INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE:
A Renewed Mandate

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Addressing the entire Church “at the beginning of the new millennium” which opens “a new stage of the Church’s journey,” Pope John Paul II presented pivotal areas of Church life requiring that she “take up her evangelizing mission with fresh enthusiasm” (1, 2). The purpose of the pope’s Novo Millennio Ineunte (January 6, 2001) is focused on enabling the Church to “shine ever more brightly in the variety of her gifts and in her unity as she journeys on” (3).

The pope addresses more than three dozen individual subject areas in his apostolic letter. Most themes are discussed rather briefly; however, five topics receive more lengthy treatment—extending to three numbered sections. Interreligious Dialogue is addressed in sections 54-56 under the heading “Dialogue and Mission.” This comparatively lengthy treatment appears to emphasize the importance the pope allots to dialogue in the Church’s mission of integral evangelization.

John Paul II asks the faithful to consider “the great challenge of interreligious dialogue to which we shall still be committed in the new millennium, in fidelity to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. . . . This dialogue must continue. . . . [it] will be especially important in establishing a sure basis for peace. . . . The name of the one God must become increasingly what it is: a name of peace and a summons to peace” (55). This pope has clearly renewed the Church’s mandate to sincerely engage in dialogue in fulfillment of her missionary vocation.
LOCAL CHURCH COMMITMENT

The Church in the Philippines, in her discussions and documents connected with the Jubilee Year and Church Renewal, has also reemphasized the importance of interreligious dialogue. Two recent sources illustrate this fact; they are: (1) the pastoral letter of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (July 5, 2000) entitled: “‘Missions’ and the Church in the Philippines”; (2) the message of the National Pastoral Consultation on Church Renewal (January 27, 2001) entitled: “Behold I Make All Things New.”

The Philippine bishops’ “Mission Letter” notes: “Mission in Asia will call for new consciousness and knowledge regarding other religious traditions here in this continent in which almost all the great religions of humanity have been born. One of the ‘new things’ of mission in Asia will be the demand for a deepened understanding of other religious communities (specially the Islamic), their religiosity and their theologies. Attitudes of genuine respect and reverence for others’ beliefs and spiritualities must precede and accompany all interreligious dialogue and all mission” (IV, 6).

The January 2001 consultation on Church renewal stated: “We shall undertake our renewal efforts in fidelity to Jesus’ will for unity among believers. Rooted in Christ, we shall strive to eradicate prejudices and to grow in deeper understanding and appreciation of other ecclesial communities and religious traditions, especially the followers of Islam. We shall engage in a dialogue of life, faith, prayer and common action with them. As a way to healing, reconciliation and national unity, we shall encourage dialogue among all sectors of Society” (7-H).

SIGNPOSTS ALONG THE DIALOGUE ROAD

The renewed commitment to dialogue at the turn of the new millennium has an important history that is worth a brief examination. The Church would never have arrived at its present appreciation of dialogue without the innovations begun by Pope John XXIII; in his call for aggiornamento and his convocation of the Second Vatican
Council he envisioned a wide and encompassing renewal of the whole Church. Today, from the vantage point of over three decades of experience after the close of Vatican II in 1965, a keen observer can readily identify the "path of dialogue" along which the Spirit has led the Church. In a word, Catholics can readily discern a "dialogue mandate" in recent Church experience and reflection.

A twelve-stop journey on the Church's dialogue road will reveal key milestones where growth and understanding have been achieved. Each milestone noted in this essay contains a brief description of the event itself, the progress it contributed, and the paths it noted for future growth in dialogue. On the one hand, the Church's milestones or signposts have been clear and encouraging; however, on the other hand, the general Church membership has been a reluctant pilgrim in walking the dialogue road. This succinct overview of significant milestones aims to encourage a fuller integration of dialogue within the Church's mission and ministry, an objective that both recent popes and local churches have consistently promoted.

I. Secretariat for Non-Christians

On Pentecost (May 17) 1964, in the climate of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI instituted the Secretariat for Non-Christians as an entity distinct from the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. Renamed the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in 1988, it was to serve as an institutional sign and structure of the Church's desire to meet and relate to the followers of other religious traditions of the world. Its task, as noted by Paul VI, was "to search for methods and ways of opening a suitable dialogue with non-Christians . . . in order that non-Christians come to be known honestly and esteemed justly by Christians, and that in their turn non-Christians can adequately know and esteem Christian doctrine and life."

