IS DIALOGUE POSSIBLE?
A Response*

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What could be a response of a consecrated person and a Mindanaoan (because of birth and present residence) to a well-written scholarly paper on an issue that calls forth varied emotional reactions from many people? Three notions come to my mind, namely, sympathy and scholarship, embracing of memories, and mutual enrichment. I will then try to articulate my response based on these thoughts.

Sympathy and Scholarship

The presentation of Fr. LaRousse reminds me of a write-up of Anglican Bishop Kenneth Cragg, who lived with Egyptian Muslims for some years. In his “Sympathy and Scholarship,” he says that:

To enter into ISLAM, it is better to go to the mosque than to reach for the dictionary. But where there is no physical opportunity for the one, we must begin from the admitted inadequacy of the other.

*First response to William LaRousse’s keynote address at the Divine Word School of Theology, Tagaytay City, 22 February 2002.
Encyclopedias, it is true, all too readily turn the mystery and livingness of things. And this destroys them.

Truly, to know the MUSLIM in his faith, we must somehow linger in the precincts of his prayer, kindle to the accents of the Qur'an reciter, and feel the pulse of the fast of Ramadhan.

But, OUTSIDERS as we are, we need for these interior ventures, the discipline of academic statement. Sympathy and scholarship must excite and complete each other. Only by their partnership are religions understood.

Living among Muslims, I experienced that this is a very useful guide in trying not only to understand them, but more importantly in loving them as brothers and sisters.

The presenter's exposition is sympathetic to both Muslims and Christians who are victims of a conflict, which is a choice made by human beings, and not a curse that God sends arbitrarily to Mindanao.

Embracing of Memories

In a lecture at the East Asian Pastoral Institute, Fr. Michael Amaladoss, S.J., cited “painful memories” as one practical difficulty in dialogue.¹ The memories that come to my mind now are both the pleasant and not so pleasant ones, those that never get into newspapers because they do not sell. My memories include how I came to this ministry. This is my experience:

Yasmin came to my Guidance Office sharing her love life problem, just like any teenager. But there were elements in her problem that baffled me. To understand her and her situation better, I requested to meet her family and that included the whole tribe. I became even more confused and felt so helpless! “If only I knew more of her culture and religion, then I could help more young

people like Yasmin to live life to the full,” was my cry. I shared these thoughts and desire with the late Bishop Tuddud, who replied: “There is joy in my heart that God revealed himself to you this way. If the Almighty reveals himself through a flower, can he not also reveal himself through a Muslim?”

I expressed my desires and aspirations to my superiors. They did not only send me for formal studies, but also generously provided me with all the facilities and possibilities so that I could live and minister with and to Muslims. And so with Yasmin and the other Muslims, whom God sent to my life, I could exclaim “al- hamdu illallah” (Praise be to God/Thanks be to God). That was the beginning of my love affair with Muslims, full of joys and challenges, and pains and difficulties, too.

The well-articulated presentation also reminds me of my sessions with the school community of St. Vincent Academy in Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte, where the infamous all-out war of Estrada was launched. We started our seminar with the film Bagong Buwan. This Christian community shared the experience of the Muslim community featured in the film—a common painful experience brought about by the same phenomenon. These Christians were refugees with their Muslim neighbors and friends. During this incident, a Religious of the Assumption was zealously protected and brought out of danger by Muslims. I quote what one participant said:

_Pareho man tang tanan. Sa dili pa ta Kristyano o Muslim; sa dili pa gani ta Maranao o Bisaya, pareho man ta nga mga tawo, pareho ug guiguikanan ug pareho usab ug sangputan. Unya nganong mag-away man ta?_ (We are all the same. Before we are Christians or Muslims; even before we are Maranaos or Visayans, we are all human beings who have a common origin and a common destiny. Why are we fighting one another?)

A difficult question to answer. A “true” understanding of the problem of Mindanao requires a deep insight into the legacy of past conflicts brought about by the interplay or clashes of local and foreign forces that came to impose not only their military and political will but also their socio-cultural and religious hegemony on the sa-
cred soil of Mindanao and its valiant people. The roots of conflict in Mindanao go deep in the collective consciousness of the people in the island and in the country.²

In her book, *Roots of Conflict*, Mayor Rosalita Tolibas-Nuñez, "calls attention to the urgent need to address the inner battle of going beyond our prejudices and misconceptions that stand in the way of a true and lasting peace in Mindanao."³

This is an affirmation of the idea of this morning's presenter, and I quote him at length:

The positive relations that are part of the history of Muslim-Christian relations and the positive experiences of dialogue or working for a common project for mutual development need to be included in written history and memories. It appears that these are often forgotten or overshadowed by negative remembrances. The pain and wounds of past events need to be healed and this will take time. As Bishop Benny Tadtud said, we need new events, "a series of happy events that will be remembered during the years to come in contradistinction to the four hundred years of unhappy events" that are now remembered.

