



PILGRIMS IN DIALOGUE

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PART I THE CHURCH JOURNEYING WITH OTHER RELIGIONS

We have just crossed the threshold of the third millennium, which has been an historical milestone for all those who follow the Gregorian Calendar. For us Christians, it has been of great importance, as we celebrated the 2000th birthday of Jesus Christ. For two thousand years Christians have tried to preach the message of Jesus Christ, and make people members of the Church, but to us it has dawned on us, that the world is not going to become Christian in the near future, and that the Church has to carry on her pilgrimage in this world together with the other religious traditions.

1. The Situation

The pattern of growth of the various religions in the world is quite thought-provoking.

World Religions	1900	1970	1995	2005
Population	619.886.800	3.697.847.000	5.759.276.000	8.472.446.000
Christians	558.056.300	1.246.173.000	1.939.419.000	3.051.179.000
Roman Catholics	266.419.400	688.673.000	1.052.116.000	1.561.066.000
Muslims	200.102.000	546.320.000	1.057.599.000	1.709.679.000
Hindus	203.033.300	477.115.000	777.372.000	1.089.018.000
Buddhists	127.159.000	237.308.000	341.096.000	452.734.000
Tribal Religions	106.339.600	90.220.000	99.246.000	76.738.000
Sikhs	2.960.000	10.870.000	20.550.000	28.264.000
Jews	12.269.800	13.605.000	13.543.000	15.100.000
Percentage of Christians	34.4	33.7	33.7	36

If we take all the Christians together, by the year 2025 they will form 36% of the world population, an increase of 2.3% from 1995. When we look at the growth of the other religions, we see that all except the tribal religions also register a steady increase. If we compare the Roman Catholic population in relation to the Muslim population we see that by 1995 the Muslims outnumbered the Roman Catholics and they are continuing to grow. This is to highlight the fact that practically all the religions are prospering and if the pattern of growth is any indication, Christianity is not going to replace them.



When we look at the religious situation according to continents, it is evident that Asia, which is the most 'religious' of the continents (all the great world religions originated here), is at the same time the least Christian of them all.

What all these numbers and particulars reveal is the fact that despite the presence of Christianity in the world for the past two thousand years, it has not become the religion of the majority of the people and it is not going to become that in the foreseeable future. Faced with this reality, Christianity can choose either of two alternatives:

- i. to wall itself in considering itself to be the only true religion and live in isolation or
- ii. to consider other religions also as paths leading to salvation and join hands with them to journey together towards the final goal.

The first of these alternatives is what has been tried till very recent times. Today, however, an experiential knowledge of other religious traditions, a better understanding of the socio-historical nature of human beings, developments in various branches of theology, especially in the theology of religions and Christology, is leading Christians to try the second alternative.

2. Characteristics of the Church Journeying with other Religions

In order that the Church may be able to journey together with the adherents of other religions towards the final goal and fulfill at the same time her role as the sign and sacrament of the Kingdom of God in the world effectively, she should focus on the following characteristics.

It is well-known that Christianity did not have an open and welcoming attitude to other religions. As a result, it was not able to truly encounter them.

Tolerance and Respect for other Religions

The attitude of openness that we spoke of above will manifest itself concretely in tolerance and respect for other religions. If we are to journey together to the goal, without each one hampering the journey of the other, then it is important that all religions insist on the values of tolerance and respect.

Practice of Dialogue

Tolerance and respect are important, but they are not enough. One can tolerate and respect the other from a distance but without becoming significantly influenced by the other. If we wish to journey together, then it is necessary that we enter into inter-relationship or into what is commonly spoken of as dialogue.

Development of an Adequate Theology of Religions

Focus into one the cultural superiority felt by the Greeks which regarded all other peoples as barbarians and the religious superiority felt by the Jews for whom all the other were pagans, Christians considered people of other religions as ignorant and sitting in the shadows of death. Their religions were considered as works of the evil one or at most as human attempts to reach God.

A significant number of Christians no longer hold such a view about other religions. Today it is quite widely accepted that all religions are graced by God, have their place in God's



plan of salvation, and do facilitate divine human encounter and as such are ways of salvation.

