Landas 35:2 (2023) 1–19

CULTIVATING INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AS AN EFFECTIVE PEACE-BUILDING MECHANISM IN THE ACADEME

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Abstract. Efforts are underway to introduce and/or strengthen peace education in the Philippine educational system, an endeavor that necessarily includes interreligious relations as a program component, especially in consideration of the diverse religious profiles of many stakeholders in the academe. This article contributes essential Scriptural and pastoral backgrounds that undergird the Catholic approach to and method of dialogue. It explores the possibilities for incorporating both ecumenical and interreligious dialogue in the training and formation of Filipino students, a move encouraged by sociologists and academicians. The article revisits the dimensions of dialogue that promote active relationships, the common pursuit of goals, respect for other people's beliefs, and the sharing of people's experiences of God. Originally delivered at a 2023 national conference sponsored by the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation, and Unity (OPAPRU), this paper incorporates the concerns and contributions of conference participants representing various institutions of higher learning.

Keywords. peace education; ecumenism; interreligious dialogue; principles of dialogue; best practices on dialogue

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To deepen classroom lessons on dialogue, a teacher brought a group of students to an Islamic-Christian center in Mindanao for some days of interfaith study and interaction. While the students were enthusiastic, their parents were hesitant at first and apprehensive about granting permission. Once in the center, the students received text messages and calls from their worried parents around the clock.

Although adventurous, the students had their own struggles as well. For instance, they confessed that they rarely had a good sleep on the first few nights, fearful that something untoward might happen to them (Muslims and Christians shared the same sleeping quarters at night). A Muslim youth also admitted that he, too, was afraid that the Christians might be planning something sinister against him. The feeling—or rather the suspicion—was mutual!

This episode describes the situation of interreligious dialogue in the Philippines. Most are for dialogue and want to try it, yet one must admit that there are challenges along the road given the degree of ignorance some people may have, our inherited prejudices, and the portrayal of religious conflict in the media and online. In this article, this author would like to present some reflections and points pertaining to the appropriateness, timeliness, and usefulness of interreligious dialogue for society and for the educational sector in particular that can prepare young Filipinos for citizenship in the global community.

Encounter with the "Others": From Jesus to Francis

Proceeding from the Christian tradition, we briefly explore the way of the Lord Jesus Christ who, as a man for others, a man of solidarity and peace, is the inspiration for many people in their journey of meaningful encounter with members of other faiths who are "God's other peoples," "others," or "outsiders," understanding these general

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terms in a positive sense instead of referring to people through negative labels.[1]

The theologian Walter Cardinal Kasper wrote of the unique role of Jesus in the history of humanity:

> The solidarity of God with [human persons] manifested and realized in Jesus Christ establishes a new solidarity among [humankind]. The Christian idea of representation then assigns to Christians and to the Churches the world as the place of their service and binds them to co-operate in a new order of peace in freedom sustained by the idea of solidarity. Then Christian love, realizing the love of God and thus accepting every [human person] unconditionally, also becomes an absolute commitment to justice for everyone.[2]

The Scriptures attest that Jesus Christ is the man for others. Therefore, his followers, too, must imitate his way of dealing and interacting with others to usher in a new order of peace and understanding, of brotherhood, sisterhood, and mutual upliftment in the world.

While Jesus called the people of Israel to follow him, those he encountered showed varied ways of responding to his call. Did he intend everyone in Israel to become his disciple?[3] Gerhard Lohfink stressed that while some were chosen to be disciples, many people took part in the mission of Jesus in different ways and were not disciples in the strict sense of the word. Some were participants in his story, resident members of the movement he started, occasional but reliable helpers, or mere beneficiaries of his actions. Nevertheless, whatever the degree of contact or relationship with Jesus, no one was turned away or sidelined.[4]

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[1] G. O'Collins, *Salvation for All: God's Other Peoples* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), vii.

[2] W. Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997), 225.

[3] G. Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth: What He Wanted, Who He Was*, trans. L. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 86ff.

[4] Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 86ff.

