Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World

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For its sixth International Conference the International Association of Catholic Missiologists (IACM), meeting in Pattaya, Thailand, from 9 - 15 July 2017, took up the theme, “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World”. The 66 participants represented 18 countries from five continents, almost all with significant cross-cultural experience in mission. Substantial informal networking among participants was naturally one of the more important fruits of the gathering.

Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World

In their keynote presentations, Indunil Janaka Kodithuwakku Kankanamalage, undersecretary at the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue (PCID), and Klaus Krämer, President of Missio Aachen, explored aspects of the document “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct”. This unique ecumenical text was drawn up jointly by the PCID, the Programme on Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation of the World Council of Churches (IRDC), and the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) at the end of a five-year consultation process. This study was unprecedented, engaging as it did both inter-faith and ecumenical collaboration, concluding with a first-ever practical ecumenical guide for conduct on Christian witness around the world for consideration by Catholic, Orthodox, Reformation and Evangelical Churches.

Global Context

Today’s context is truly exceptional: the rapid globalisation of the economy and of cyber-communications has left nowhere isolated. The de-territorisation of cultural domains has undercut previously held local and regional consensus in social and cultural values. Mass world-wide migration has turned everywhere into multi-cultural and multi-religious fluidity. Meanwhile, the model of globalisation is that of “casino capitalism” where the rapacious and the unethical win, and where the gap between a minute minority of super-rich and an ever-enlarging majority of the poor is producing an increasing number of unwanted “losers”.¹ Losing out economically while unable to transform their situation politically, bereft of both dignity and identity, understandably some of the displaced retreat into cultural, ethnic and religious enclaves. And a few turn to criminality and so to religious violence. Treating the earth as a seemingly unlimited source of wealth is destroying the earth as the common home of humanity, for the earth is not a collection of objects, but rather a communion of subjects. In this unprecedented context, the PCID, IRDC and WEA drew up the 2011 recommendations for conduct on Christian witness. Over the past six years the situation has intensified rather than diminished.

Listening

In line with this exceptional ecumenical document, we have come to see the evangeliser first of all as a listener who attends with “the ear of the heart” (Benedict of Nursia) to the convictions, values and motivations of our partners from other faith traditions. Listening leads to learning and mutual

¹ Russia has the widest rich-poor gap in the world, where 1% control 66.2% of the country’s wealth, Thailand comes second where 1% control 55.5%, and Indonesia third where 1% control 50.3%.
appreciation of each other, and so in free encounter we can arrive at a more accurate understanding of each other’s experience and perceptions about mission and conversion.

Conversion

For a Christian, conversion is first and foremost metanoia – a change of heart and direction (Mk 1:15), a turning to God, to God as revealed in our inter-faith and inter-cultural conversations, a God who is greater than our heart (cf 1 Jn. 3:20), greater than any particular linguistic, cultural or religious articulation. In listening we come to a deeper, more profound understanding of our own faith, as do our partners, which leads not only to mutual understanding, but further, to mutual conversion, as we are then able to rediscover and so re-appropriate aspects of our individual traditions previously dormant. In genuine dialogue, a profound mutual conversion is possible as we face each other as fellow human beings, as sisters and brothers, and so become more truly human. Cut off in cultural or religious enclaves we become ever more narrow and shallow, while open to others we find that our religious convictions unite and ennoble as we re-vision and re-appropriate our Gospel faith with ever greater insight. And so we begin to understand and practise our faith in the light of our core principles and ideals, recognising them in the life and community of our partners.

Free Choice

Living dialogue as metanoia acknowledges and upholds the freedom to practise, propagate and change one’s religion as a fundamental, inviolable and non-negotiable right of each and every human being everywhere. At the same time Evangelisers need to heal themselves from any obsession to convert others to their own religious institution, in particular by unethical means. Therefore there needs to be transparency in the practice of inviting others to one’s faith.

Self-Criticism

In inter-faith conversations we are led to an honest self-critical examination of the historical conduct of our own tradition. Such self-criticism and repentance should lead to necessary reforms, including reform related to the issue of conversion. Humanitarian work undertaken by faith communities needs to be conducted without any ulterior motive. What we can do together, we should never do separately. No faith organization should take advantage of vulnerable sections of society, such as children and the differently abled. We also recognize the need to listen to how people of other faiths perceive us. This is necessary to avoid and remove misunderstanding, and to promote better appreciation of each other’s faith traditions.

Mission in Dialogue

Dialogue is the way we do all aspects of our mission, not simply as a strategy but more as a spirituality embedded in our experience of God: we live our convictions. For the Triune God is divine relationships, a communion of love: Creator, Word and Spirit. Divine love overflowed giving birth to the universe, a universe that expresses who God is. The more we understand the universe, the more we understand its creator who has engaged humanity in a prolonged dialogue through the Divine Spirit, through God’s dealing with humanity in every age, culminating in the Incarnation of the Divine Word. Consequently, the whole of history can be seen as a dialogue of salvation, a conversation between God and creation beginning at the moment of creation, continuing with a chosen people, culminating in the saving action of God in Jesus Christ. God’s mission is, therefore, dialogical of its very nature, and we are called to play a part in this ongoing conversation (cf Mk 16:15).