A Christology That Does Not Threaten

The Christian claim for the uniqueness of Jesus Christ has been a problem in relating with other religions. Yet it is not only the Christians who make uniqueness claims. In one way or the other most religions claim uniqueness for their God, Founder or Teachings. Speaking of Jesus, Christianity holds that “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven giving among men by which we must be saved. Acts 4:12.

At the Service of the Kingdom

Speaking of the mission of Jesus Christ Pope John Paul II says that “the proclamation and establishment of God’s kingdom are the purpose of his mission” RM 13. So Jesus came to proclaim and establish the Kingdom of God.

Commitment to the Poor, the marginalized and to the Integrity of Creation.

A very good platform on which all religions can meet, interact and journey together is action for justice on behalf of the poor and the marginalized (tribals, dalits, women etc) The concern for the poor and the marginalized can across religious, ethnic and caste barriers.

Sensitivity in Language

Language not only expresses a mentality, and in that sense also a theology, but also reinforces that mentality and creates that mentality in others.

Together in Celebration

Our origin and our goal are one: God (NA 1). We are all children of the same God. As children of the same God it should be possible for us all to come together to praise and worship God.

Diverse Paths of Mission

Jesus Christ came to establish the kingdom of God. he did it in various ways—teaching, healing, calling to conversion, table-fellowship with sinners, concern for the poor, passion and death. The Church is called to continue the mission of Jesus Christ.

3. The Practice of Interreligious Dialogue

The Salvific action of God

From the beginning, God has called all people to share in divine life and love and has not abandoned humanity to sin and selfishness. Thus, intending to gather all into his kingdom, God makes himself available to all peoples in many and various ways. We believe that the Spirit of God is at work in the heart of every person and is found in human initiatives and in the efforts to attain truth, goodness, and knowledge and union with God (cf. RM 28).



We believe further that the same Spirit was at work when the Son of God took on human nature, suffered, died and rose from the dead elevating with him our humanity. We profess that God reveals and communicates himself for the salvation of all in Jesus Christ. "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and humanity, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, the testimony to which was borne out of the proper time" (1Tim 2:5-6). All who are saved share, though differently, in the same paschal mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ through his Spirit. The mystery of salvation reaches out to them in ways known to God, through the action of the Spirit of Christ (cf.DP 29).

The role of the Church

The community of his faithful, the Church, believes, celebrates, lives and proclaims this message of salvation in Jesus Christ. In that sense, the Church is sacrament, sign and instrument, of salvation through which Christ continues to act.

Proclamation and dialogue

The Spirit of God is active in the world opening up the hearts and minds of all to salvation, wholeness, and fullness of life through their cultures, religions, and a multitude of their experiences. This fact necessitates two intimately related though intrinsically different aspects of the evangelizing mission of the Church. First, the necessity of proclaiming Christ is founded on our belief that God wills the salvation of all. Second, interreligious dialogue serves to bring all, Christians and other believers alike, to a greater sharing of life with God and communion with one another.

Sensitivity to God's gifts

We Christians are called in every age to develop a new awareness of this total salvific action of God although we have not always been sufficiently open and sensitive to the gifts and blessings which God bestows on others.

Equal partners

Our openness to interreligious dialogue rests first and foremost on our fundamental belief in the equal worth of all human persons whom God has chosen to bless in individual ways. Therefore, we engage in this types of dialogue as equal partners with other believers, each bringing to the other what one has.

Forms of dialogue

Study and contact with persons of other traditions are aspects of an ever deepening and engaging process. It occurs in several kinds of ways of which we distinguish four types. First, there is the dialogue of life, whereby believers strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations. Second, there is the dialogue of action in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people. Third, the dialogue of theological exchange, which may be incorrectly considered the equivalent of dialogue in general, engages specialists and experts seeking to deepen their understanding of the respective religious heritages and to appreciate each other's spiritual values. Finally, the dialogue of religious experience calls some, rooted in their own religious traditions, to share spiritual riches, for example, prayer and meditation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.

