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Dialogue and identity

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DIALOGUE AND IDENTITY

In popular parlance the word dialogue means „conversation, particularly between two people”. Having its roots in Greek culture the term dialogue originally also meant „a form of literary expression (used for the entire literary work or its part) in the form of a conversation between two or more people”. Dialogue understood in such a way found its expression in a „literary or philosophical work, written in the form of a conversation”. The word dialogue was one of the fundamental terms present at the root of the emerging Greek world and thus the Mediterranean, European, and Western cultures. It is sufficient to mention the „Platonic Dialogues” to realize the antiquity, dignity and seriousness of the term dialogue and what it implies. At the start of civilization there was conversation, there was dialogue.

One could suppose that the notion of dialogue should play a key role in the history and culture of the West, starting from the times of Plato. However, after a thorough study of the history of the idea of dialogue, it does not turn out to be this way. The Greco-Roman world, and therefore Christianity embedded in this cultural „milieu”, Judaism present in the West from the „time antiquity began”, as well as Islam, which started to penetrate into this world already in the seventh century after Christ, wanting to be in the West like it was „at home” in the East, was far away from actualizing the idea of dialogue. People chose monologue, subsequently building walls of prejudice, and furthermore, they created in themselves the fear of strangers. Humanity called to dialogue lived in monologues, and even assigned to this monologue a sort of cultic status.

The full truth of history would not be told if we tried to convince everyone around that the idea of dialogue emerged from the ashes of forgetfulness only toward the end of the twentieth century. Likewise, the entire history of mankind, the history of cultures and religions up to the twentieth century, cannot be called the anti-dialogue epoch. A more appropriate term would be the pre-dialogue epoch. In the history of culture

and religion, one can find quite a number of people who were precursors of dialogue, and whose ideas fascinate modern man. Even now, a person who fascinates Christians and non-Christians, and who lovingly embraced his Christian identity, is St. Francis of Assisi. He opened up his heart to the whole world. Being faithful to identity is that which makes dialogue efficient and trustworthy. At the beginning of the twentieth century a martyr for dialogue was Charles de Foucauld. In „our age”, witnesses faithful to their own identity as well as witnesses of interreligious dialogue are Mother Theresa of Calcutta, call by the Hindus the „Saint from Calcutta”, and Pope John Paul II. They are the sorts of witnesses who are recognized by the whole world. It suffices simply to have a look around in order to see the people involved in reconciliation. The fruit of dialogue is simply reconciliation between people.

Today no one should have doubts that the word dialogue is one of the key concepts of European civilization. The word dialogue should also become a basic word of the rising human civilization in the world, which is becoming an irreversible „global village” where everyone knows everyone else. The closer we get to the year 2000, the frequency of the word dialogue in mass media, in the messages of people dealing with culture and politics, but also in the declarations of Church leaders, seems to be increasing. Not long ago, in the period after the second world war, up until the 60»s, the word dialogue for some was an outdated term, as if taken from the dictionary of unused and outlandish terms. For others, the idea of dialogue was like an exploding mine, threatening at any time to explode and destroy its own identity, when someone was in favor of having a meeting to discuss the notion of dialogue.

It is difficult to believe that the Catholic Church for ages avoided the word dialogue in the sense that two differently thinking people would meet together to talk on the topic of God and man. People of various cultures and religions lived on their own, carefully guarding their yards, viewing everyone else coming into their yard as a threat toward their own identity. There is only one generation of people who reached a mature age and for whom the idea of dialogue became a normal word, and who can use it without fear or reservations or without being accused of heresy. Only one generation started to come forward bravely from their guarded yards.

After years of mankind’s terrible dramas, which occurred in the twentieth century, such as the October Russian Revolution, the Nazi era, the Second World War, the time of the „Iron Curtain” and the absurd „Cold

War”, the word dialogue became one of the challenges of modern times and mankind. Dialogue challenges religions and cultures to come out of the security of their yards. It also means overcoming distrust and a liberation from complexes. Dialogue enables one to understand the past as well as the future marked by a spirit of openness. It is the way to one’s salvation, and to the removal of the threat of self-destruction. Dialogue means creativity.

Just as the term dialogue became commonly used, and at times misused, so also the term identity more often appears in the discussions held in the forums of the modern world. It is a paradox that in our day the topics of dialogue and identity are discussed also by those whose mentality reflects the structures of totalitarian thinking. The loudest call for respecting one’s identity comes from those who do not want and do not have the intention of respecting the identity of others. Pseudo-promoters of dialogue are those who refrain from seeking the truth and use dialogue only to promote their own interests.

