

3/03/2017

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Catholic Commitment to Interfaith Dialogue
By Yoginder S. Sikand

Just back from a trip to Egypt, where he addressed a peace conference at one of the most influential Islamic seminaries in the world, Pope Francis has once again won wide acclaim for his firm commitment to interfaith dialogue. At a time when hate and terror in the name of religion pose a major threat to world peace, the 80 year-old global head of the Catholic Church has emerged as one of the most influential contemporary icons of interfaith harmony. That he insisted on travelling to Egypt despite the grave threats this might have posed to his life (the visit came soon after deadly bombings of Coptic Christian churches in the country by Islamist terrorists) shows the utter sincerity of his consistent advocacy of interfaith peace-building. The Catholic Church is truly blessed to have such a person at the helm of its affairs at this juncture of its history. The rest of the world is equally blessed with his inspiring presence.

It is not, however, that Pope Francis is an exception in his church in his passionate concern for interfaith dialogue. For several decades now, the Catholic Church—the single largest Christian denomination in the world—has been actively engaged in seeking to promote better relations between people of different faiths. Interfaith dialogue is now an official and integral part of the work of the Catholic Church wherever Catholics live—and that probably means in every single country in the world. At the Vatican, the global centre of the Catholic Church, there is a special department for interfaith relations, and this is replicated in other countries too, at the national, regional and diocesan levels. At each of these levels there are Catholic faithful who are entrusted with the responsibility of promoting mutual understanding and fostering harmonious relations between people of different faiths.

Catholic commitment to interfaith dialogue today takes various forms. There are Catholic retreat centres where people of different faith backgrounds can live together, sharing with each other the spiritual treasures of their respective religious traditions. Across the world, Catholic groups are today probably the most active of all in organizing interfaith seminars and conferences, bringing together theologians and lay people from different communities to learn about and from each other's faiths and to reflect on ways to promote peace and counter violence and hate in the name of religion. At Catholic seminaries, would-be priests study about other faiths in addition to their own. They are also taught that no religion possesses a monopoly of truth and that all religions contain rays of it. A vast number of Catholic theologians have specialized in the study of other religions—some spending many precious years on this effort. Many of their scholarly writings are characterized by sincere appreciation of the goodness in other faiths, and are recognized even by the adherents of these faiths to be excellent. Catholic groups extend relief and bring succor to victims of poverty and disease, war and natural calamities irrespective of religion, this being another expression of their interfaith commitment. And so on.

This generous openness to other religions was not, however, always a feature of the Catholic Church, as anyone familiar with the Crusades and the Inquisition, for instance, would know. Till just a few decades ago, the Church clung to a centuries'-old belief according to which outside its portals there was no salvation—in other words, insisting that all non-Catholics would suffer eternal damnation in Hell for the mere fact of not being Catholic. That, of course, was not a very good recipe for interfaith bonhomie, you would agree. But things drastically changed from the 1960s onwards, in the wake of what is called the Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II. This was a series of meetings of top members of the Church who were commissioned to rethink many matters related to Catholic practice and theology that were now considered deeply problematic.

One issue with regard to which Vatican II made really bold advances was interfaith relations. Although it did not give up the claim of the ultimate normativity of Catholicism, it called for greater openness to non-Catholics, including recognition—at long last—of truths contained in other religions. It suggested the need for Catholics to closely dialogue with people of other persuasions.

Since the teachings of Vatican II were adopted as official Church policy, being endorsed by the highest authorities of the Catholic Church, interfaith dialogue became something that the Church across the world was now mandated to work for. The Catholic Church's unique hierarchical structure of religious authority, stretching from its global centre at the Vatican right down to the local parish level in every

country where Catholics live, facilitated the interfaith dialogue work that Vatican II had called for. Because interfaith dialogue was something that the top authorities of the Church insisted needed to be encouraged, Catholic interfaith initiatives began being promoted across the world and at various levels.

It is primarily because interfaith dialogue was promoted and actively backed by those at the helm of affairs of the Church that today Catholic groups are probably the most active of all in this field. This clearly suggests a general principle—that for faith communities to take an active interest in promoting interfaith dialogue and peace-building, religious authorities must view it as an important priority and must themselves personally engage in it. When a leading religious authority like Pope Francis endorses interfaith dialogue and peace-building through his own personal example (and even at the cost of possible grave personal risk), it sends out a powerful message to his co-religionists (and to others, too)—of the need to recognize the importance of building bridges with people of other faiths and to work for this in whatever way they can.