**Consequences of dialogue**

From the interplay of the practice of dialogue and theological reflection, we Christians are expected to make use of what is true, holy, and good to explain our faith in a language that is correct, and intelligible. Similarly, when persons of other faiths incorporate elements of Christianity, we are expected to assist them in doing this correctly and intelligibly. Finally, dialogue calls for change on the part of all, from whatever hinders people from developing as integral human beings.

Attitudes needed for dialogue

Those Christians taking part in dialogue should be friendly, cooperative, and open. This means, above all, an attitude on other part to learn and to correct their understanding of peoples of other faiths. They should also study how best to communicate their faith. Eventually, they should incorporate what they learn from study and dialogue into a new catechetical language taking into account the religious values and expressions of other believers.

Dialogue as a special apostolate

As a special apostolate in the Church, dialogue has its own difficulties and is an ongoing learning process. Therefore, a certain freedom has to be allowed for attempts and experiments that are genuinely and rightly motivated.

Role of the Local Church

The local church should be aware of its duty and responsibility in these matters. Those engaged in dialogue need the prayers, encouragement and support of the local church. Regarding problems in the social and political spheres, the local church should foster a common vision of the welfare of society.

Religion and culture

Following a holistic view of human life, culture and religion can be regarded as intertwined. In many societies culture and religion are intrinsically related, and the local church needs to share in the life of the local community. For example, pilgrimage is a shared religious undertaking, but each traditional pilgrimage has a contextual meaning. The local church in consultation with other local churches needs to spearhead studies of specific questions to ascertain what can be adopted, adapted, or even rejected.

4. Theological foundations for Interreligious Dialogue

Our experience of interreligious dialogue of the last three decades has inspired us to discover more and more and to identify the theological foundations for interreligious dialogue:

Anthropologically speaking, the dialogical structure of the human person with his/her dignity, freedom and openness (self-transcendence) calls for self-realization through inter-personal self-giving and dialogue.

There is only one God who is the origin and destiny of all human beings who are created in the "image and likeness" of God.

God created human beings as male and female, and it is by their mutuality that they attain their fullness and this implies dialogical and dialectical relationship within humanity.



Humankind is one family of the children of God and our relationship as members of the one family is maintained by continuous dialogue, self-communication, and the resulting communion which is an unending process in history and beyond it. Religions should not divide humanity but they should be forces of unity. The very Trinity is the supreme model of dialogue.

The idea of revelation expresses at the same time the self-communication and self-concealment of God. The very mystery of incarnation by which the Word took flesh and assumed the whole of humanity, and the entire cosmos invites us to dialogue with all peoples and their cultural traditions. Therefore, God's self-communication is not limited within the boundaries of Christianity. As God spoke to the people of Israel, in a similar way He spoke to peoples of other nations.

The kingdom of God which Jesus proclaimed and inaugurated is not limited to Israel and the Church, but is a wider reality which includes the whole of humanity where the different religions and cultures have a positive role though all of them have to be transformed including Christianity on its way to the Kingdom of God.

The Church, being the sign and sacrament of the whole humanity, continues to proclaim and actualizes the mystery of the kingdom in its "already" and "not-yet" character. The Spirit blows where it wills. The universal presence and work of the Holy Spirit, not only in individuals but in human communities, cultures and religions, invites us to dialogue and thus to discover the fullness of the truth to which the Spirit leads us. But God's self-communication and the work of the Spirit in all religions have to be critically discerned. What are the criteria for this discernment? Jesus Christ and the Gospel values are the norm.

All formation for interreligious dialogue must begin with the formation in our own faith. It must be given a correct understanding of our faith, and must be initiated to fall in love with Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, and their commitment to Christ and the Church must be deepened. The specificity of Christianity should be emphasized, but not isolating it from the heritage of other religions and cultures.

Courses should be coupled with exposure programmes where people should be initiated to actual contact with people of other faiths, their rituals, festivals, scriptures, devotions, etc.

Along with the thorough study of the Bible, reference should be given to the scriptures of other faiths, and students should be given sufficient introductions to the scriptures of other religions.

In the spiritual formation of students, the spiritual resources and methods of other religions and cultures can be made use of.

Inter-disciplinary approach in the teaching methodology is an urgent need in the context of dialogue with other religions and ideologies. An authentic formation with emphasis on human virtues, especially openness to truth, is an indispensable requirement in the formation for interreligious dialogue. Christianity should be taught as a living reality with all its human and historical aspects, paying attention to popular religiosity, devotions, etc.