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Jesus's life was not restricted to the Jews since he also clearly interacted with non-Jews.[5] He even performed miracles for Gentiles, like the Roman centurion whose servant was sick and the Canaanite woman whose daughter needed an exorcism—the only two miracles Jesus performed in a "long-distance" manner.[6] Jesus felt comfortable performing miracles for Gentiles and in predominantly Gentile settings. When Jesus healed the Samaritan leper, he blessed a person who was doubly an outcast—both a leper and a non-Jew. Jesus showcased a "Good Samaritan" as the protagonist in one of his parables, and discussed salvation with a Samaritan woman he briefly met.[7]

More compelling than Jesus's gestures of accommodation was the content of his own preaching. His message, which had a transcendent and universal appeal, was intended for everyone. He gathered around him a new family, a new final community: "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."[8] This and other "whoever" statements clearly did not imply the condition of race or creed and had a generalized applicability to people everywhere. Jesus's parables as well as his prayers moved beyond a homogenous audience to include all people of good will. His teachings clearly spoke to everyone and continue to resound with people today: "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Mt. 5:9). When Christians engage in ecumenical dialogue among themselves and interreligious dialogue with other great religions, their primary motivation is to imitate Jesus in his openness to people and in his desire to sow peace in every heart, to heal wounds of division, and to usher in a new form of universal brotherhood and sisterhood.

Among the universal voices today that echo Jesus's call for solidarity among people of different faiths is that of Pope Francis. Even as an Argentinian archbishop, then-Cardinal Bergoglio already opened his doors not only to his Catholic flock but to people of other confessions

[5] O'Collins, *Salvation for All*, 80.

[6] O'Collins, *Salvation for All*, 81.

[7] O'Collins, *Salvation for All*, 83–84.

[8] O'Collins, *Salvation for All*, 88.

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and traditions. He was discovered to have "developed strong bonds with leaders of the historic Protestant and Orthodox churches, as well as with Jewish and Muslim leaders."[9] Convinced of the validity of the charismatic experience of the Holy Spirit, he welcomed Pentecostal Christians, attended meetings with them, allowed them to preach to his priests, and prayed with them.

An enduring image of the future pope was of him kneeling on the floor surrounded by Christian pastors and ministers with their hands extended over him in prayer and blessing. The late Jean-Louis Cardinal Tauran observed how the future pope became a master builder of "cross-frontier relationships" which sometimes blossomed into deep friendships with people of other faiths. He admired Bergoglio's "Argentine model of interreligious dialogue, unique in the world."[10] Among the notable interfaith friendships the future pope had in Buenos Aires were with Muslim leader Adel Made, Jewish rabbi Abraham Skorka, and an Anglican evangelical bishop, Tony Palmer.[11]

When he was elected head of the Catholic Church, Francis enshrined ecumenical and interreligious dialogue in the programmatic document of his reign, *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG).[12] He believed that ecumenical relations among various Christian denominations could contribute to the unity of the human family and thus called for the healing of the divisions in the Body of Christ that would enable Christians to become true peacemakers as envisioned by the Lord Jesus Christ.[13] He valued interreligious dialogue as a "necessary condition for peace in the world" and acknowledged relations with the followers

[9] A. Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014), 290.

[10] Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer*, 321.

[11] Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer*, 321.

[12] Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Pasay City: Paulines, 2013). Hereafter referred to as EG.

[13] EG nos. 244, 255.

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of Islam as being of great importance, especially at a time when their growing presence was perceived even in traditionally Christian regions. He championed religious freedom for Muslims in Christian nations and called for reciprocal respect for Christians in countries with a Muslim majority.[14]

In his document on universal human fraternity, *Fratelli Tutti*,[15] Francis once again upheld dialogue as a way for believers in God to contribute significantly toward the building of a civilization of brotherhood/sisterhood and justice. He reiterated that the goal of dialogue "is to establish friendship, peace, and harmony, and to share spiritual and moral values and experiences in a spirit of truth and love."[16] Religious leaders, he said, should be "true people of dialogue" cooperating toward building peace as authentic mediators.[17]

In 2019, Francis also co-signed the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*[18] in Abu Dhabi in which, together with the Grand Imam of Al-azhar, he called for the adoption of "a culture of dialogue among religions as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; [and] reciprocal understanding as the method and standard" for living in a world marked by divinely inspired goodness, love, and peace.[19]

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[14] EG nos. 250–253.

[15] Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (October 3, 2020), available at http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html (accessed April 20, 2023). Hereafter referred to as FT.

[16] FT no. 271.

[17] FT no. 284.

[18] Francis & Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* (February 4, 2019), available at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html (accessed April 20, 2023).