The popular definition of identity, present in the common language, is also as simple as the definition of dialogue. Identity means „being the same”, „sameness”. Even a quick look at the shortest definitions of the terms dialogue and identity leads to deeper conclusions. Since dialogue is a conversation between two people, it is likewise a meeting of two identities, two different „samenesses”, which have the highest right to be that, what and who they are. Dialogue supposes identity. Not being oneself, „not being the same”, meaning giving up identity and also authenticity, preventing one from engaging in dialogue. He who surrenders his own identity in order to win the favor of the partner in dialogue is the greatest obstacle and threat to dialogue. One cannot march to the beat of a different drummer. Once engaged in dialogue, one cannot say only that which the other side wants to hear. In dialogue, one cannot dance to the rhythm imposed by the partner. Dialogue is a meeting between two distinct individuals. The condition for a good dialogue is respect for one’s identity and for the identity of the other party engaged in dialogue. Dialogue doesn’t mean raising a toast or having a big party with a lavishly prepared banquet. Dialogue includes hardships and effort in order to become more oneself and also to better understand the other.

Dialogue demands speaking about uncomfortable aspects, even those that hurt, those which are the source of suffering, but also about that which brings joy. It is speaking about not only what the other party wants to hear, but also speaking about matters the other party would most gla-

dly turn a cold shoulder at. Wanting to respond to the emerging questions about the conditions and goals of dialogue, it is necessary to penetrate the exact definition of this term in order to fathom the phenomenon of meeting in dialogue. In our days, one must speak courageously about how important and what great role dialogue has. It is necessary to point out these goals of dialogue which may pave the way to a better understanding and to bringing people closer together. The way to understanding the phenomenon of dialogue is a careful reflection on its subject and object. It is very important to delineate all the conditions of a genuine dialogue. A careful analysis of the form of dialogue must also not be omitted. Reflecting on dialogue will provide some answers to the question relating to the subject of identity. These two notions cannot be separated. Something that refers to dialogue also refers to identity.

My reflection on dialogue and identity is based on the teachings of Pope John Paul II – a great teacher on dialogue and tireless defender of man's identity, regardless of his creed, convictions and culture.

The Subject and Object of Dialogue

The current Pope, while still the Bishop of Krakow, made a sheer distinction between dialogue in the actual sense and dialogue in the potential sense. The former is simply an exchange of thoughts and signifies communication, being composed of a series of questions and answers. The latter expresses readiness and disposition to its undertaking and carrying on. John Paul II teaches that dialogue is also an attitude. It signifies not only a conversation but also a number of positive, as well as creative relations between the partners in dialogue. These relations take place among people as well as communities.

The Holy Father names various co-participants of dialogue, who are its subjects. He states that at the heart of dialogue the presence of two or more different parties is assumed, having equal rights. Most of all the Pope stresses dialogue among individuals. In his opinion, in human nature there is encoded a sort of innate ability to undertake and continue dialogue. When in dialogue, an individual experiences his or her limitations, but also realizes that there are ways to overcome them. Dialogue enhances the maturity of those involved in it, which eventually leads to *communio personarum*. A dialogue among two people forms a foundation and starting point for all other dialogues. The Shepherd of the Church in his message for the XVI World Day of Peace (January 1, 1983) states:

Dialogue constitutes the central and indispensable element of every ethical human thought, regardless of who the people may be. Seen as an exchange and as possible understanding among people, thanks to the existence of speech, it is in fact a mutual quest.

Dialogue conducted on different levels, while taking into consideration its goals and range, is finally „based” on the original form of dialogue, which is an interpersonal meeting between people. Partners in dialogue are individuals who are its subjects, but the partners of dialogue could also be smaller or greater groups or communities, more specifically – nations, countries, religions.

The Bishop of Rome clearly indicates the importance of dialogue between social groups. The difference between these groups determines their separateness and autonomy. Any emerging problems which are inseparable parts of group dynamics cannot be resolved through confrontation. The only sure means of communication is dialogue. Society, as John Paul II teaches, *cannot give its citizens happiness which they expect from it. unless it is based on dialogue.*

Subsequent subjects of dialogue are therefore certain social groups forming so-called political powers at the heart of the nation or country. The task of such a dialogue is to oppose any form of injustice, such as economic and social. Dialogue between political powers is necessary for the normal functioning of the nation, since it keeps governments from abusing their power.