Part II INTERMONASTIC DIALOGUE

History

In reply to the call launched by Encyclical *Fidei donum* of Pius XII (1957), Benedictines and Cistercians laid the foundation of some Monasteries in New Churches.

The Secretariat of AIM which was then called Aid for Monastic Implantation was established in 1960 in order to sustain their efforts. Since these Monasteries were facing a number of difficulties, the AIM organized meetings of Superiors in Africa (Bouaki, 1964) and in Asia (Bangkok, 1968). The Christian monks living among Buddhists became also aware of the urgent need of a dialogue with the monks of other religions and the messages addressed to them by Pope Paul VI, encouraged them to go ahead.

For the first time in History, Christian monks and non-Christian monks got together in October 1973, in Bangalore, in order to exchange their views on a central theme relevant to all: "The experience of God". This encounter was so successful that Cardinal Pignedoli, then in charge of the Secretariat for Non Christians invited Abbot Primate D. Rembert Weakland to promote the dialogue, for the very fact that, he said: "Monastic life is like a bridge between religions".

The AIM organized therefore in 1977 two encounters of monks and experts on the subject, one in USA (Petersham) the other one in Europe (Loppem). These meetings led to the creation of two commissions within the set up of AIM: the NABEWD (North American Board for East West Dialogue), which is at present the MID (Monastic Interreligious Dialogue) for North America in January, the DIM / MID for Europe in February, for Germanic speaking countries.

Indeed, what has been so far the pre-occupation of some individuals, lonely pioneers like Jules Monchanin, Henri Le Saux, Bede Griffiths and Thomas Merton, took shape in the entire monastic body.

DIM/MID along with NABEWD-MID multiplied the links between Christian Monasteries of Western countries and those from Asian Eastern countries, namely between Hindus and Buddhists, and between Tibetans and Zen monks of Japan with whom "Spiritual Exchanges" were organized at regular intervals since 1979. In 1980 Kandy, Sri Lanka, a "spiritual exchange" was held on the theme: "Poverty in all Religions", which is very relevant to Asia.

The meeting at Assisi in 1986 enhanced the dialogue, and the European and the American organizations DIM and NABEWD were assuming too much of importance to remain a simple commission within the AIM. They became therefore in 1994 a Secretariat similar to AIM, and like it, open to Benedictines as well as to Cistercians. At the same time, this dialogical movement spread in many continents, which led to the creation on regional and national basis of Centres, co-ordinated at the international level by a General Secretariat.

The organic movement was followed by a broadening of perspectives. At the beginning, it was only a dialogue with monks of various religions. And in spite of the fact that there exists no monachism in Judaism and Islam, the dialogue between Christian



monks and their brothers in Islam does exist, as the Atlas of Christian monks shows for the case of Islam. Besides, the religions of Asia are spreading in Western countries where they evince sincere and faithful followers, leading further to the creation of chairs in the Universities. Westerners deeply touched by these religions land up in Monasteries, questioning the Christian monks, and often invite them to share sessions in Colloquiums. In other continents, the DIM / MID work in collaboration with other organizations for an interreligious dialogue.

Thanks to this change of perspectives, one could reach to the understanding of an interreligious dialogue, “since a monk is a seeker of God”, with all those who wish to accept this point of view, no matter what their state or religion is. Thus conceived, the dialogue becomes a dialogue of religious experience, realized mainly through spiritual exchanges; but also, by means of various other forms of dialogue, which are the stepping stones.

The specific place of monastic life in the Interreligious dialogue

The monastic archetype is common to the whole of humanity. By saying so, we mean that every human being has a tendency to be monastic. Therefore, one can easily understand that monasticism provides a platform for encounter between all religions, in spite of the diversity of monastic life in the various traditions. The monks who are seekers of an interior union and an opening to the Absolute, recognize one another easily, and rather spontaneously enter into a dialogue of life.