II. Encyclical: Ecclesiam Suam

Pope Paul VI published his programmatic encyclical letter Ecclesiam Suam on August 6, 1964 (between the second and third sessions of
Vatican II). This *magna carta* for dialogue is the first time that the term “dialogue” is found in an encyclical (over half of the document is devoted to a discussion of the need, source, characteristics, modes, partners, challenges and goals of dialogue): “The Church should enter into dialogue with the world in which it exists and labors” (67). “The dialogue of salvation was opened spontaneously on the initiative of God: He [God] loved us first” (74). We “need to wait for the hour when God may make our dialogue effective” (79).

“Dialogue is, then, a method of accomplishing the apostolic mission” (83). “The Church is not unaware of the formidable dimensions of such a mission” (99). It is also directed towards “the followers of the great Afro-Asiatic religions” (111). We “recognize and respect the moral and spiritual values of various non-Christian religions, and we desire to join with them in promoting and defending common ideals of religious liberty, human brotherhood, good culture, social welfare and civil order” (112).

III. Second Vatican Council

Five documents of Vatican II contain important elements for understanding the Church’s role vis-a-vis world religions (*Nostra Aetate, Lumen Gentium, Ad Gentes, Gaudium et Spes, and Dignitatis Humanae*). Some general themes are: the need to recognize within religions “elements of truth and grace” (AG 9), “treasures which the bountiful God has distributed among the nations of the earth” (AG 11), “a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men” (NA 2); recognition of the work of the Holy Spirit (GS 11; AG 4); the presence of treasures of the ascetical and contemplative life (AG 15, 18); and, the presence of “Seeds of the Word” (LG 17; AG 11).

The Council promotes an attitude of profound respect toward all world religions (AG 10), specifically primitive and traditional religions (NA 2), Hinduism (NA 2), Buddhism (NA 2), Islam (NA 3; LG 16), and Judaism (NA 4; LG 16). It encourages dialogue and collaboration (NA 2); it is through dialogue that Christians can “receive the inspirations of the Spirit and follow them ardently” (GS 92). The
Council challenges all Christians: “we are obliged to hold that the Holy Spirit offers everyone the possibility of sharing in the Paschal Mystery in a manner known to God” (GS 22).

IV. FABC First Plenary Assembly

The Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) met in Taipei, Taiwan (April 22-27, 1974) to prepare for the Synod on Evangelization. Their landmark document *Evangelization in Modern Day Asia* spoke of “the integral preaching of the Gospel” (23), “the building up of a truly local church” (9) and the triple dialogue with people, cultures, and religions (12). The Church in Asia especially needs to engage in “a dialogue with the great religious traditions of our peoples” (13), which are “significant and positive elements in the economy of God’s design of salvation” (14); “they have been the treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors” (14). “And how can we not acknowledge that God has drawn our peoples to Himself through them?” (15). FABC recommended the need to “evolve a working concept of evangelization that embraces, as integral to that concept, genuine dialogue with the great living religions of Asia” (3a).

V. Synod on Evangelization of the Modern World

The short declaration at the end of the 1974 Synod proclaimed: “Confident in the action of the Holy Spirit which overflows the bounds of the Christian community, we wish to foster dialogue with non-Christian religions, so that we may reach a better understanding of the gospel’s newness and of the fullness of revelation, and thus may be in a better position to show to others how the salvific truth of God’s love is fulfilled in Christ” (11).

VI. Apostolic Exhortation: *Evangelii Nuntiandi*

One year after the Synod Paul VI published *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (December 8, 1975). Evangelization is seen as the “vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize” (14). The understanding of evangelization in EN is a broad one: “evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity” (18). “Any partial and fragmentary definition which attempts to render the reality of evangelization in all its richness, com-
plexity and dynamism does so only at the risk of impoverishing it and even of distorting it. It is impossible to grasp the concept of evangelization unless one tries to keep in view all of its essential elements" (17).

EN speaks of the Church’s esteem and respect for non-Christian religions (53) because “they are the living expression of the soul of vast groups of people . . . they have taught generations of people how to pray . . . they are all impregnated with innumerable ‘seeds of the Word’ and can constitute a true ‘preparation for the Gospel’.” The Church needs “to offer to the missionaries of today and of tomorrow new horizons in their contacts with non-Christian religions” (53).

VII. Dialogue and Mission

On Pentecost (June 10) 1984, the twentieth anniversary of the creation of the Secretariat for non-Christians, the Church published “The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission.” Approved by the pope, the document expressly places interreligious dialogue within the purview of the Church’s evangelizing mission: “dialogue finds its place within the Church’s salvific mission; for this reason it is a dialogue of salvation” (John Paul II: Introduction, 5; cf. Ecclesiam Suam 74).