The next subject of dialogue brought up by the present Bishop of Rome is directed toward nations forming the international community. This type of dialogue is based on the rule that any desire of hegemony of a stronger country toward a weaker one is not appropriate. By no means can dialogue lead to domination by one side in any sphere of life, since such domination would undermine and violate, most of all, the sovereignty of a country. The Holy Father calls us to overcome the barriers of ideologies and such political systems which are against any form of dialogue. He calls us to work out new ways of coming closer together and form new ties and social relations within the framework of the international community.

The Pope teaches that *dialogue between peoples and nations, despite existing economical, monetary and material inequalities, should take place on the basis of equality, in dignity and sovereignty. Neither economic nor monetary superiority, material goods and natural resources, as well as technical advancement, none of these are the basis for justifying political, social, cultural, or moral superiority of one nation over the other.*

According to the Pope, no nation can realize its goals at the expense of another nation. At the basis of dialogue between nations there is implicit the principle of social justice. In such a dialogue, John Paul II teaches, *there is a gradual overcoming of artificial inequalities, past burdens, and antagonism between political systems.*

The subject of international dialogue should be human rights, economy, disarmament, as well as what John Paul II calls *the mutual international good*, which with all certainty is peace. The goal of dialogue conducted to promote peace is the eradication of aggressiveness on an international scale. John Paul II teaches that dialogue *presupposes and demands openness to the real problems of others, acknowledging all that which stands at the basis of differences and the uniqueness of others, so as not to reduce the other party to a mere object.* According to the Pope, political dialogue demands openness and the abilities to accept and reciprocate. In short, there cannot be dialogue promoting peace without accepting justice.

There are also other subjects of dialogue which the Holy Father points out, and these are various „clusters of people” representing certain traditions, creeds, and religions. The subjects, and therefore the parties in dialogue, are the presently existing religions, including Christianity. The framework outlined by this dialogue is clearly spelled out. It takes place within these religions. In the case of Christianity, a significant and thus a very important level on which dialogue takes place is ecumenism.

The Catholic Church, reflecting on its identity and mission twenty years after Vatican II states: *Ecumenical dialogue should be conducted in various ways on various Church levels, whether this is through the universal Church or through the local Churches, or eventually through concrete local communities of the faithful. Dialogue should be spiritual and theological; the ecumenical movement should be enlivened through each other's religion. Dialogue is authentic and fruitful if it presents the truth with love and fidelity toward the Church. In this way ecumenical dialogue allows the Church to show itself more clearly as a sacrament of unity. „Communion” between Catholics and other Christians, even though it is incomplete, calls everyone to cooperation and in this way it makes it possible for all Christians to give a common witness of the salvific love of God to the world in need of salvation.*

Ecumenical dialogue which on the one side involves the Catholic Church and on the other side other Churches and Christian Communities constitutes a new era in the history of Christianity. From the very

beginning of the pontificate of John Paul II, ecumenical involvement has been the hallmark of his pontificate. The Bishop of Rome disagrees with those who have negative views toward Christian unification and doubt the significance of ecumenical endeavors. The Pope demands, however, that during ecumenical dialogues the faithful of the Church strengthen their faith, which should be *conscious, deep and responsible*.

The ultimate goal of ecumenical dialogue is *unitas redintegratio*, and thus a manifold process involving doctrinal, liturgical and disciplinary issues. The direction and goal of ecumenical cooperation are marked by theological dialogue. All Churches involved in this type of dialogue should seek solutions to overcome obstacles preventing them from a common expression of faith. *In this dialogue*, states the Pope, *the truth expressed in love and faith, „only once presented to the saints”, is deepened through collective effort*. Prayer plays the fundamental, unshakeable role in dialogue. The Holy Father asserts: *Dialogue must always be fed and expressed by the efforts to strengthen cooperation through a mutual witness, wherever it is possible, and most of all by fervent prayer and change of heart*.

John Paul II pays attention to *dialogue with other communities, who are seeking God and long to stay in union with Him*. It is an interreligious dialogue, whose goal is to serve the common good of the human family. Christian dialogue with the faithful of various religions also has ecumenical dimensions. The Church's dialogue with other religions is also a call for Christian unity, so that they will be able to proclaim and witness to human and religious values of Christianity itself.

