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# **DEVELOPING INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN MYANMAR: REFLECTIONS ON THE VATICAN DOCUMENT *EDUCATING TO INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS***

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## **ABSTRACT**

For the Roman Catholic Church beginning with Vatican II, interreligious dialogue has been promoted as an instrument to obtain mutual understanding. This has been outlined in the document *Nostra Aetate*. The Bishops of Myanmar, fully aware that interreligious dialogue is highly necessary for witnessing the gospel of Jesus Christ in this Buddhist-majority nation, have taken steps in their respective dioceses to further promote this approach. This paper is an analysis of the ways this has been implemented. It will show that a positive attitude towards interreligious dialogue must be developed in the lives of seminarians while they are undergoing clerical training. As future priests, seminarians should understand and advocate the true meaning of dialogue with other religions in order to carry out their missions seamlessly and successfully.

## **Introduction**

The Roman Catholic Church beginning with Vatican II, began promoting interreligious dialogue as an important instrument for obtaining mutual understanding. This task was continued by Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II, as well as by Pope Benedict XVI. Pope Benedict XVI

declared in Naples, Italy, on October 21, 2007, that “Religion should not be a vehicle of hatred but of love.”<sup>1</sup> This follows the teachings of the document *Nostra Aetate*.<sup>2</sup>

This presents an important challenge for a country like Myanmar, a land of predominantly Buddhist people. Buddhism is a deeply rooted way of life for the majority of Myanmar people (World Mission, 2006). Although Christianity came to Myanmar later, it still has a long history. It set roots in Myanmar as early as 1287, as evidenced by the discovery of frescos containing crosses (England, 1987, p.147) and evidenced by the presence of Latin and Greek inscriptions in some places in Pagan, once a flourishing kingdom in Myanmar (*The Official Catholic Directory of Myanmar*, 2012, p.10-16)<sup>3</sup>. Overall, the main religions of the country are Buddhism (89.2%), followed by Christianity (5.0%), Islam (3.8%), Hinduism (0.5%), Spiritualism (1.2%) and other minor religions (0.2%) ([www.mofa.gov.mm/aboutmyanmar/religion.html](http://www.mofa.gov.mm/aboutmyanmar/religion.html)).<sup>4</sup>

Since Christianity is a minority religion, it needs to engage with people of different faiths, and to approach them with a positive attitude which can cultivate long-term trust. The Myanmar Catholic Church needs to join other Christian denominations as well as other faiths to maintain a unity in diversity. This can be accomplished only through mutual dialogue.

Education is a force for changing the world and addressing the central challenges of the future according to the Vatican document *Gravissimum Educationis*. Catholic schools have great responsibility to train students develop a spirit of intercultural dialogue without losing one’s own identity. By acquiring theoretical and practical knowledge, students may value their own culture as well as the cultures of others. By understanding differences and having ability to witness and dialogue, the common goals of peace and harmony can be achieved. Therefore, this new document encouraged parents, educators/formators, national and diocesan Episcopal commissions to take the path of intercultural dialogue. Religious leaders, too, can contribute to the public’s benefits. The clergy are the leaders of Catholic communities and need to be well-trained on the nature and benefits of interreligious dialogue. They

need to view it positively, and nurture it throughout their lives. While elements of interreligious dialogue is already taking place in the formation of diocesan clergy in major seminaries in Myanmar, it has yet to be emphasized as a mainstream subject.

### **The Declaration of the Congregation for Catholic Education**

*Educating to [sic] Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools: Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love* is a new Vatican document published by Congregation for Catholic Education on 28, October, 2013.<sup>5</sup> This new document outlines the program for education to encourage intercultural dialogue to be conducted by Catholic schools.