For the Christian monk who commits himself in this specific way, the interreligious dialogue is an authentic realization of his monastic vocation. To be one with God (cf. 1 Jn.3:2), and to be able to express this union in daily life, in order to stimulate as an authentic monk the growth of human diversity towards a profound unity (cf. Jn 17:21). To be able to admire the other one as different and as an expression of the pluriform wisdom of God, and to honour Him in his unique character (Wis 11: 24), is an integral part of the contemplative attitude. While committing ourselves to the assimilation and the deepening of our own tradition, the interreligious dialogue keeps us open to the questioning of our own tradition. To relativize is also to link; it is a questioning which serves the purpose of deepening our faith, and a source of spiritual enrichment.

The DIM/MID encourages monasteries of Benedictine tradition to keep the doors and the heart wide open to monks belonging to other religious traditions. In today's world in the process of globalization, the DIM/MID invite the monasteries to enter into contact with believers of other religions who have become their close neighbours.

Three important points are the outcome of this practice:

Hospitality

The interreligious dialogue widens the old practice of monastic hospitality. One should not feel satisfied to welcome the guests under the same roof of the monastery, not only share liturgical prayer and the table, and exchange views of life; but also, one must welcome a



different way to search and to live for God. One should be able to recognize that a different spiritual way, leads to similar goals through the fundamental intuition of the monastic charism and observances. One should accept this confrontation, in order to deepen the Christian way of locating oneself in the universal plan of salvation.

Contemplation

Spiritual exchange and interreligious prayer along with contemplatives of other religions, reveal other contemplative practices which can be very well adopted by Christian monks; provided they succeed to integrate them into their own faith (Vipasana, Zazen, Yoga, etc). In this way, the traditional contemplative horizon becomes wider; or may be, certain aspects of the tradition which have been forgotten, are brought to light; for instance, the care for the details of daily life, the awareness of the body or the opening to the cosmic life.

Commitment

Ethical, Social, Political and Spiritual exchanges strengthen the solidarity among believers of various traditions. These exchanges, invite them to collaborate with the initiatives of the movements of religions for Peace, and respect of creation.

The request of the Church

Not long after the 1973 Meeting at Bangalore, Cardinal Sergio Pignedoli wrote to the Abbot Primate, Rembert Weakland, who had attended the meeting, saying: "For a long time I had wished to convey to you my joy regarding the success of the meeting of Bangalore, and the excellent relationship which the Benedictine Order entertains with our Secretariat. Even our limited experiences in interreligious dialogue has already dawn very clearly the great importance that monasticism has in this field, specially in Asia. The monk typifies historically and par excellence the 'homo religiosus' of all times, and is a point of reference for Christians and non-Christians alike. The existence of monasticism at the very heart of the Church is like a bridge to all religions. If we tried to approach Buddhism or Hinduism without monasticism, we would hardly be considered religious."

His Holiness Pope John Paul II is more insistent on the importance of such dialogue on the monastic level. To the plenary assembly of the Secretariat in November 1984 he said: "In consistency with one's own faith, it is possible to enrich one another through comparing spiritual experiences and sharing forms of prayer as ways of meeting with God. All Christians are called to dialogue. Some have an expertise which is very useful while others make notable contribution through their special gifts. I am thinking particularly of intermonastic dialogue.

On September 9, 1987, receiving in audience Zen and Christian monks and nuns who participated in the third East-West Spiritual Exchange, the Pope addressed himself specially to the Benedictines:

"Your specific contribution to these initiatives consists not only in maintaining an explicit dialogue, but also in promoting a deep spiritual encounter, for your life is above all devoted to silence, prayer, and a witness of community life. There is much you can do through hospitality. In opening your houses and your hearts, as you have done these days,



you follow well the tradition of your spiritual father, Saint Benedict. To your brother monks coming from across the world and from a very different religious tradition, you apply the beautiful chapter of the Rule concerning the reception of guests. In doing so, you offer a setting wherein a meeting of mind and heart can take place, a meeting characterized by a shared sense of brotherhood in the one human family that opens the way of ever deeper spiritual dialogue.” (Bulletin Secretariat pro-non-Christians 1988)

Similar words were again used by the Pope on September 20, 1989, when receiving in audience Tai Situpa Rimpoche during his “pilgrimage for active peace.” Finally on May 16, 1993 at the beatification of Fr.Maurice Tournay, martyred in Tibet in 1949, John Paul II praised the monastic dialogue with the Tibetan monks along with the efforts and sacrifices of the missionaries on the spot, and sees it as one of the fruits of martyrdom.