The mentioned partners in dialogue, other Church groups, other Churches (ecumenical dialogue), as well as other religions (interreligious dialogue), do not exhaust all possible subjects of dialogue which are at the forefront of Church activities. John Paul II repeatedly points at culture as the „object” of the Church's dialogue. It must be stressed at this point that Church dialogue with culture is not something enigmatic or abstract.

According to John Paul II, Church dialogue with culture and cultures is a dialogue with man and has a specific character pertaining to the human dimension only. Culture as we know it does not exist in itself, does not exist without man. Where there is culture, there must be man. The participation of the Church engaged in dialogue with cultures is a sign that practically every human being and every society is potentially a partner in it. According to John Paul II, the object of dialogical attempts of the Church include „all forms of culture”. This is an expression of the universality of the Church engaging itself in dialogue with other cultures, and through

this the Church not only becomes acquainted with the rich and diverse heritage of the human spirit, but also seeks that which unites this heritage.

Church dialogue with culture, according to the Pope, takes place at various levels. Turning his attention to this, the Holy Father in a sense clearly specifies the subjects of culture – individuals and institutions. These are scientists, researchers, all kinds of specialists, but in particular universities as culture-generating centers. What is characteristic in this context is that the Pope is not referring only to Christian environments, not only to so-called „old cultures”, but also to currently emerging new cultures in the modern world. Church dialogue with cultures is of great significance as far as the future faith of the church and the world is concerned. According to John Paul II, this dialogue in a sense conditions the efficacy of Church evangelization.

Conditions for Dialogue

The existence of dialogue depends on a number of elements, and they are *sine qua non* conditions of dialogue in general.

The essential condition for dialogue to occur is appreciation and affirmation of the subjectivity of the other party. This pertains to dialogue both between individuals and between smaller and greater societies. Every partner in dialogue, as John Paul II teaches, cannot and *will not attempt to reduce the other party to a mere object, but should recognize the other party to be an intelligent, free, and responsible subject.*

John Paul II reminds us of the fundamental Christian truth, namely that we are all brothers and sisters. In a certain sense we are all in relation with each other, and thus not someone strange or indifferent. The subjectivity allows us to see the partner in dialogue as a fellow man and not as an opponent or even more as an enemy. Taking such a stance does not mean the blurring of differences and unique character of either party engaged in dialogue. For this reason the constructive characteristic of true dialogue is the acknowledgment and acceptance of the subjectivity of the other party.

The subsequent condition which somehow „accompanies” the affirmation of subjectivity is the recognition of the distinctness and individuality of the other party. John Paul II clarifies this by saying that *dialogue should strive that each party accept the specific differences of individuals or the other party, while retaining a scope of freedom.* We cannot talk about any dialogue without acknowledging the distinctness of the other party. To

affirm „otherness”, autonomy is not only at the basis of dialogue, but should remain an integral part of dialogue in all its dimensions.

The recognition of differences seems to be a very important condition for dialogue. Our daily life, however, shows that the differences often jeopardize all dialogical initiatives. In his message for the XVI World Day of Peace (1983), John Paul II states that *to engage in dialogue presupposes that each party should accept the difference and the specific nature of the other party. The party also gets to know what separates it from the other and will accept it with a risk of tension that comes from it.* Acknowledging differences is in the context of the above stated a difficult yet necessary condition of dialogue if it is to be effective.

Another essential condition of dialogue which the Pope brings to our awareness is „being open” to the partner in dialogue. On account of dealing with difficult and complex problems, dialogue requires decisive openness, whose fruit is a spirit of understanding. Openness goes hand in hand with trust and goodwill toward the other party, as well as trust in the genuineness of their intention. Openness, according to the Pope, is a sign of authentic dialogue.

Together with openness there must also be mutual trust. John Paul II stresses that the greatest hindrance in undertaking constructive dialogue is a lack of trust between individuals or human groupings, nations, states and religious groups. The atmosphere of mistrust which questions the goodwill of the other party nullifies any initiative of a dialogical encounter.

Respect toward the other party is, according to the Pope, a condition for dialogue to take place. It simply means appreciating everything that dwells in the heart of „that other”. Respect, according to the teaching of the Pope, must go hand in hand with discernment. It also takes into consideration the overall being of the partner in dialogue, namely his humanity, rich experience, subjectiveness and identity.

