

## A call to Fraternal Dialogue -October 27<sup>th</sup> 2022

At the opening of the Exhibit on the World's religions on the 31st of March 2005, at Santa Clara University, Dr. Hans Kung said, *"There will be no peace among nations without peace among religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions."* These strong words explain the need for fraternal dialogue in our mission ventures in today's world. Consequently, as members of the Society of African Missions, with regards to the subject of dialogue in mission, we are bound by our Constitutions and Laws. In the constitutions and laws, article 2, it challenges us saying; *"Motivated by the Gospel of Christ and faithful to the charism of our Founder in the mission entrusted to us, we will give prophetic witness to the compassionate love of God for the world (cf. John 3:16). Attentive to the ever-changing signs of the times, and in a spirit of openness and dialogue, we will cooperate with local churches, and with all who share our objectives. We will exercise, chiefly among Africans and peoples of African origin, a ministry of service and empowerment."*

In a similar way for OLA Sisters our Constitutions No. 16b and 18 speak of dialogue in these terms: *"Our mission is communion. The Spirit, at work in the world, invites us to recognize and respect each people in its own culture, its history, its faith and beliefs. Ready to share all that we are, we are equally open to receive from others in the context of their values, the word or gesture which evangelizes us. We dialogue also with our brothers and sisters of Christian religions in the spirit of openness and ecumenical progress. With the faithful of Islam and other religions, with all people of goodwill, we establish relationships of mutual respect and together seek a common basis for constructive collaboration."*

These words reckon our obligation as missionary institutes to promote dialogue that will bring about peace and love in the world. The Lord has entrusted us with the mission to go out into the world towards his people so that they may become his children who share in his love.

As we commemorate the day of promotion of interreligious Dialogue, it is of great importance to reflect on some of the vital and edifying points that are enumerated in the Encyclical of Pope Francis on Fraternity and Social Friendship (*Fratelli Tutti*) in our world today. The document, which was published on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October 2020, begins by stating that our call to love others as brothers and sisters, even when they are far from us, is a call to open fraternity, a love without boundaries and conditions. The encyclical consists of eight

chapters, each exploring principles of friendship and unity in a time of growing division, with a focus on the human family in a post-COVID world.

However, without pretending to exhaust all the points in the encyclical, we shall try to reflect on some of the chapters in the Encyclical that can enrich our missionary venture on fraternal dialogue as enumerated by Pope Francis.

In the second chapter of *Fratelli Tutti* “There is a stranger on the road”, here the Holy Father Pope Francis draws us to the parable of the Good Samaritan. As we look upon the stranger, the Holy Father says there are two attitudes which we tend to inculcate: we either pass by on the other side, or we stop and be moved by pity. The type of person we are or the type of political, social, or religious movement we belong to will be determined by whether we embrace the injured stranger or abandon him. By implication, as people called to promote brotherhood, we are being encouraged to create a different culture in which we resolve our conflicts and care for one another (FT n° 57) because we all have one Creator who is the defender and promoter of human rights at all levels of life. This is exactly what Louis Massignon emphasizes. He calls Christians to see themselves with people of other religions as one generated from the same creator. He went further by inviting Christians to see Muslims as brothers and sisters from an Abrahamic religion. Just like *Fratelli Tutti*, Massignon challenges Christians and especially missionaries to see themselves challenged by the presence of Islam to live a life of a simple sainthood.<sup>1</sup>

In the third chapter, the Holy Father, talking about the “universal love that promote people”, states that, God is universal love, and since we are part of that love and share it, we are called to universal fraternity, which is openness. Human beings can live, develop, and find fulfilment only in the sincere gift of themselves to others; they cannot fully know themselves apart from an encounter with other persons. No one can experience the value of living without having real faces to love (FT n° 87). By implication, it is indeed of great importance to note that life exists where there is bonding, communion, and fraternity. Life is stronger than death when it is built on true relationships and bonds of fidelity (FT n° 87). Every healthy, authentic relationship opens us to others (FT n° 89). This has to do with our daily efforts to expand our circle of friends, to reach out towards the margins, to include those whom we do not naturally consider as part of our circle of interests.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Borrmans, Maurice, “*Aspects Théologiques de la Pensée de Louis Massignon sur l’Islam*”. In Daniel Massignon (ed.). *Louis Massignon et le dialogue des cultures*. Paris, 1996, p. 127