Social, Cultural and Religious Contexts

God meets us, and we encounter each other, in specific social, cultural and religious networks which we must approach with respect and sensitivity. Hence, rooted in fundamental ethical values, we collaborate in promoting greater social justice and work for peace and reconciliation in society.
We are called to a fearless prophetic denunciation of inhuman conditions and violations of human rights, and to witness to the liberating power of the Christian message where people’s lives are tangibly improved through practical endeavours. Here, the Gospel is experienced as a joyful and liberating message of hope which reaches people in their everyday lives.

Mission is achieved when faith becomes the soul of culture. From within local and global contexts we seek to express our faith authentically, and yet in inter-cultural dialogue, we also adopt a critical approach, aware of each culture’s limitations and contradictions. Inter-cultural mission leads us to transform and renew cultures, including our own, from within.

Inter-Religious Dialogue
As regards the concrete conduct of Christian witness, there must be critical scrutiny in particular of aggressive mission strategies and methods which reveal a confrontational attitude towards other religions, and which distance themselves in a disrespectful manner from the religious convictions or practices of others, or reflect them in a falsifying manner. For dialogue thrives on respect for the freedom of others whom we encounter on an equal footing.

In dialogue, convictions and positions are introduced into the discussion, the purpose of which may be to convince those addressed, but always without exerting any pressure on them. Bearers of the Gospel throw light on what they have experienced themselves, what constitutes the essence of their own identity, what has touched them and what they thrive on, what their mission is, and where they see the meaning of their life. Bearing witness involves adopting a standpoint, explaining the claim to which the bearer has freely committed him or her self, illuminating the reasons which prompted them to do so and thus voluntarily opening up for the persons addressed an area they can enter in order to see for themselves whether they wish, and are able, to make these reasons their own. Of crucial significance is the area of freedom which emerges between the two dialogue partners as a result of the witness borne. Persons addressed must not be restricted in their freedom. The message is simply an offer which cannot be foisted from the outside.

Conflict, Violence and Reconciliation
The second pair of plenary presentations took up the issue of conflict, violence and reconciliation. Francis-Vincent Anthony, of the Pontifical Salesian University in Rome, presented a detailed analysis of three in-depth empirical research programmes on religious conflict and conflict prevention in India. As became apparent in both panel and plenary discussions, profound insights from these particular studies gave new light on a host of different situations as diverse as Fiji, the Philippines and Burundi.

Labelling
We were stunned when made aware that every one of the conference participants came from an area that is experiencing some form of upheaval involving the label “religious conflict”. However, the research presented by Francis-Vincent indicates that while ethnic and religious labels adhere to much violence, underlying rival socio-economic and political interests, actual or perceived, are a pivotal trigger of communal conflict. “Perceived realities” and “perceived history” easily become reality. Where majorities feel threatened by seemingly successful minorities, where the future looks increasingly uncertain and uncontrollable, those threatened often fall back onto their ethnic and religious identity. As scholars and practitioners of mission, we need to analyse the facts on the ground, and be aware of majority/minority dynamics. **Religion is not often the key trigger** of conflict, but rather underlying unjust economic and political conditions. When we use a particular label we tend to reduce people to a single identity and violence to one issue. Recognition of our common humanity is the basis of reconciliation, for when we rediscover our own humanness, dialogue is able to emerge.

Force versus Strength
Religion contains the potential both to heal and to destroy, to love and to hate. Conflict in itself is not necessarily a negative as long as it is managed appropriately. The research data shows that there are no significant differences between Christian, Muslim and Hindu respondents’ agreement with force-driven causes of interreligious conflict. ‘Force-driven religious conflict’ is to be distinguished from ‘strength-driven religious conflict’. Force is characterized by a capacity for violent action, which imposes coercion in a social sphere and involves a certain level of violence. Force exercised by one group implies absence of the power to act and speak in another group. Strength is characterized by an increased possibility to act and speak inspired by one’s convictions, while leaving the integrity of all individuals and groups in society intact. Actions are characterized by strength if an individual finds ways of coping with violence. This calls us to be attentive to violence in Christian traditions and foster critical thinking while promoting cosmopolitan citizenship.

**Women in Conflict Situations**

In her plenary presentation *Gennie Khury*, of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees at the Myanmar Field Office, took up a key issue in conflict situations in our patriarchal world, namely the role of women. Conflict has displaced over 65 million people worldwide, more than half of whom are vulnerable women. The presenter focused on Myanmar where conflict has been triggered by an unequal sharing of resources and weak civic institutions. Gennie Khury noted how conflict and cultural barriers result in women having limited access to the public sphere, and so have little or no voice. Despite the crucial role of women in reconciliation, peace processes are almost inevitably dominated by men. The voice of women is not heard where a majority of women have lacked opportunities to acquire skills in policy making, policy analysis, public relations, negotiations, leadership and management. Recognizing women, both their contribution and their disempowerment, is crucial. In conflict their dignity is undermined, and yet they are usually the first to come forward to work courageously for an end to fighting.