John Paul II in his message for the XVII World Day of Peace (1984) teaches that the parties engaged in dialogue must repeatedly undertake difficult and complex problems. Here loyalty and patience make up the next conditions of dialogue. Loyalty is a sign of honesty, and excludes double and multi-dealings.

A subsequent condition for the existence of dialogue is a conscious willingness to share the responsibility for the truth. She is the goal of dialogue. Joint responsibility in searching for the truth will not water-down the dialogue for utilitarian purposes. The parties in dialogue will not impose their own opinions, hidden violence, and interests. Dialogue

flowing out of an honest heart should promote truth and as such, quoting Pope Paul VI from the encyclical *Ecclesiam suam*, should be free from *competition, betrayal and deceit*. Everyone entering into dialogue should clearly distinguish truth and falsity.

According to John Paul II, dialogue requires preparation, meaning a true conversion, a metanoia, and this is a subsequent condition for dialogue. *This conversion or change of heart* – states the Pope – *is not exclusively a Christian nor even a religious ideal. It is a fundamental and initial human experience referring to nations and individuals*. Therefore, it can apply to every aspect of human life.

Dialogue means overcoming selfish tendencies on an individual and group basis. It means understanding and accepting others in order to evoke the hidden goodness which is deep within every human being. Such a stand could also be seen as a subsequent condition for dialogue. Authentic dialogue, according to John Paul II, *breaks down the walls of selfishness, misunderstanding and aggressiveness*. Moreover, the Pope states: *Change of heart makes people apt to support universal brotherhood; dialogue helps to achieve this goal*.

Forms of Dialogue

Every dialogue can take various forms. Life experience is proof of this. The form of dialogue is the embodiment or expression of that which constitutes dialogue. I will only pay attention to these forms of dialogue which refer to interreligious contacts.

The Holy Father most of all points to dialogue of a doctrinal character. It is immeasurably important on account of so-called „deep investigation”. This type of dialogue is concerned with understanding the doctrine by which the essential contents of each religion are expressed. The subject of doctrinal dialogue consists of broadly understood theological, philosophical and anthropological issues. Doctrinal dialogue is realized in the form of discussions and the exchange of ideas, not through polemics. In a special way it engages specialists and experts, such as philosophers, theologians, and those with knowledge of religion and culture.

The next form of dialogue which the Pope points out is the so-called dialogue of life. Its goal is friendly and peaceful coexistence among the faithful of various religions. Dialogue of life means the daily coexistence in a spirit of tolerance and understanding. It is being expressed by collective efforts in building up better and more just societies on the

micro- and macro- scale. The propelling power behind these human undertakings is the concern for man rather to „be” than to „have”. The dialogue of life, therefore, serves for the advancement of mankind. It enriches parties thanks to the experience of spiritual and human values. This dialogue is a daily attempt to witness to the faith by every believer. Dialogue understood in this way is at the same time the means and the goal. It is the goal, since it is an ideal, the means, since it is the daily way to attaining the ideal. Experienced daily, the dialogue of life should encompass all human spheres of activities, for example professional, social and community. It also deals with such topics as social justice, human rights, and charities. Thus, this dialogue serves for mutual enrichment and enables the parties involved to witness to their own faith.

Another form of dialogue distinguished by John Paul II is prayer. According to the Supreme Pontiff of the Church, prayer always indicates the relationship of man to Being who completely and totally transcends man. There is no doubt that each prayer plays a big role in shaping up human consciousness. It is namely in prayer and through prayer, asserted the Pope in the opening speech of the World Day of Prayer for Peace (27 X 1986 in Assisi), that we deepen our sense of the ultimate Reality. Dialogue in the form of prayer by no means ruins one’s own religious identity. This dialogue does not mean reducing various religions to the lowest common denominator.

Conclusion

In summary, one must state that dialogue constitutes a complex reality. The semantic meaning and capacity of the term found in the Pope’s reflections do not exhaust the richness of the issue. The overall nature of dialogue, its characteristics and the conditions in which it can take place, indicate that the Pope understands dialogue most of all in personalistic categories. Dialogue understood in such a way points to the parties involved as well as to the form the dialogue takes. Dialogue is carried out by various parties, starting from individuals, going through smaller and greater communities, and finally reaching states, nations and religions. During this it takes on various forms like: conversation, exchange of ideas, prayer, co-work, and daily coexistence (the so-called dialogue of life). Hence, the most important conclusion is that true dialogue takes place when one’s own identity is respected, as well as the identity of the party in dialogue.

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