The Second Vatican Council's Declaration *Gravissimum Educationis*<sup>6</sup> was proclaimed by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965. That declaration was one of the earlier documents illustrating the importance of education. The whole document was developed under twelve sub-titles:

1. The Meaning of the Universal Right to an Education
2. Christian Education
3. The Authors of Education
4. Various Aids to Christian Education
5. The Importance of Schools
6. The Duties and Rights of Parents
7. Moral and Religious Education in all Schools
8. Catholic Schools
9. Different Types of Catholic Schools
10. Catholic Colleges and Universities
11. Faculties of Sacred Sciences
12. Coordination to be Fostered in Scholastic Matters

This document concluded that education is important in the life of man and that the responsibility for education should be in the hands of the young people themselves who should be made aware of this so they can strive in their quest for true knowledge.

By observing *Gravissimum Educationis* we are aware of the following points: 1) Christian Education, 2) The Importance of Schools, and 3) Coordination to be Fostered in Scholastic Matters.

The purpose of Christian education is to help students to “become actively involved in various community organizations, open to discourse with others and willing to do their best to promote the common good.” The phrase Coordination to be Fostered in Scholastic Matters means “to foster suitable cooperation between Catholic schools, and between these and other schools that collaboration should be developed which the good of all mankind requires.” This document clearly points out that the true meaning of education is for the benefit and development of mankind. To achieve this goal, Catholic schools should foster the spirit of collaboration and cooperation.

To further support this teaching there is the recent document “*Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools: Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love*” issued by Congregation for Catholic Education in October, 2013. This document is published to mark the 48th anniversary of the Promulgation of the Second Vatican Council’s Declaration *Gravissimum Educationis*. This document concludes with a quote from Pope Francis:

Do not be disheartened in the face of the difficulties that the educational challenge presents! Educating is not a profession but an attitude, a way of being; in order to educate it is necessary to step out of ourselves and be among young people, to accompany them in the stages of their growth and to set ourselves beside them. Give them hope and optimism for their journey in the world. Teach them to see the beauty and goodness of creation and of man who always retains the Creator’s hallmark. But above all with your life be witnesses of what you communicate. Educators ... pass on knowledge and values with their words; but their words will have an incisive effect on children and young people if they are accompanied by their witness, their consistent way of life. Without consistency

it is impossible to educate! You are all educators, there are no delegates in this field. Thus collaboration in a spirit of unity and community among the various educators is essential and must be fostered and encouraged. School can and must be a catalyst, it must be a place of encounter and convergence of the entire educating community, with the sole objective of training and helping to develop mature people who are simple, competent and honest, who know how to love with fidelity, who can live life as a response to God's call, and their future profession as a service to society (Rome, 28 October, 2013).

### **Respecting Other Cultures**

In reading this document we can see that the Catholic Church values the following three things: 1) Cultures and Intercultural Relationships, 2) Education and the important role of Catholic Schools, and 3) Intercultural Dialogue. This document strongly urges us to respect other cultures. Catholic schools should prepare their students to hold on to their own beliefs or identities without prejudice to others' beliefs and cultures. This means that Christians should not view Christianity as "truer"<sup>7</sup> than other religions and cultures.

The researcher must admit that in the context of Myanmar at present, it would be very difficult to translate this into practice. In Myanmar, Buddhism is the national religion and all other religions, Christianity included, are regarded as foreign religions. The followers of "foreign" religions have been suffering under this situation for so long, that it would be an uphill task to change the majority way of thinking and to persuade them to become more open. Yet we must continue to find ways to get along with others. This document insists that such change is possible, and we can train our younger generation to reshape their thinking. Specifically, they must not hold any prejudicial views towards other cultures, or think too highly of their own cultures. They must keep in mind that any culture is as good as their own and deserve our sincere respect.<sup>8</sup>

This document also has very clear message: Catholic schools need to be multicultural and should foster a culture of dialogue. Religion is a choice that we can make, but culture is not, and we need to adapt and adjust according to the current situation in which we can show our “humanness” and “otherness”. Teachers and students of Catholic schools should know that all cultures and nations can and should live together in harmony. They should be able to discern the differences between good and evil, truth and falsity.

They should dare to cross over from monoculturalism to multiculturalism. Nowadays, in the world of Catholic education “multiculturalism”<sup>9</sup> is strongly encouraged. However, multiculturalism would be meaningless if the true recognition of “otherness” is not sincerely demonstrated.