And in the fourth chapter of the encyclical, the Holy Father reflects on “A heart open to the whole world” the Holy father explains that we experience social friendship, we seek what is morally good, and we practice social ethics because we know that we belong to a universal family. Therefore, we are called to imbibe a heart of solidarity and gratuitousness. The conviction that all human beings are brothers and sisters invite us to see things in a new light and to develop new responses (FT n° 128).

In the last chapter of the document, which is chapter 8, Pope Francis explains that religions are at the service of fraternity in the world. So therefore, each religion’s respect to every human person as a creature, made in the image and likeness of God, contributes significantly to building fraternity and to defending justice in the society. Dialogue among religions seeks to establish friendship, peace, and harmony, and to share spiritual and moral values and experiences in a spirit of truth and love (FT n° 271). And as visible images of the invisible God, human persons possess a transcendent dignity; they are therefore, by their very nature, the subjects of rights that no one may violate (FT n° 273). Our witnessing to God benefits our societies. The effort to seek God with a sincere heart helps us recognise one another as travelling companions, truly brothers and sisters (FT n° 274). The call to dialogue is an imperative call in this world of today bedevilled by so many conflicts, why because our God is a God of dialogue “He is a God of dialogue who has been engaged, from the very beginning of history, in a dialogue of salvation with the humanity which he created”.<sup>2</sup>

With all these important words from the Holy Father we can note that as missionaries and as Christians who are called to unite God’s people, a fraternal dialogue is therefore important more than ever, in our world of today. And this can start in our places of mission. As pastoral agents, we are to encourage all our faithful in our parishes to engage in dialogue with the people of other denominations and religions, through collaborations, at different levels. Today we see, in our places of mission a situation where in the village, one church is against the other. This results into what we can term as interreligious or interdenominational conflict. Therefore, as pastoral agents we have the responsibility of helping our people not to see others as competitors but as brothers on the same earthly journey towards a heavenly destination.

---

<sup>2</sup> Michael L. FITZGERALD, *Catholic theological perspectives on Islam and Christian-Muslim relations since Vatican II until today*, Acta Universitatis Carolinae Theologica 8/1, 2018, p. 30.

In addition, we have also an obligation to engage the families around us, not only family in conflict but also non-conflicting families, to embrace dialogue at their own level. This will help in establishing fraternal dialogue at a higher level. One may ask, why engaging non-conflicting families? Yes, it is important because as it says, “prevention is better than cure”, it will do good to families to get acquainted to religious diversities and to management of conflicts when in the future, there comes misunderstanding because of conglomeration of religions in the same family. In our own context, we witness situations where families go to different churches or religions. This can bring about divisions in the family if there is no cooperation among the members. As agents called to show the love of God to our people, we are to preach love and fraternity to the people around us through charitable works without leaving any one behind.

Lastly, we see that in our places of mission especially in villages, the chief of the village has much influence and power over his subjects. We believe that dialogue can also start from engaging the chiefs into the importance of this subject to the people. In other words, as stewards of peace, we are to engage into fraternal dialogue with local chiefs of our different missions’ territories. This will help to easily reach out to the people and teach them about the importance of embracing one another as brothers and sisters.

We end this discourse by using the words of the Holy Father to appeal to all people of goodwill around the world: that ‘In the name of God and of everything stated thus far, we declare the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the path; cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard (FT n° 285). So therefore, in our missionary journey as agents of God we ought to continue striving to promote fraternal dialogue so that every creature may experience the love and peace of God in the world. May the Spirit of God continue to lead us in bringing His love to His people.

BY WESTERN PATRICK CHEWE, SMA.