Part III BENEDICTINE INTER FAITH DIALOGUE IN INDIA

At the end of his stay in Rome during his “Pilgrimage for Active Peace”, Tai Situpa Rimpoche, head of the important monastery of Sherab Ling in N.India, invited the DIM to visit his and other monasteries in India, and to organize there an encounter between Tibetan and Christian Monks. This project, was encouraged in Rome, by the Pontifical Council for Dialogue; and in India, by the CBCI Commission for Dialogue, headed by Bishop Patrick D’Souza and by the Archbishop of Bangalore.

The Indian Benedictine Federation agreed to respond to the Tibetan request. The Benedictine Superiors took the responsibility of the organization in India. This Spiritual Exchange took place in 1992, 15-22 November and was divided into two phases.

1. Visit to the Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries in the region of Sherab Ling and Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh.

2. Days of exchange at Asirvanam Monastery, Bangalore; discussion and prayer on the themes of Compassion, Renunciation and Humility.

Tai Situpa Rimpoche, Abbot of the Monastery of Sherab Ling had expressed a wish to spend some time at Asirvanam Monastery, Bangalore, but it did not materialize. However, in February 1995 with the assistance of the chief representative of the Tibetans residing in Karnataka, 2 Benedictine Nuns and 2 monks received a pass to visit the Tibetan Camp at Mundgod, and to attend the Kala Chakra Puja for Peace in the World, which was performed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Ongoing Interfaith Spiritual Exchanges, Colloquiums and Seminars

Some Indian monasteries, such as Asirvanam, had been organizing interreligious meetings for several years, but the first official meeting of the commission presided over by Abbot Primate Rt.Rev.Jerome Theisen osb took place on January 11, 1995 at Asirvanam Monastery on the occasion of the ISBF Mtg. For monks and nuns responsible for formation, which was organized by AIM.

In March 1996, the first spiritual Exchange with the Jain nuns was organized at Veerayatham Rajgir (Bihar). Four Benedictine Nuns and one monk spent a week with the Jain Nuns.

October 27, 1996, the celebration of the 10th anniversary of the Meeting for Peace at Assisi, brought together Benedictines and a big group of the Inter Religious Harmony Movement – Ashirwad (IRHM), at Shanti Nilayam Abbey, for an evening prayer service.

With the unexpected visit of Sr.Mary Margaret Frunk osb, Executive Director of MID (USA) to Shanti Nilayam Abbey in June 1997, we resumed our exchange, with the Tibetan monks and nuns after a lapse of 2 years. The American MID thought it better that the second stage of the Educational Program for Exiled Tibetans be held in the very land where the exiles lived. Over the course of 2 years Tibetan monks stayed at Asirvanam Monastery, and the nuns at Shanti Nilayam Abbey, where they pursued their higher studies.



At the time of the consultation on Interreligious Prayer, organized by PCID and the Department for Interreligious Relations of the WCC at the Ecumenical Centre of Bangalore, Fr. Pierre de Bethune took advantage of the opportunity to meet several participating contact persons of the commission.

In August 1997, there was a Meeting of MID at Bangalore, and in November an Interreligious Spiritual Exchange (IRSE) was held at Asirvanam Monastery, on the theme "Concepts of Inner Freedom in the different Religions."

In Feb 1988, at the invitation to the Tibetan New Year Celebrations from the Buddhist Nuns of Jangchup Monastery, Mundgod, Sr. Amala and Sr. Iona from Shanti Nilayam Abbey spent a week with the Buddhist Community.

From 8-12 July 1998, the second Buddhist Christian Colloquium organized by PCID, was held at Asirvanam Monastery on the theme of "Word and Silence in Buddhist and Christian Traditions". It was an International Meeting at which Mother Abbess Teresita D'Silva and Sr. Iona Misquitta from Shanti Nilayam Abbey participated; and the former presented a paper- "Reading the Scriptures in Christian Prayer and Spirituality".