Among the people who come to my mind in responding to Fr. LaRousse are the seminarians, the religious, priests and lay people with whom I journeyed in the context of a centuries-old tension that marks Muslim-Christian relations in the Philippines. I remember you and the pilgrims who are, in the words of Bishop Tadtud, trying to "move from fear of dialogue, to dialogue out of fear, to love out of dialogue, and above all, to dialogue out of love."

How can I tell you, or even, how can I convince myself that, quoting Fr. LaRousse, "the primary reason for involvement in inter-

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³Ibid., xi.
religious dialogue is not the political or social situation, but the theological understanding of God's plan of salvation and the mission of the Son and the mission of the Spirit”? How do I live the Incarnation and proclaim that “forgiveness alone heals the wounds of the heart and fully restores damaged human relations” after tragic events such as the bombing of the World Trade Center, “which undermined [humanity’s] confidence... in the face of persistent flashpoints of cruel conflict which create anxiety throughout the world”?4

Fr. LaRousse asks challenging and hard questions which lead me to confront myself if I am to live the call I have chosen to respond to as a religious.

**Mutual Enrichment**

Finally, in presenting the definition of “dialogue” found in the document *Dialogue and Proclamation*, the speaker took pains to emphasize that dialogue must not end only in mutual understanding but it must lead to mutual enrichment. I agree with his emphasis; moreover, I think I have the grace of living it.

My contacts with Muslims have enriched my prayer life. For example, waking up early to pray in solitude. I used to be a night person: very productive from nine in the evening until the wee hours of the morning and then go to sleep and wake up late. I disliked and had to struggle to be awake early in the morning, especially in Tagaytay, where I spent my novitiate. This was one area of adjustment in my early years of formation. Therefore, when I was in Marawi I almost “cursed” the Muslims for waking up the whole city with their “Call to Prayer” as early as four o’clock in the cold mornings. Then a change happened when, after a year of study, I went to Tunis to learn more Arabic. At that time, I could already understand some Arabic and the Muslim’s formal prayers.

Mosques surrounded our house in Tunis. After working on Arabic texts the whole day and in the evening, I would have just loved to have more sleep and wake up late. But then I had to wake up early with our Muslim neighbors and pray. You know why? The “Call to Prayer” precedes the five prayer times of the Muslims. For the dawn prayer, there is a special line, unique to this time of prayer. It runs like this: Ḥayā - al ṣalāh! Ḥayā - as ṣalāh! As - salatu grayrul min an-naum! [Come to success! Come to prayer! Prayer is better than sleep!]

Hearing these lines makes me get out of bed and start my meditation for the day. During these days of my life now, when I am at Centering Prayer or before the Eucharistic Lord at dawn, I know that during those same moments there are Muslims who are also praising the same God that I adore. In Iligan, I could hear them every morning. Our Sisters in Siasi, down in Sulu, have their adoration of the Blessed Sacrament to coincide with Muslim dawn prayer.

Are my Muslim friends also learning from me? Let me cite here one experience.

After a month of stay with a Muslim family in a Muslim community of Sirawan, Davao, a group of young and not-so-young ladies approached me. They wanted me to help them establish a community similar to the one to which I belong. It was truly an enriching afternoon of exchanging ideas, opinions, and experiences, on celibacy from both Islamic and Christian perspectives.

One influence in my life as a consecrated person is a mystic who kept a life of celibacy (very rare in Islam), the well-known Rabī‘ah al ‘Adawiyyah of Basra. Her refusal to get married would seem to imply a vow of consecration to God. She eschewed marriage, though legend states that she received many offers from the men Sufis who were her friends, and sometimes her disciples. To one of them she said:

The contract of marriage is for those who are concerned with the affairs of this material world. However, in my case, there is no such existence, for I have ceased to exist and have passed out of Self. I exist in God and am altogether His. I live in the shadow of His command. The marriage contract must be asked for from Him and not from me.
Her life was a model of mutual love between the Creator and his creation—a state of perfect love in which the lover ceases to exist for herself but lives for the Beloved. Rabi’ah’s life is a supreme example of the spiritual state in which the lover, love, and the Beloved become one.