**Mass Migration**

Both conflict and the globalisation of the economy have led to mass migration, the underbelly of which is human trafficking. Stability and “normality” among the uprooted is in the hands of the women. Often it is the women who develop strategies and long term plans; they develop self-esteem and no longer feel lost, and in the absence of the men take charge of the family. The underlying cause of mass migration is poverty, and so to tackle conflict we need to tackle poverty and confront the capitalist model of globalisation that is producing it.

**Re-Reading the Bible**

The Catholic Church needs to hear female voices in theology and in biblical interpretation. In truth, we are called to re-read the Scriptures from a woman’s perspective. Both the presenter and participants referred to the creation myth in Genesis Two, where the earth creature (Hbr. *adam* created from *adam*, red soil) is put to sleep and God creates a woman, a “helper”. There is no indication of subordination here, for half of the references in the Hebrew Bible to “helper” refer to YHWH, God.

Mary of Nazareth is a model for both women and men in her “fiat”, which was clearly receptive but also astounding. As a teenage girl engaged to Joseph by her family, she had no right to respond to the angel Gabriel. But rather than first consulting her father, brothers, uncles and fiancé as both cultural and religious norms demanded, she took up her future in her own hands: “Let it be done to me…” (Lk 1:38). Receptivity, courage and self-reliance are one. Yet again in the *Magnificat* (Lk 1: 46-55) Mary, the voice of the silenced, yearns for a cultural (v.51), political (v.52), and economic revolution (v.53).

**Gender Equality**
Gender sensitivity, gender justice and gender equality are crucial in these times of upheaval and ongoing conflict. There will be no lasting reconciliation without gender justice. The oppression of women demands advocacy to bring about social change so that women and men, in both Church and society can be clearly co-responsible. If truth be told, what would have happened if the women at the tomb, while trembling with amazement, “said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” (Mk 16:8, the original ending of Mark’s Gospel). Today, also, women are pioneering Christian witness in conflict situations.

The Cross
One word that we did not hear during these five days was “success” in mission, for Christian witness leads to the cross: “When we are weak, then we are strong”, declared Paul of Tarsus. (2 Co 12:10). While a political prisoner, Aung San Suu Kyi learned from those able to stand up to suffering without being broken in spirit. In a similar spirit of solidarity, conference participants acknowledged those suffering discrimination, persecution or martyrdom in many parts of the world, and those falsely accused of engaging in forced conversion. The Spirit of Jesus gives us the grace and the courage to forgive the unforgiveable, recalling that daily we ask God to forgive us only as far as we are willing to forgive others (Mt 6:12). That in a nutshell is Christian witness, a witness of hope.

Facing the Future
And so the sixth IACM conference called us to re-invent ourselves as practical missioners and as academic scholars engaged in mission. We need to develop skills for dialogue, and to witness to our faith with an openness to others. The plenary papers, panel and plenary discussions provide us with much material with which we can re-read our experience, and so face the future as listeners and learners with a stronger sense of history. Key terms emerged in our sharing such as advocacy, empowerment and awareness building. For this to become reality, there is a need for pastoral and catechetical material to arouse our Christian communities.

A Living Parable of Mission
Throughout these five days, we have been immersed in a living parable of mission by residing among the students and staff of a Fr. Ray community. We learnt of former student and now staff member, Meuchai, who is armless, and uses his feet with incredible dexterity whether for threading a needle or driving a car. We heard of blind students who play goal-ball at international level with their ears, with a sharpness of hearing way beyond what the rest of us are capable of. Similarly, in deep listening and profound learning from “the other” we are able to re-imagine our Christian faith in ways impossible without ongoing inter-faith and inter-cultural encounters. In Fr. Ray’s communities for the differently-enabled, students are brought to accept their physical and possible mental limitations while nurturing their spiritual and physical abilities. Thus, self-trust, self-worth and self-belief are ignited and a creative future becomes once again imaginable, and then reality. Only after reaching adulthood and ready for a self-reliant life, are alumni allowed to consider changing their religious allegiance if they so wish.

And so for five days we have been immersed in this living parable of mission, where the physically-challenged witness to the attitudes and dispositions we ourselves need as Christian witnesses in a multi-religious and multi-cultural world. Facing an unprecedented situation of communal conflict and ecological and environmental destruction, we are being called in “bold humility” (David Bosch) to re-imagine Christian witness as strangers in another’s home, and be open to embrace a new paradigm of mission.

For truth is not primarily a formula or a teaching, but rather a person, “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (Jn 14:6). It follows that truth is discovered in relationships. The Cosmic Christ is at the heart of the Divine Trinitarian Community, at the heart of creation, at the heart of the human community,
present in each person’s heart (cf Col 1:15-20). We encounter the Risen One in each individual and in each culture, indeed in the whole creation: “May the Triune God live in our hearts and the hearts of all humanity. Amen.”