### **Learning From Each Other**

We should be aware that all cultures do have disagreements about values, but we should also be aware that we all share the same human nature and need to learn from each other<sup>10</sup> and will continue to do so. Therefore, multicultural approach or “Intercultural Approach” is strongly needed. The nature of Catholic education and Catholic educational community should be for all different peoples in spite of different moral criteria among cultures.<sup>11</sup> Thus, “multicultural” curriculum is needed in Catholic schools. Both documents therefore help and suggest a standard for the study of other cultures outside our own. The idea or notion of “multiculturalism” helps the young to see common features of human experience and the moral law as a valuable part of one’s education.

From the teaching of the Popes discussed and from these documents, we can apply the spirit of “Intercultural Dialogue”\_in all Catholic schools especially seminaries in order to help seminarians to move beyond monoculturalism from the very first day of priestly formation. It is true for Myanmar seminarians who are studying in seminaries that they need to open their eyes to appreciate the beauties shown in various cultures that are quite different from Catholic traditions.

They need to find time to learn things that they do not understand. The more they learn the more positive attitude they have.

Although at present Myanmar seminarians are trained within a limited local framework; they need to be prepared to embrace the globalized world. They need to learn from others, only then they will understand and accept “otherness” which will enable them to engage in “Intercultural Dialogue” without bias. The Catholic religion is one of the religions that cannot exist without various cultures and traditions. Thus, Myanmar seminarians should bear in mind that they are carrying not only Catholic faith but also the rich tradition of the Church and its history. At the same time, they are dealing with people of different faiths and different cultures in their daily life. In order to walk peacefully along with their neighbors, first and foremost, Myanmar seminarians need to learn, to understand and to recognize “multiculturalism”<sup>13</sup> They need to overcome their monocultural bias. Only then can they go forward. Although this is not easy to achieve it is a necessary task for all seminarians who are going to work in the area that they are assigned. It is very true to say that Myanmar seminarians’ situations are quite different from seminarians from other countries because of different cultural context and traditions. All teachers or administrators also need to be open and embrace multiculturalism in accord with the curriculum. By this way, they may transfer their positive attitude towards multiculturalism and knowledge to their students.

Openness to other cultures must not only be taught in the class-room, but it must also be practiced in daily living.<sup>14</sup> Myanmar seminarians should be aware that they live among a plurality of cultures. They should know that there is strong link and connection between culture and religion. In order to engage in fruitful interreligious dialogue, intercultural education is necessary. By knowing and following an intercultural approach, the interreligious dialogue goal is constructed.

To be able to construct intercultural dialogue, seminarians need to follow the realization that ‘man cannot exist outside of culture’. The teaching of the Catholic Church is based on theological foundation,

anthropological foundation, and pedagogical foundation. All these foundations refer to understanding and to obtaining common good. To achieve common good, education is one of the best ways for people who live in a country with diverse cultures. The spirit of respect and dialogue can help students to become aware of their own identity and cultural traditions. The contribution of Catholic schools is to support different ethnic groups and religious beliefs. By this way, students may have confidence to hold on to their own 'identity' while having the courage to engage in intercultural dialogue with others. By respecting the values of others' cultures and religions, students can build up a vision which recognizes the equal dignity of other persons.

### **Good Formation**

For this reason, the formation of the formators is important.<sup>15</sup> Formation programs should not only concentrate on traditional teaching and administrating but should also train seminarians sensitivity to diverse cultures. The good formation is to equip a person to be a professional and to have responsible personal relationships with various other subjects. Thus, a teacher needs power of listening, respect, dialogue and the value of diversity. A Catholic school's sole objective is to train and to help students to develop maturity and the self-security and sensitivity to engage in intercultural dialogue. This document supports the formulation of Myanmar seminaries' curriculum which can help seminarians in their future tasks.