The First International Hindu - Christian Seminar held in Oct 1998, on the theme "Men of Peace", was held at St. John the Evangelist Monastery, Parma (Italy): and organized by K.J. Somaiya Sanskriti Peetham, Mumbai (India), the Interfaith Dialogue Centre of Sassari, (Italy) the Department of Oriental Studies, the University of Turin and DIM Italian Commission. Sr. Iona Misquitta from Shanti Nilayam Abbey, as Co-ordinator of the MID (India) presented a paper on the development and progress of Monastic Interfaith Dialogue in India.

On Jan 14, 1999, 2 monks, 4 nuns and an Oblate of the Benedictine Communities in Bangalore, had the privilege of a private audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama at Drepung Loseling Monastery in Mundgod. His Holiness welcomed us as we entered the reception hall and Geshe Namgyal a monk well known to all of us, introduced us by name, to His Holiness. Thereafter, we sat in a semicircle facing His Holiness, and Fr. Bernard OSB briefly outlined the life of St. Benedict, and the spread of the Benedictine Order in India and Sri Lanka. His Holiness responded, saying that he was happy to meet us, and he expressed his heartfelt gratitude and appreciation to all the Benedictines for the Education Programme conducted in our Monasteries. He said, that there were many common elements in our monastic life, like community life, prayer, meditation, study of sacred scripture and of course the ideals of Monastic life. He admired and appreciated our dedicated service in the field of education, health care, social welfare, etc., and said that the Buddhist monks and nuns had much to learn from the Benedictines. He also said, that he was happy to share his insights and reflections on the Gospel texts, at the John Main Centre, U.K. We then thanked His Holiness for the audience, and presented him with a book on Dialogue, as we wished him good bye.

At the ISBF annual Meeting in February 1999, the MID Commission was integrated into the Indian Sri Lankan Benedictine Federation (ISBF) under the name Benedictine Interfaith Dialogue (BID). In February 2001, the General Body of the ISBF approved BID's new statutes.

Fr. James Wiseman OSB President of MID (USA), came to Shanti Nilayam on June 13, 1999. He came precisely to evaluate the Educational Exchange of the Tibetan monks and nuns with Sr. Iona OSB Co-ordinator of BID. He spent a week at the two Benedictine Monasteries responsible for the Educational Exchange and then visited the Tibetan



Monasteries of the monks and nuns at the Tibetan Camp, Mundgod, accompanied by Br.Martin osb.

The National Seminar held in November 1999 at the National Biblical Cathecetical , Liturgical, Centre (NBCLC) Bangalore, organized by the CBCI Commission for Interreligious Dialogue, in preparation for the Jubilee Year, was outstanding for its attendance and active participation by its members from all over India – priests, religious and laity. It was well attended by representatives of the BID commission from Bangalore.

The Monasteries of Asirvanam, Bangalore and of St.Joseph's Makkiyad, Kerala, have Guest Houses that allow them to host many Interreligious Seminars, Colloquia, etc. Members of the Commission meet there annually for these Interfaith Exchanges.

From 18-21 November 1999, BID organized a Hindu –Christian Colloquium at Asirvanam Monastery. Seventy participants from the Benedictine Monasteries and other religious congregations in Bangalore, with some local Hindus had a 'live- in experience, sharing their ideas and views on the theme " Celebration of Festivals". At its conclusion, they drafted a statement on the Colloquium – "Celebration of Festivals in Hindu and Christian Traditions."

In view of the year of Kristi Jayanti 2000, the Catholic Bishop's Conference of India (CBCI) and the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) united in organizing the National Ecumenical Assembly 1999, from Dec 1-3, 1999, at the Renewal Centre, Kochi, Kerala. This Assembly of Bishops, priests , pastors, sisters, laymen and women (altogether 200 participants) from more than 23 Christian denominations, was a landmark in the ecumenical efforts undertaken by the mainline churches in India. Three Benedictine monks and two nuns from Bangalore actively participated in **this Assembly**.

The first Ecumenical Prayer Service co-ordinated by Sr.Iona osb was conducted at Sadupadesa College, Redemptorists Philosophate on Jan 22, 2000 – "The Jubilee Year.' The following year 2001 it was organized and co-ordinated by Sr.Iona osb at Shanti Nilayam Abbey. Thereafter, it has become an annual celebration in the Church Unity Octave in our local Parish Church. Every religious community in the vicinity, takes its turn to organize and co-ordinate this Prayer Service.

At regular intervals Seminars have been organized at the Somaiya Campus, Vidyavihar, Mumbai to which the members of the BID Commission (India) have been invited to present papers on the varied themes."Religious and Ethical Foundations of Family and Social Life in Hinduism and Christianity" Feb.27 to March 2, 2000. "Mahavakyas in Hinduism and Christianity" Feb 5-9, 2001. Lastly, an International Symposium for Hindu - Christian Interfaith Dialogue on Dhyana (meditation), was organized from Dec 15-19, 2003.

Sr.Iona and Sr.Metilda were invited to an International Seminar on "Interreligious Dialogue" from 15-28 September, 2001, organized by the DIM Secretariat (Europe), at San Anselmo, Rome. It was an excellent occasion to come to meet and live with Benedictine monks and nuns from all over the World, and to experience the richness of our Liturgical and Community life, and the wonderful generosity and hospitality afforded us by the Community and Domestic Staff of San Anselmo.

Ever since the integration of the MID Commission into the ISBF, there have been regular BID, Interfaith Meetings after the annual Meetings of the ISBF. In February 2002, the Interfaith Dialogue with the Buddhist monks and nuns at the Benedictine Monastery of Monte Fano in Kandy, (Sri Lanka) there was a Symposium on " Love, Pity and Compassion in Buddhism and Christianity". Both Christians and Buddhists found the



sharing to be very rich. The symposium concluded with visits to the Buddhist Monasteries and Temples.

The following year at the House of Peace, Yercaud, February 8-9, 2003, at which Abbot Primate, Dom Notker Wolf was present, the theme was 'Signs and Symbols in Religions'.

At St. Michael's Monastery, Kumily, Kerala, on February 9, 2004, the theme was "Rites and Rituals in Religions." A month later from 8th-10th March, BID Commission participated at the International Seminar on "Religion and Society Issues of Peace and Justice" at Osmania University, Hyderabad. It was organized by: The Department of Islamic Studies, Tulsi Bhavan, Centre for Devotional Studies o.u., and Inter faith dialogue Centre, Sassari, Italy. Three representatives of the BID participated at this Seminar.

Ever since the erection of the BID Commission, its members have been participating at Inter-religious Centres in Bangalore and elsewhere.

During these past 10 years of its existence, BID organized several formation sessions for contact persons, and began the practice of including an interreligious pilgrimage in its program; visiting temples and mosques, and creating links of friendship with Hindus and Muslims.

Finally, this list of Interreligious activities does not include the numerous Interreligious activities and contacts Monasteries have with their nearest neighbours, in their respective vicinities.

Conclusion

The second millennium has been the millennium of schisms, as well as the millennium of geographical expansion and numerical growth of the Church, made possible mainly through the missionary enterprise. It was a period when the Church opposed and conquered other religions both figuratively and literally. During this period the Church influenced the other religions converting them of unleashing waves of reform movements in at least some of them.

Let us hope that the third millennium will be period of reconciliation, dialogue and harmony. May it be a period when there will be mutual interaction between religions leading to mutual fecundation so that the Church herself will become enriched by other religions. In a spirit of reconciliation and harmony let all, Christians and members of other religions, journey together towards the ultimate goal.

I conclude my paper with a message from His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

"Everytime I take part in an Interreligious gathering, I experience a revelation. I become more and more aware that almost all religious teachings, inspite of the fundamental differences of their philosophical approaches, emphasize love, compassion, pardon, tolerance. These concepts represent a common patrimony of all humanity; they are always and everywhere relevant ! Moreover, in this era of globalisation, dialogue is absolutely necessary. We must meet with men and women of other religious traditions in order to share our experiences with them and to learn how to appreciate the values we hold in common. Unfortunately there are more than enough conflicts and tragedies in our



world that have been caused by religion to provide us with the determination to carry on this dialogue. It is one of the great challenges of this century.”