Her poor and humble dwelling symbolized faqr or spiritual poverty, which served as a center of barakah (Divine Grace), she being a genuine faqirah (a woman who practices faqr). She was a servant of God alone and desired to be possession-less in order to be possessed only by her own love for God.6

Her devoted service to the One Master, coupled with an intense longing for the Master’s majestic presence, led to the development of a close relationship between the two, whereby the servant began to hear with the ear of the Master and to see with his eyes. It was at this juncture that the servant’s poor dwelling became the treasure house of spiritual wisdom and blessings of the Master, wherein many seekers found the true meaning of poverty and started their journey on the spiritual path.7

How can a poor hut serve as a treasure house of spiritual wisdom and gifts? This can be answered by citing an episode from Rabi’ah’s life. Once a thief entered Rabi’ah’s hut and found nothing save a pitcher of water. As he was about to leave, Rabi’ah called out to him, “If you are really a thief then do not leave without taking something.” The thief replied sarcastically, “What is there to be taken?” She replied, “O needy one, do the ablution with the water in the pitcher, enter this prayer room, and perform two rakaas or two


7Ibid., 210.
cycles of movements of prayer.” The thief obeyed and, when he stood for the prayer, Rabi’ah raised her hands for prayer and said, “O Lord, this man found nothing here. I have brought him to Thy door; bless him by Thy bounty and grace.” As a result of Rabi’ah’s appeal to the Hearer of prayers (one of the beautiful names of God), the thief felt spiritual absorption and joy and thus continued his prayers throughout the night. Early in the morning when Rabi’ah entered the prayer room, she found him prostrate before the Almighty and heard him seeking repentance.⁸

Selfless service performed from the depths of love developed in Rabi’ah an intense longing for that supreme moment when she would hear the Beloved saying, “O soul rest, return to thy Lord well-pleased, well-pleasing; so enter among my servants and enter my Heaven” (Q. 89:27-30).

As a Franciscan trying to live and pray, “My God and My All,” let me end with a prayer of Rabi’ah al-Adawiyyah, a woman Muslim mystic who taught by her life to love God for the sake of God alone.

O my God! If I worship You because of the fear of Hell, burn me in Hell. Moreover, if I worship You with the hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise. However, if I worship You for Your own sake, then withhold not from me Your Eternal Beauty.⁹

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⁸Ibid.

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Antonio F.B. de Castro, S.J.

Fr. Bill LaRousse has laid out in admirably clear and concise terms the task that lies ahead for the Church in Mindanao. He has done that with a short but accurate description of the situation in which the Church finds herself in the southern islands, where the issue of Christian and Muslim relations has become an important, if not the primary, concern. He has also provided us with a brief account of the thorny issues connected with the proper understanding of such a context, particularly in its historical dimension. He has laid out for us the imperative of interreligious dialogue, drawing on the teaching of the Church on the matter as this can be gleaned from the documents of the magisterium, and on the articulated experiences of authoritative figures such as Bishop Tudtud, highlighting in the process the theological, ecclesiological, missiological and experiential foundations of interreligious dialogue.

His illuminating focus on the local Church, as the site where Mission and Dialogue meet and become an intertwined reality, provides the Church in Mindanao with the necessary orientation for the tasks

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that lie ahead. And finally, his focus on Basic Ecclesial Communities as the venue and locus for the living out of the dialogue mission of the local Church reveals to the Church in Mindanao where she must begin: local communities of faith reaching out to our Muslim brothers and sisters so that dialogue on various levels—life, action, doctrine, religious experience, collaboration to assure the human rights of all, and culture—may begin to take flight. There are many reasons therefore to thank Fr. LaRousse; his paper should be of great assistance to those of us concerned about the fate of the long-suffering people of Mindanao.

It might be useful to bring to the fore issues that complement Fr. LaRousse's treatment of the subject. My comments therefore will necessarily lack the nuancing required by such a complex topic. In any case, allow me now to get to the following points:

First, the theological, ecclesiological, missiological and experiential imperative of interreligious dialogue must bring to the fore the social justice character of the problems we face in Mindanao. This is nothing new; it has been a problem of Mindanao, indeed of the whole country, for decades now. Fortunately, this is one area where Christians and Muslims can actively engage in collaborative efforts; both our religious traditions have a strong component of proactive social advocacy.

