dependency to authority; from conformity to authenticity; from a sense of ego to an awareness of gift; from tribalism to friendship; from law to grace; from busyness to stillness; from servility to theosis; from asceticism to pleasure; from words to silence; from melancholy to joy. We attach infinite value to the other, to the here and now, to the physical. It is a process of maturation.

We begin to see all is created through us and for us (cf. Col 1.16). We are heirs to all reality (cf. Rm 8.17) and yet remain tranquil within this moving world.
It will then become increasingly apparent that Christ is being formed in us, he the ‘Perfect Man’ (Eph 4.13), not some idea, not some principle, but a person. It will become increasingly clear that there is a personal Heart to our company. We begin to see him, not as someone apart but as our very self. We will have not a shared sentiment, but a shared person, Jesus, the one who holds all things together.

Inspired by the Spirit we come to the knowledge of the Christ, the paradoxical Christ who knows all and reveals all, and in seeing him we see the Father. (Jn 14.9)

All parties discover to their surprise that the Triune God is at work in them, for the relations of the Trinity are the basis of their interfaith relations. In our communion we perceive the transcendent and abiding communion. We become present to each other eternally and without limit.

We discover we have become incarnate in each other as was the Word in the world. We consciously experience both the self-emptying of the cross and the glory of the risen. Even now we enjoy the fullness of heaven ‘raising our mortal bodies to be like his in glory’. In this way Christ will come again but not immediately recognizable: it is the second coming. We perceive that the Christ is come again in us, same Christ ever unfolding to the new and future Christ all in all.

Blessings therefore stream from us as light from the flame (Mt 5.15), for we are transfigured (Phil 3.21). We have become fully incarnate; dead to self and alive in all.

We take on the character of those with whom we speak, just as Jesus took on the form of the Jewish people. We Christians cannot fully be ourselves unless we become the other. We can be truly Christian only when we have
assented to all that is good in Buddhism, in Hinduism, in Islam and in all the religions until together we reach the full maturity of Christ.

And then at last we can proceed to give full-hearted thanks in Eucharist.

Author

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