The document gives interreligious dialogue a broad definition: “It means not only discussion, but also includes all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment” (3). Its main concern is “the relationship which exists between dialogue and mission” (5). The document presents the five dimensions of integral mission/evangelization and notes how they are understood “in the consciousness of the church as a single but complex and articulated reality” (13). Both local churches and missionaries are “responsible for the totality of mission” (14), because “Christian mission embraces all these elements” (13). Four forms of dialogue are presented in detail (25-35).
VIII. World Day of Prayer for Peace at Assisi

In the context of the International Year of Peace, on October 27, 1986, John Paul II invited representatives of other Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities and of the major World Religions to come on pilgrimage to Assisi to pray and fast for world peace. Explaining the event, John Paul II noted: "The event of Assisi can be considered as a visible illustration, a concrete example, a catechesis, intelligible to all, of what is presupposed and signified by the commitment to ecumenism and to interreligious dialogue which was recommended and promoted by the Second Vatican Council" (7). He added: "Either we learn to walk together in peace and harmony, or we drift apart and ruin ourselves and others" (5).

IX. Theses on Interreligious Dialogue (FABC)

In April 1987, after two years of study and consultation by the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) Theological Advisory Commission, the document Theses on Interreligious Dialogue: An Essay in Pastoral Theological Reflection was released. The aim of the document was to "facilitate a new insight into the identity of the Church in a religiously pluralistic world and a renewal of its mission" (0.9). The document presents a comprehensive vision of interfaith dialogue in seven closely reasoned theses with extensive commentary. They address important theological-missiological questions, consistently asserting that dialogue "is an integral dimension of the mission of the Church, which is the sacrament of the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus" (Thesis 2). This document is illustrative of the holistic FABC vision that consistently identifies dialogue as the "distinctive mode" of mission in the Asian continent (FABC V: 4.1).

X. Encyclical: Redemptoris Missio

John Paul II’s mission encyclical, dated December 7, 1990, addresses the "Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate." Within the fourth chapter "The Paths of Mission" a specific section addresses "Dialogue with our Brothers and Sisters of Other Religions" (55-57). It is an exceedingly rich section: "Interreligious dialogue is a part of the Church’s evangelizing mission; . . . dialogue
is not in opposition to mission *ad gentes*; indeed, it has special links with that mission and is one of its expressions; . . . the Church sees no conflict between proclaiming Christ and engaging in interreligious dialogue” (55). “Each member of the faithful and all Christian communities are called to practice dialogue. . . . I [John Paul II] am well aware that many missionaries and Christian communities find in the difficult and often misunderstood path of dialogue their only way of bearing sincere witness to Christ and offering generous service to others. I wish to encourage them. . . .” (57).

XI. **Dialogue and Proclamation**

On Pentecost (May 19) 1991 the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples jointly issued “Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” The document explicitly affirms the holistic and integral nature of the evangelization process and mentions the five principal elements of mission (2). Discussing “the relationship between dialogue and proclamation” (4), the document quotes John Paul II: “Just as interreligious dialogue is one element in the mission of the Church, the proclamation of God’s saving work in Our Lord Jesus Christ is another. . . . There can be no question of choosing one and ignoring or rejecting the other” (6). “Both are legitimate and necessary” (77).

There are many “signs of the times” (social, cultural, religious and political) and a religious sensitivity and attentiveness is an important avenue to hear “the Spirit of God [who] is speaking, teaching, and guiding” (78). “All Christians are called to be personally involved in these two ways of carrying out the one mission of the Church, namely proclamation and dialogue” (82). “Yet more than tasks to be accomplished, dialogue and proclamation are graces to be sought in prayer” (89).

XII. **Continental Synods and Apostolic Exhortations**

As part of the celebration of the Jubilee Year 2000, John Paul II convoked a series of continental synods. In those areas of the world
where a variety of religious traditions are found and form an integral dimension of people's indigenous culture and faith, interreligious dialogue necessarily became a key dimension in understanding the Church's presence and ministry.

On the Feast of the Triumph of the Holy Cross (September 14) in 1995, John Paul II released the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*. In reference to dialogue (65-67), the document notes: "Commitment to dialogue must also embrace all Muslims of good will" (66). "With regard to African traditional religion, a serene and prudent dialogue will be able . . . to foster the assimilation of positive values. . . . They can be seen as a preparation for the Gospel. . . . The adherents of African traditional religion should therefore be treated with great respect and esteem, and all inaccurate and disrespectful language should be avoided" (67). This is a task given to the Church in Africa in fulfillment of "her evangelizing mission towards the year 2000" (8).

