INTERFAITH DIALOGUE
AND THE QUALITY OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION*

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Our topic for this morning focuses on two important points that need thoughtful reflection. These two points are "interfaith dialogue" and "theological excellence."

For those who profess the Christian Catholic faith, their stance and attitudes towards interfaith dialogue and ecumenism have already been spelled out in a number of official documents that have been issued by the Catholic Church since the holding of the Second Vatican Council (1963-1965).¹ The most recent was issued jointly last year on May 19, 1991 by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples with the title "Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ."²

Interfaith Dialogue is premised on the belief that all peoples comprise a single community and they all have God as their single origin, as well as their one final goal. In the course of the history of mankind, various religions have arisen to which peoples look for answers to those profound mysteries of the human condition. Religions see a need and an obligation to proclaim their faith. Definitely this is true of the Christian religion

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which follows the mandate of the Lord Jesus: "Go and make disciples from all nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to fulfill all I have commanded you" (Mt 28:19-20).

Hand in hand with the belief in the unity of mankind is the acceptance of basic human freedom even in matters pertaining to religion. For Catholics, the principle of human freedom in religious matters has been clearly stated by Vatican II: "This Vatican Synod declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that in matters religious no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs. . . . This Synod further declares that the right to religious freedom has its foundations in the very dignity of the human person, as this dignity is known through the revealed Word of God and by reason itself."3 These are principles that can be accepted by all believers of good faith.

Ecumenism, on the other hand, takes its inspiration from the Lord Jesus himself when he prayed to His Father for those who believe: "That all may be one even as Thou, Father, in me and I in thee; that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that thou hast sent me" (Jn 17:21). Through His Death and Resurrection and through the outpouring of the Spirit whom He had promised, "the Lord has called and gathered together the people of the New Covenant, who comprise the Church, into a unity of faith, hope, and charity. For, as the apostle teaches, the Church is 'one body and one Spirit, even as you were called in one hope of your calling: one Lord, one faith, one baptism' (Eph 4:4-5)."4

FORMS OF DIALOGUE

Since the time of Vatican II, the discussions and research on dialogue and ecumenism have so progressed that different forms of dialogue are now accepted and recognized. In the 1984

document of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, four forms of dialogue are discussed.

a) The *dialogue of life*, where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.

b) The *dialogue of action*, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.

c) The *dialogue of religious experience*, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.

d) The *dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other’s spiritual values.\(^5\)

Interfaith dialogue and ecumenical endeavors must have as foundation a deep respect for the person of every believer. We must presuppose that all faithful believers are looking for the truth of God. It is the truth that will unite us, and as Christians are taught, it is the truth that will liberate us, as the Lord Jesus himself said, “if you live according to my teaching, you are truly my disciples, then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (Jn 8:31-32).

AIMING FOR THEOLOGICAL EXCELLENCE

To know the truth — that brings us to the next important point we want to focus on: to know the truth and to impart the truth. We are gathered here as Presidents, Deans, and Directors of Theological and Biblical Schools. We come from different religious traditions, but I am sure we are one in accepting that our basic aim is to look for the truth and to impart the truth. We want to know the truth deeply and thoroughly, and we want to impart the truth with competence. And so the second part of our topic this morning reads: “the quality of

5. See DP, no. 42.
theological education."

SITUATIONER

Let me introduce this section with a brief situationer that will say something first about the state of Philippine Christianity at the turn of the century, that is, at the end of the Spanish rule and the beginning of our experience with the Americans. It is good to recall that time because what was true then is still true for many of our Christians today, especially the Catholics. I would like to borrow some lines from a lecture given by the late Filipino historian, Fr. Horacio de la Costa — verbatim, since he has expressed the matter very well.

What the Filipino priest of the twentieth century inherited from his Spanish predecessor was a Christian people for whom Christianity was social fact more than personal conviction, and the Church, institution rather than community.

"Social fact more than personal conviction." Some care has been taken in formulating the phrase. It is not asserted that when the present century began there were not Filipinos who were Catholics from personal conviction; who had, by a process of personal reflection, arrived at a personal faith. It is merely suggested that such personally committed Catholics were not in the majority; they did not give to Filipino Catholicism its dominant tone. Neither is it asserted that those who did not possess Catholicism as a personal conviction did not possess it at all; that they were not real, but merely nominal Catholics. What is meant by personal conviction in this context is a faith of which one can give an account, which one can justify by reasoned argument; for conviction is of the mind. It is suggested that at the end of the Spanish period of our history there were not many Filipinos who possessed their Catholicism in this fashion; although there were many, a great many, especially among the poor and uninstructed, who clung to their Catholic faith with tenacity, who would unhesitatingly have died for it, but who would never have been able to give reasons for their belief.

And indeed, why should they have? Catholicism was simply what men believed. It was the established religion; or rather, it was religion itself. They had never had any occasion to explain it or defend it. It was there. It had always been there; a landmark by which one
steered, but which one took for granted. In short, a fact. A social fact.⁶

Social fact more than personal conviction, and the church, institution, rather than community, this is how Fr. de la Costa succinctly describes the Christianity we have inherited. It gives us some idea of the magnitude of the task we religious educators still have to do.