Therefore, Myanmar seminarians must understand the importance of this task and be committed to it throughout their lives. Catholic priesthood is a service for all those who know Jesus Christ as well as those who do not. Their target is not only a selected group but all men and women. It means that they should be messengers who are sent to work and live among the different groups of people. They should dare to enter into the communities of people of diverse cultures. By this way, Myanmar seminarians become not strangers or intruders but Good News proclaimers in the soil of Myanmar in which they are born and assigned to

work. This task may not be easy but is a big challenge for all seminarians.

As a whole, Catholic schools especially seminaries realize the presence of different cultures, at the same time cultural diversity is much appreciated and seen as a great source for mutual enrichment.

Openness to other cultures offers an opportunity for mutual understanding that can lead to intercultural dialogue without losing their own identities. Myanmar seminarians need the ability to show their identities, and energy to engage in intercultural dialogue. All these ability and energy must be well rooted in their formation program that can change them like the apostles of Jesus. This document is a means of dialogue to be reflected by all Catholic schools especially Catholic seminaries which help to prepare seminarians for their future task of witnessing Jesus' love shown to all people.

Without recognizing the importance of cultures and neglecting the role of intercultural dialogue, a peaceful society cannot be built. Building up a peaceful society is dependent on education that can transform a person of monocultural view into a multicultural one. This is a difficult task to be pursued by all. It is a noble project for Myanmar seminarians who will meet many diverse people in their mission.

There can be no peace and development in Myanmar if there is no intercultural dialogue and the cultures of minority groups are still neglected. This document provides a message which, while not new, still constitutes a gift of enlightenment that helps us to revive cultures and education more intensely; it is a ray of light for educators and formators of our time. Thus the message of this document is also implicitly a message about the value of the human being.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is a good point to realize and rethink about the value of the church's declaration on education. How do we answer its demand? Forty-eight years after the promulgation of the *Declaration on Christian Education* Myanmar Catholic church did change her formation programmes for Myanmar seminarians. The most important point

well-noted in this document, perhaps, *is* that the Church and her schools depend upon educators and formators for the development of students. The work of educators and formators is necessary as a true service for the accomplishment of real education offered to society. We can instil this idea into our seminarians who are undergoing priestly formation that this declaration is a pathway that they have to walk. This pathway is the source for their growth and ability to encounter intercultural dialogue. This document, in general, represents the Catholic church's notion of the importance of education, and the urgent necessity to equip a young generation with the ability to reflect their own identity, and to be open to plurality and differences. Interreligious dialogue could help end major conflicts among believers of different faiths, especially in a multi-ethnic country such as Myanmar. It is interreligious dialogue that can lead people of different faiths move towards a better world of justice and peace.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Pope Benedict XVI's Visit to Naples Italy, on October 21, 2007, when he declares "Religion should not be a vehicle of hatred but of love."

<sup>2</sup> *Nostra Aetate*. Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, October 28, 1965

<sup>3</sup> *The Official Catholic Directory of Myanmar*, 2012, p. 10-16

<sup>4</sup> [www.mofa.gov.mm/aboutmyanmar/religion.html](http://www.mofa.gov.mm/aboutmyanmar/religion.html) accessed 05 December 2017

<sup>5</sup> See "Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love." Vatican City 2013

<sup>6</sup> See Pope Paul VI's declaration on Christian Education *Gravissimum Educationis* on October 28, 1965

<sup>7</sup> See Hsane Hgyi. "Religions and Culture in Myanmar." Paper presented at the FABC-OEIA, Bangkok, July 2009

<sup>8</sup> See Ariarajah, S. W. (1994). *The Bible and people of other faiths*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994.

<sup>9</sup> See Swidler, L. J. *After the absolute: The dialogical future of religious reflection*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990.

<sup>10</sup> See Swidler, L. J. *Towards a Universal Theology of Religion*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987

<sup>11</sup> See Arinze, F. *Church in dialogue: Walking with other believers*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990.

<sup>12</sup> See Hsane Hgyi, "Religions and Culture in Myanmar." Paper presented at the FABC-OEIA, Bangkok, 2009

<sup>14</sup> See "Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools: Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love," No. 63, Vatican City, 2013.