Land for example continues to be a festering wound in the conflict in many parts of Mindanao. This is vital because our Muslim brothers and sisters are primarily concerned about assuring the integrity of their Islamic way of life. And land is crucial to such an assurance. The Church, I submit, is called to witness to this basic human right on behalf of and together with our Muslim brothers and sisters. The Church's witnessing in this area must be proactive, not just for Christian communities mired in poverty and misery, but also for Muslim and Lumad communities which find themselves in the same dire straits.

Dialogue in this case demands as a component the Church's own involvement in this struggle for social justice on behalf of and to-
gether with our Muslim brothers and sisters. Are our local Churches in Mindanao up to this task? Are our local Churches, particularly their bishops, priests, religious and lay leaders open to this demand and willing to submit to its practical requirements in the areas of civil and political life? Are the Luzon and Visayas local Churches willing to support the Mindanao Churches in this initiative?

Second, the communities of Christians, Muslims and Lumads in Mindanao often find themselves put in situations where they are forced to consider each other as enemies because of outside forces, extraneous elements, other entities. I speak here of elements of the Philippine state and of the Philippine military and police on the one hand, and of armed groups like the Abu Sayyaf, the Pentagon and other kidnapping and extortionist groups and private armies on the other. I am convinced that the conflict in Mindanao is desired, exacerbated and promoted by some unscrupulous elements in the Philippine state, military and the national police, in collusion with other armed groups.

This conflict therefore demands a witnessing on the part of the Church, on behalf of and together with our Muslim and Lumad brothers and sisters. One, against those elements in the Philippine state, military and national police who in fact do not wish peace to reign in Mindanao, who in fact have used Mindanao for their own personal and collective interests; and two, against these other armed groups. There is clear evidence of collusion between private armies and bandit, terrorist and lost command groups such as the Abu Sayyaf and elements in the state, military and national police. If the Church wishes to address the religious component of the conflict in Mindanao, she cannot for one moment allow these unscrupulous elements to use religion as an instrument of division, conflict and war. It is not enough for the Church to condemn bandit and terrorist groups; the Church needs to confront these elements in the state, military and the national police and apply pressure on the Philippine government to get its act together on this point.

It is unconscionable that Fr. Nacorda—whose testimony on this point is crucial, not least because it belongs to a long list of testimo-
nies on the conduct of these elements in the military which goes back to the Marcos years—has largely been ignored by the highest officials of the land and by the top brass of the military. Fr. Nacorda needs the whole Philippine church behind him on this; otherwise, our dreams of interreligious dialogue will remain ever vulnerable to sabotage by the unscrupulous whose only interest is to gain profit from a permanent conflict in Mindanao.

Third, and not unconnected with the second point, there is the complicating factor of the September 11 terrorist bombing of the World Trade Center, the campaign against Bin Laden and Al Qaeda network by the U.S.-led coalition of forces, the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan, and now the presence of American military troops engaged in Balikatan exercises with Philippine military personnel in Mindanao. What impact does this have in efforts to answer the question: Is dialogue still possible for Muslims and Christians in Mindanao? Indeed, is it even desirable? I ask this question because, if one goes by the latest news reports coming out of Mindanao, the citizens of Tangub, whom I presume to be largely Christian, have just overwhelmingly decided in a poll to deny the Muslims living among them the right to build their own mosque. Allow me to quote columnist Michael Tan rather lengthily on this subject (Philippine Daily Inquirer, 21 Feb 2002):

In a way, I cannot blame Tangub's residents for reacting the way they did. Years of a self-imposed religious apartheid system have blocked Muslim-Christian dialogue. Denying Muslims their right to a place of worship only widens this gap because it keeps Muslims invisible, strange, even dangerous.

This takes us to the impact of the denial of a mosque in Tangub on the Muslim population. It is precisely this kind of discrimination that radicalizes Muslims, driving them to fundamentalist Islamicist ideologies. Imagine young Muslims growing up asking why they don't have their own place to worship in, and learning that Christians went to the polls in reaction to their request for a building permit, and voted down their appeal....

...In sociological terms, I was thinking of alienation from the so-
cial mainstream. Think again of our young Muslims without a mosque, and seeing themselves demonized in the media (especially with the government’s video showing the Abu Sayyaf beheading soldiers).

As alienation intensifies, the marginalized search for an identity, drifting toward radical fundamentalist ideologies where the “axis of evil” is now composed of those Christians who won’t let you build a mosque, and the Kano soldiers who come in for “war games.”