The Church in Asia (home to more than 85% of the world's non-Christians) celebrated the "Asian Synod" in 1998; the final apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* was released on November 6, 1999 during a pastoral visit of John Paul II to India. As expected, one finds rich insights into dialogue in this document: "From the Christian point of view, interreligious dialogue is more than a way of fostering mutual knowledge and enrichment; it is a part of the Church's evangelizing mission, an expression of the mission ad gentes. . . . It is therefore important for the Church in Asia to provide suitable models of interreligious dialogue—evangelization in dialogue and dialogue for evangelization—and suitable training for those involved. . . . Communion and dialogue are two essential aspects of the Church's mission. . . . Only if the People of God recognize the gift that is theirs in Christ will they be able to communicate that gift to others through proclamation and dialogue" (31).

POPE JOHN PAUL II

This essay opened with a citation from the pope's programmatic apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, where he affirms the impor-
tance of interfaith dialogue; he views commitment to dialogue as an imperative demanded of the Church: "It is our task to follow with great fidelity the Council’s teaching and the path which it has traced" (56).

Commitment to the promotion of dialogue is a hallmark of his pontificate, now extending over two decades. He repeatedly emphasizes the role that dialogue plays within the evangelizing mission of the Church; in his missionary journeys he constantly seeks opportunities to respectfully interact with the followers of various religions and faith traditions. From his voluminous statements on the panorama of interreligious themes, some representative quotes—in addition to those already presented—manifest the variety of his unique insights.

"Christians will, moreover, join hands with all men and women of good will [and] work together in order to bring about a more just and peaceful society in which the poor will be the first to be served" (Manila, Philippines; February 21, 1981).

"Christians and Muslims, in general, have badly understood each other, and sometimes, in the past, we have opposed and even exhausted each other in polemics and in wars. I believe that today, God invites us to change our old practices. We must respect each other, and also we must stimulate each other in good works on the path of God” (Casablanca, Morocco; August 19, 1985).

"By dialogue we let God be present in our midst, for as we open ourselves to one another, we open ourselves to God” (Madras, India; February 5, 1986).

"Interreligious dialogue is ‘a Christian work desired by God’ and ‘one element in the mission of the Church’; the commitment of the Catholic Church to dialogue with the followers of other religions remains firm and unchanged” (Rome, Italy; April 28, 1987).

"Throughout my Pontificate it has been my constant concern to fulfill the apostolic and pastoral task of both dialogue and proclamation. On my last visit to Africa, I met leaders of African traditional
religions and witnessed their awareness of God's nearness and their appreciation of the ethical values of a godly person” (Rome, Italy; April 28, 1987).

"Respectful dialogue with others also enables us to be enriched by their insights, challenged by their questions, and impelled to deepen our knowledge of the truth. Far from stifling dialogue or rendering it superfluous, a commitment to the truth of one's religious tradition by its very nature makes dialogue with others both necessary and fruitful” (Jakarta, Indonesia; October 10, 1989).

"Interreligious dialogue at its deepest level is always a dialogue of salvation, because it seeks to discover, clarify and understand better the signs of the age-long dialogue which God maintains with humanity” (Vatican City; November 13, 1992).

"It is a sign of hope that the religions of the world are becoming more aware of their shared responsibility for the well-being of the human family. This is a crucial part of the globalization of solidarity which must come if the future of the world is to be secure. . . . To choose tolerance, dialogue and cooperation as the path into the future is to preserve what is most precious in the great religious heritage of mankind” (New Delhi, India; November 7, 1999).

CONCLUSION

This essay has attempted to manifest the clear "dialogue mandate" that the Church has received in the Vatican II era. It highlighted twelve pivotal moments within the Vatican II era and added additional, pertinent citations from John Paul II. All this material portrays the Church's thought and direction vis-a-vis dialogue and evangelization—as she begins her pilgrim journey in a new millennium.

In addition, at the heart of recent Catholic literature on dialogue is an operative vision of evangelization that is broad, comprehensive, and holistic; it is often termed "integral evangelization." Several elements—including dialogue—are seen as constitutive dimensions of this evangelization process. The Church consistently affirms her com-
mitment to “integral evangelization,” realizing that evangelization culminates in the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ—whenever, wherever, and however this is practically and respectfully possible.

Within integral and holistic evangelization, dialogue remains an essential and fundamental commitment—yes, a *mandate*—of the Church. In fulfilling her mission, she engages the followers of various faith traditions, because she believes that in this encounter all dialogue partners will experience a mutual evangelization under the influence of the Holy Spirit.