How about our Christianity at present? A group which studied that faith of Catholic Christians in preparation for the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II), held January 20 to February 17, 1991, came up with conclusions like the following: we have clung to the faith in large numbers, and we have kept the traditions of our forbears in the faith. Even to this day we have kept our fiestas and festivals, our traditional rites for Christmas and Holy Week, our many devotions to the Santo Niño, the Jesus Nazareno, our devotions to the Blessed Virgin, the Saints, and the way we honor our dead on All Saints’ Day, etc. — all of these confirm the strength of our religious traditions.⁷

While we should not dismiss our faithful as simply “nominal Catholics,” it remains true that for many of our people today, the faith is centered on the practice of the rites of popular piety, rather than on the Word of God as found in Scriptures, not on doctrines and not on sacramental worship (beyond baptism and matrimony). To go back to the words of Fr. de la Costa, even today our Christianity is still “social fact more than personal conviction.” And the Church, for many Catholics is still institution rather than community. As Fr. de la Costa wrote:

Even today when many Filipinos say that the Church must do this, or do that, they mean the institutional Church; more concretely, the leaders and functionaries of the Church — bishops, priests, religious. They mean ecclesiastics almost always; hardly ever the *eclesía*, the gathering, the assembly of God’s people. For us Filipinos, until very

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⁶. These paragraphs are from an unpublished lecture entitled “The Priest in Philippine Life and Society: An Historical View” which the late Horacio de la Costa gave in a Seminar on the Priesthood to the Association of Major Religious Superiors of Men in the Philippines (AMRSMP), Tagaytay City, 19-24 April 1971.
recently at least, the Church is *sila* (they), rather than *tayo* (we all).\(^8\)

The importance of this situationer is to impress upon us how much we still have to do. In the discussions and deliberations of PCP II, so often it was mentioned that so many of our Catholics are still "unchurched" or to use another term, not yet evangelized. We are faced with a heavy and serious responsibility. We have to form good theologians, whether they are going to be pastors, or priests, or lay leaders. Good, competent theologians. What does it mean to be a theologian? What is theology?

**COMPETENCE IN THEOLOGY**

All theology involves reflection on the Word of God, and formulating its message in a more systematic way. But in order to be relevant, theology must also address human needs and aspirations, and so theology brings to Scriptures certain questions drawn from life's problems. There is a twofold movement in any good theologizing. The first movement is the study of the Word of God as set down in Scriptures and celebrated and lived in the living tradition of the Church. Theological competence includes a good knowledge of God's mighty deeds in history obtained through a serious, scientific, critical study of the Bible. While our different schools will offer the students a method of interpreting the Bible according to our different traditions, we presuppose that each faculty will try to give its students the most scholarly and most reliable courses on the Bible.

But good theology has a second movement, and that is the movement towards man, the man who is called to believe and to communicate to others his faith and outlook. Theological competence includes the capacity to relate the great deeds of God to each other and to bring them into a synthesis. It means especially understanding the present revelation of God without destroying the past, understanding new questions as they occur in our present and ordinary ministries and bringing to bear some degree of critical judgment on the great issues of our human

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8. De la Costa, "Priest in Philippine Life and Society."
society.

Because of the importance of man in the study of theology, a crucial stage in the intellectual formation of our students must be the study of philosophy, which leads to a deeper understanding and interpretation of the person, and of the person's freedom and relationship with the world and with God. It will also be very helpful if the students before they come to the study of theology already have had studies in the so-called "human sciences" — sciences such as sociology, psychology, education, economics and politics, and the science of social communication. These sciences will help the student toward a deeper understanding of man and the phenomena and lines of development of society. Equally helpful will be a knowledge of the precise field of the positive and descriptive sciences to help the priest, pastor, or lay leader to speak more effectively to contemporary man.9

But the students of our schools must be, first and foremost, believers, meaning to say, men and women of faith. But they are believers who ask themselves questions about their own faith (fides quae rens intellectum: faith looking for understanding) with the aim of reaching a deeper understanding of the faith itself. The two aspects of faith and systematic and mature reflection are intimately connected and intertwined: their intimate coordination and interpretation are what makes for good theology. This, done within the community and tradition of each school, will decide the contents, modalities, methodology, and spirit according to which the sacred doctrines are elaborated and studied.

SOME SUGGESTIONS

Everything mentioned above can be considered general principles that can be discussed and perhaps agreed upon by all involved in religious education. Permit me now to add a final section of more specific suggestions that I hope will help us in our work.

A. WITHIN EACH SCHOOL

1. Because of the serious work involved in the study of theology, there should be appropriate screening of students applying for theological or biblical schools, so that only students with adequate intellectual ability and proper motivation and character are accepted.

2. A school should have adequate facilities and learning "tools" (books, etc.) so that both teachers and students can make good progress in their studies.

3. There should be enough number of appropriately and adequately trained teachers and professors so that competent instruction is available to the students. The standard and quality of the school should compare favorably with other educational institutions in the locality.

B. BETWEEN SCHOOLS

1. Our schools should promote the dialogue of theological exchange.

2. To the extent possible, our schools should work towards a sharing of resources and even exchange of professors.