There are now Muslim communities all over the country, in our major urban centers. Some Christians find this threatening, even fretting that Muslims might take over the country. I see the migrant communities as a challenge for Muslims and Christians to overcome the ignorance that stokes fear and hatred. Mind you, the solution is not “integration” in the sense of Muslims being absorbed into the majority Christian culture. The true test of social cohesion comes when people have space to practice their own religion, to create their own culture.

Is Tangub an isolated case in Christian areas in Mindanao? Did the Church in Tangub play any role at all in this decision making? I ask these questions because, prerequisite to interreligious dialogue on our part is a network of Christian communities which would have voted otherwise if they had been confronted with the same referendum as in Tangub. Indeed, are our Christian communities in Mindanao convinced of the Gospel-based imperative of interreligious dialogue? Fr. LaRousse’s thoughts on the BEC in his paper become all the more significant given this question.

Fourth and finally, I am convinced that what the Muslim communities are going through today is what the Filipino nation underwent in the nineteenth century. They are in the process of imagining themselves as one nation, the Bangsamoro, and therefore of construing everything else from that perspective, quite analogous to the Filipino propagandists and nationalists like Rizal, whose annotations of Antonio de Morga’s Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas were precisely an attempt to imagine Philippine nationhood.
What Fr. LaRousse therefore says about the Moro reading of history is apropos, for the creation of a national identity and a national consciousness invariably involves the imagination of a common past, a common history, a common future. Muslims in the Philippines do not relish being reminded of how divided they are between and among themselves. But even those who accept this as a historical and actual reality nevertheless point to the machinations of imperial Manila as the culprit; the ancient Roman adage “divide and rule” has its contemporary strategists and tacticians in the current state apparatus. To a certain extent, it is difficult today to argue against this vehement assertion on their part. This is a challenge for the Church today. It does not help I think to try to convince our Muslim brothers and sisters that they are romanticizing the past.

The director of the film Bagong Buwan, Marilou Diaz-Abaya, had this story to tell: there was this lighthouse and there was this battleship. But the battleship did not know that the light flashing on its path was that of the lighthouse. It thought that it was another battleship bearing down on itself on a collision course. If the Moro reading of history is a lighthouse for the Muslims of the Philippines, then no amount of warning from our battleships will be able to get the Moros to move so that we can avoid a collision. Here we are confronting a historical dynamic that has become almost impossible to arrest. Where before Muslims in the Philippines identified themselves first as Muslims, and second as Maranaos, Maguindanaos, Taosugs, Iranuns, Yakans, etc., and indeed almost never as Moros—for the term after all was foreign—today we find ourselves confronting different Muslim groups who now identify themselves as Moro. It is the abiding genius and achievement of Nur Misuari and the MNLF to take this pejorative term “Moro,” fill it with a positive meaning, and use it to nudge the Muslims in the Philippines in the direction of construing themselves precisely as one nation. Hashim Salamat and the MILF have pushed this nationalist construction further by introducing Islam as the unifying ideological force among these diverse cultural communities of the south.

What then are the implications of this for a Church that seriously
desires to bridge the gap between Christians and Muslims in Mindanao through interreligious dialogue? I guess one would be that the Church should not feel squeamish about entering the political process in order to assure that the interreligious dialogue it wants to conduct is not threatened by acts of the state or the government. In effect, what this entails is a certain perspicacity, a discerning heart on the part of the Church where political issues are concerned. And necessary for this perspicacity is a sharp awareness of issues, both local and international, in the areas of political, economic, ethnic, social and cultural life. I think that, given its resources in men and women and institutions in the south, the Church in Mindanao is in a good position to construct a program that is able to see both the forest and the trees of the interreligious problems that confront us.

Another implication would be to follow through on a suggestion of Fr. LaRousse. We must tell stories other than the ones we read about in newspapers and other media, stories other than what we see on our television screens, stories other than what we hear on the radio. We must tell stories that narrate how Muslims and Christians have already been engaged in dialogue. Counter-stories, this time, not of violence, but of peace, sharing, listening, of the times when Muslims and Christians lived peaceably with each other. There are such stories waiting to be told; the people whose stories they are must be found and appealed to.

Is dialogue then possible? Let me change the question: where in Mindanao has dialogue already been a reality? We can point to Sr. Lilian and Fr. LaRousse and the many Christians of Mindanao who have identified themselves with a Church that lives and breathes dialogue. But I think they will agree with me when I say that dialogue has become increasingly more difficult today. If that is the case, then dialogue—to become ever more a reality—demands a truly evangelical witnessing on the part of the Church, a witnessing that, I am afraid, puts her smack in the middle of the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ.