

# Meeting God in Friend and Stranger

by Colin Carr O.P.

***Meeting God in Friend and Stranger*, published in 2010, is a Teaching Document of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.**

Let us start with two of the Good Friday prayers from the 1962 Missal, remembering that before 1962 the remarks on the Jews had been even less complimentary.

*Let us pray for the Jews: that our God and Lord would remove the veil from their hearts: that they also may acknowledge our Lord Jesus Christ.*

*Almighty and everlasting God, who drivest not away from thy mercy even the Jews: hear our prayers which we offer for the blindness of that people; that acknowledging the light of thy truth, which is Christ, they may be rescued from their darkness.*

*Let us pray also for pagans: that almighty God would remove iniquity from their hearts: that, putting aside their idols, they may be converted to the true and living God and his only Son, Jesus Christ our God and Lord.*

*Almighty and everlasting God, who ever seekest not the death but the life of sinners: mercifully hear our prayer, and deliver them from the worship of idols; and join them to thy Holy Church for the praise and glory of thy name.*

Now consider what Pope Benedict had to say about a famous text in Matthew's Gospel: this extract is from the second volume of his '*Jesus of Nazareth*':

*When in Matthew's account the "whole people" say: "His blood be on us and on our children" (27:25), the Christian will remember that Jesus' blood speaks a different language from the blood of Abel (Heb12:24): it does not cry out for vengeance and punishment; it brings reconciliation. It is not poured out against anyone; it is poured out for many, for all. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...God put [Jesus] forward as an expiation by his blood" (Rom.3:23, 25). Just as Caiaphas' words about the need for Jesus' death have to be read in an entirely new light from the perspective of faith, the same applies to Matthew's reference to the blood. These words are not a curse, but rather redemption, salvation. Only when understood in terms of the theology of the Last Supper and the Cross, drawn from the whole of the New Testament, does this verse from Matthew's Gospel take on its correct meaning.*

If you read the New Testament with an anti-semitic prejudice in your heart you will find an anti-semitic New Testament; if you read it the way Pope Benedict read it, with love for Jewish people in your heart, then you will not be reading an anti-semitic book. If you look at the world with prejudice in your heart, you will understand your faith in a way which excludes and despises other religions; if you look at it with the love of Christ in your heart, you will understand God's welcome for all his children.

'Meeting God in Friend and Stranger' is inviting us to look at the world – and at members of other religions – with Pope Benedict's attitude, with the welcoming attitude of Peter speaking to Cornelius and his household: "*I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him*" (Acts 10:34). Without that attitude we wouldn't be here, and we wouldn't want to know what the document is about.

Chapter 1 is straightforwardly called *What is 'interreligious dialogue'?* We probably

think of it as, say a group of Christians and a group of Muslims sitting down together and discussing the nature of God; that certainly is one important aspect of dialogue, but for the Church the word means much more. Pope John Paul II put it like this in 1990:

*"Dialogue is not so much an idea to be studied as a way of living in positive relationship with others."*

I remember shortly after some major event – I think it was that threat which has meant that ever since you can't take liquid with you on to a plane – following a Muslim driver at an air pump in Sainsbury's garage, and asking him how to use this new-fangled machine; he showed me and I thanked him and we said goodbye: just that. Simple neighbourliness; that, too, is included in the concept of dialogue.

Dialogue might also mean people of different religions working together for the common good; or it might mean, more explicitly, learning about another's faith and culture. But rather than listing the ways in which dialogue can happen, the document speaks of it as a whole attitude – a humble and unprejudiced approach to the 'Challenge of Difference'. Does this mean that we temporarily put aside our convictions in order to listen objectively to the other person? Not at all: it is our very conviction about the truth we have found in Christ Jesus that motivates us to listen for the truth that is found in other faiths, and to recognise where we cannot agree.

The second chapter is entitled *The Changing Face of Britain*, and points out that there is now a highly visible presence not only of *ethnic* diversity (which you anyway find within the Catholic Church and the other Christian bodies) but of *religious* diversity – buildings such as mosques, and dress which proclaims religious adherence (that was how I knew my kind helper at the air pump was a Muslim). The implication for us is that we foster good relations between different groups, without being blind to the possibility of religious people expressing themselves in a hateful way, or politicians exploiting fear of ethnic diversity. The document distinguishes two terms: pluralism, which means a positive attitude to the fact of difference in our society; and relativism, which is a philosophy which says there is no absolute truth, and what people believe is their own affair: it's true for them, but not necessarily for someone else. As followers of Jesus whom we believe to be the Way, the Truth and the Life, we don't say that just because there are other faiths visibly present in our society now, the truth has changed. Jesus Christ is still the same, but we have an opportunity to share his love with others not simply by overt proclamation, but by all the types of dialogue mentioned in chapter 1 and spelled out again in chapter 3 which is the main chapter. Jesus Christ is the truth, and therefore, as well as commending him to all people, we delight to find the truth in other faiths because all truth is God's truth.

Chapter 3 of the document is entitled *Dialogue in the Teaching of the Catholic Church*. It reminds us of the extraordinary document of the Second Vatican Council, '*Nostra Aetate*' That document was originally intended to be about Jewish and Christian relations, but it soon became clear to the bishops that it would be necessary to address the whole question of our relationship with all other faiths. The quotation from the 1962 Missal which I started with gives a flavour of the kind of attitude we had towards Jews and 'pagans' – which I presume meant all the rest, though how you could accuse Muslims of idolatry I wouldn't know. *Nostra Aetate* and many other documents of Vatican II are positive about other religions, while never denying the truth as it is in

Christ Jesus. And papal actions, especially the days of prayer at Assisi, have been the Church's body language about our attitude to other religions.

Undoubtedly the relationship with Judaism is special: the Commission for relations with the Jews is not housed in the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, but in the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. However, *'Meeting God in Friend and Stranger'* is concerned with all interreligious dialogue, and probably most of us are aware of the challenge of Islam because there are far more Muslims around than adherents of any other non-Christian religion.

The Church wants us to proclaim Christ as the unique Saviour; the Church wants us to enter into real dialogue (not cryptic proselytising) with all religions. Aren't those two wishes contradictory? Surely if you want to proclaim Christ and his Church as the place where salvation is found, you don't have dealings with other religions which don't acknowledge him as God and Saviour. Either proclamation or dialogue, but not both.

Well, the Church has a habit of going for the 'both-and' option, especially in its understanding of who Jesus is: he is both truly human and truly God. We are both sinners and saved. So dialogue and proclamation do not have to be in contradiction: it is our duty to proclaim – to tell the world that Jesus, the Son of God, is the truth by whom we are saved. But we do not deny that truth by having respectful and sincere dialogue with people of other faiths. There are two reasons, which together make a third reason.

First, there is the unity of the human race. We are all God's creation, and God is the goal towards whom we are going, whether we know it or not. Whoever you meet in the street is made in the image of God, loved by God, destined for God. The church is the sacrament of the unity of the human race, and of our unity with God; so we are not called to be a ghetto, or to consider ourselves superior to others; we are called to promote unity among all people, and one of the ways of doing that is dialogue. As Churchill reputedly said, *"Jaw, jaw is better than war, war"*.

Secondly, there is the call to be open to what is holy and true in other religions. The Second Vatican Council was very firm about this, reflecting what some of the early Church Fathers said about 'seeds of the Word' being found in humankind's searching. God has not left himself without witness in the different religions of the world, and it is our task to recognise those elements in other faiths which can speak to us of the true God. We can recognise in Islam a commitment to fasting, prayer and almsgiving which is an expression of their submission (Islam) to the one God. We can recognise, as Thomas Merton did, the profound contemplative dynamic of Buddhism. And for each religion one could point to an aspect which both harmonises with our faith and challenges us to live it as fervently as Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists live theirs.

Both these reasons – the unity of the human race and the call to be open to what is holy and true in other religions, constitute a call to dialogue: the Church is calling us, and God is calling the Church, to enter into a dialogue which is both proclamation of our own faith – we don't just talk about the weather – and a learning from the faith of others. None of this is a watering-down of our faith in the uniqueness of Christ and of the call to all the human race to recognise him and acknowledge him in faith and baptism. But proclamation is not just standing on a soapbox and yelling at people: it is proclaiming Christ to those whom we have met and learned to respect, and proclaiming him not as the contradiction of their faith but as its fulfilment.

There is a problem lurking here, which some critics of this approach would call religious imperialism. (I'm not now giving an exposition of MGFS but discussing our whole approach to others). It raises its head when we talk about Karl Rahner's 'Anonymous Christians'. To say that a good Hindu is really, deep down, a follower of Christ without knowing it may seem to be an insult to her religion and its integrity. She will want to say, "Hang on, I'm a moderately good Hindu and I'm not a Christian, much as I admire Christians whom I've met in India; I am a Hindu, not an anonymous Christian." All that MGFS says is that we both share our own faith – in its integrity, not watered down – and recognise and learn from the truths we encounter in another religion. We can and must in all honesty say where we disagree. It is possible to disagree agreeably!

And remember that dialogue is not simply discussion of religious topics: MGFS outlines 4 types of dialogue:

- **The Dialogue of Life:** this is simply people living together as good neighbours, like my Muslim friend at the air-pump; only we never saw each other again; what is envisaged more is those who are literally neighbours living in a neighbourly fashion day after day.
- **The Dialogue of Action:** I quote from the Document:  
*This is where those of different religions collaborate in working for greater human freedom and development, such as in matters of peace, justice and the integrity of creation.*  
Here is an example: In Lent 2011 Jim Wallis, of Sojourners (an American Evangelical movement which is on the side of the poor) was appalled by the US budget proposals which savagely cut programmes of aid to poor people, leaving untouched military expenditure and tax-breaks for the rich: he and many other religious and secular leaders fasted during Lent as a protest, and some of his colleagues in the fast were Jews and Muslims.
- **The dialogue of Theological Exchange:** I quote again:  
*Here specialists and scholars seek to deepen their understanding of one another's religious heritage, and their appreciation of one another's spiritual values.*  
This is probably the first kind of encounter that springs to mind when dialogue is mentioned, but while not all of us are specialists, we can engage in the other forms of dialogue mentioned.
- **The Dialogue of Religious Experience:** This is about sharing experiences and thoughts on prayer and the search for God; although the document doesn't mention it in this context, the practice of coming together to pray may be an example – as in Assisi, as at the Shrine of Our Lady of Jesmond, where every year a group of Muslim and Christian women go to honour Miriam, the Mother of Jesus.

All these forms of dialogue require that we have a confident and humble faith, and a willingness to learn from others.

I began this talk with a quotation from the 1962 revision of the Roman Missal – still in the Tridentine Use. That attitude towards Jews and Pagans was more or less standard in the Church for most of its life; is there a completely new attitude in Pope Benedict's Jesus of Nazareth Volume II, and in *Nostra Aetate*? No, both in Scripture and the history of the Church there is an – admittedly minority – voice which does not condemn

non-Christians (or non-Jews in the Old Testament). The Second Vatican Council and subsequent teaching have simply listened to that minority voice and realised that it was right all along. It is the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church that other religions are to be respected and the truths found in them appreciated. Our attitude is not to be condemnation but dialogue, and this is in no way a contradiction of the command to proclaim the truth about Jesus Christ and his Church. There are still plenty of Catholics who have not got that message. But if we are to contribute to the peace of the Kingdom, if we are to enrich our own faith and spiritual life, then the way forward is the way of dialogue – and if I hear that word once more, I shall rejoice!

*This article is based on a talk on Chapters 1-3 of Meeting God in Friend and Stranger given to the Tyneside Circle of the Newman Association on July 31st 2013*

## Letter to the Editor

Dear Sir

Last Advent marked the second anniversary of the introduction of the new translation of the Mass, and I for one was no more reconciled to it than I was in November 2011. Every time I go to Mass I am so distracted by the strange admixture of baroque, multi-claused Latin sentences (the Proper prayers, and especially the Collects), turgid circumlocutions ('my most grievous fault', 'I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof', 'with your spirit'), awkward uncolloquialisms ('consubstantial', 'in a similar way', 'in the light of your face'), and straight mistranslations ('confess' instead of 'profess' or 'acknowledge', 'for many' instead of 'for the many' or 'for all', 'adore' instead of 'worship') that I have difficulty in concentrating on the main purpose of public, communal worship that we are meant to be about. And though my reaction may be a bit extreme, I am certainly not alone: of the many people I have spoken to on the subject, both inside and outside the Newman, only one or two have said they like it, whereas the overwhelming majority regard it on a scale ranging from a major disappointment to a scandalous disrespect for God, God's people, and the English Language.

Council may not consider it appropriate for the Association to become involved in any lobbying for general change from the 2011 translation, and indeed I have no wish to deprive the minority in favour of it from continuing to enjoy it. But, if I am right in thinking that most Newman members don't like it, I would like to suggest that Council might nevertheless encourage the use of better versions at Circle and Association Masses. The simplest alternative, of course, would be to revert to the familiar 1973 translation. But the preferable, and not especially difficult, alternative would be to use the much better—indeed, in my not very humble view, excellent, and often beautiful—1998 ICEL version which had been approved by the English-speaking bishops and would—should—have been introduced but for the intervention of a powerful 'formal equivalence' (literalist) lobby in Rome.

At the very least, can I recommend members to look at that version for themselves and make up their own minds about whether it would be worth trying out? It's available at <http://wikispooks.com/wiki/Template:1998Sacramentary>.

Martin Redfern