[19] Francis & Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together.*

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The initiatives of Francis in the arena of interreligious dialogue and interfaith relations should not come as a surprise to his observers and commentators. As the first post-conciliar pope, his formation and the years after his priestly ordination transpired within the context of the gradual implementation of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. As priest, bishop, and pope, he certainly made his own the impulse of the Council's doctrinal document on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, namely, for dialogue and openness with the great religions of the world, which began with a re-appraisal of the Jewish roots of Christianity,[20] referring to the people "to whom the testament and the promises were given and from whom Christ was born according to the flesh."[21] Furthermore, Vatican II affirmed that "this people remains most dear to God, for God does not repent of the gifts [God] makes nor of the calls [God] issues."[22] The Council acknowledged, too, that the plan of salvation encompasses believers from other religious traditions, foremost among them those who extol God as the Creator. The lordship of God over all creation is manifested glowingly, for example, in the conviction of our Muslim brothers and sisters.[23]

Speaking on the fiftieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* (1965–2015), the Vatican II document on interreligious dialogue, Francis expressed his belief that dialogue with religions needs to be

> open and respectful, and thus prove fruitful. Mutual respect is the condition and, at the same time, the aim of interreligious dialogue: respecting others' right to life, to physical integrity, to fundamental

[20] In the practice of the Catholic Church, relations with Judaism are classified under ecumenical, not interreligious, initiatives.

[21] Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964), no. 15, available at https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (accessed May 13, 2023). Hereafter referred to as LG.

[22] LG no. 15.

[23] LG no. 15.

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> freedoms, namely freedom of conscience, of thought, of expression and of religion.[24]

The Council, animated by the spirit of communion manifest in LG, was for the Pope

> an extraordinary time of reflection, dialogue and prayer which aimed to renew the gaze of the Catholic Church on herself and on the world. A reading of the signs of the times in view of an update oriented by a twofold faithfulness: faithfulness to the ecclesial tradition and faithfulness to the history of the men and women of our time.[25]

By promoting and engaging in constructive relationships with other religions toward understanding, reconciliation, and peace, the Church lives its mission of truly being a proclaimer of Christ, the true Light of the nations who sends his Church as "sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race."[26]

Encounter with the "Others" in the Academe

Today, it is even a needless cliché to say that the world has become a global village. It is obvious that interdependence among peoples, communities, and nations continues to increase in terms of economics, politics, media, and especially the new social media brought about by new communication technologies. And, instead of the death of religion, developments show that there is a new awareness of its revival and its plurality.[27]

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[24] Francis, Interreligious General Audience [address] (October 28, 2015), available at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20151028_udienza-generale.html (accessed May 13, 2023).

[25] Francis, Interreligious General Audience [address].

[26] LG no. 1.

[27] Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation* (May 19, 1991), available at https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/

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The global situation has become more and more "multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious."[28] The role of religion in the lives of people and even of nations cannot be overlooked. Thus, in addition to cooperation in other aspects of human society, interreligious dialogue at every level and every context is a pressing and urgent necessity.[29]

Young people are the first to benefit from and avail of the advancements that transcend national and continental frontiers and boundaries. They are more open to new visions, behaviors, and encounters. Distant from the experiences of their forebears, they carry less historical baggage and traditional prejudices against people who belong to different cultures, races, and religions. Of course, they are also most vulnerable to misguided concepts and portrayals of people outside their circles, particularly those who are strange and incomprehensible to them.

The opening narrative of this article would have been different if the young people mentioned—both Muslim and Christian—did not bear the religious prejudices against and mutual fear of each other from their domestic upbringing and present environment. It is important for young people to be steadily exposed to the genuine reality of others so that they can grow in understanding, compassion, and empathy.

In school, young people do not only learn academic skills and cognitive competence. Academic institutions are also venues for "education for life" since their specialized environment reflects society and the world in a microcosmic form given the varying backgrounds of students, faculty, and staff. Students are introduced and thrust into a world of diversity, including the world of religious differences.[30] And

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interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html (accessed April 20, 2023).

[28] O'Collins, *Salvation for All*, ix.

[29] O'Collins, *Salvation for All*, ix.

[30] A. Abdool, F. Potgieter, J. Van der Walt, & C. Wolhuter, "Inter-religious Dialogue in Schools: A Pedagogical and Civic Unavoidability," *HTS Theological Studies* 63:2 (2007): 553.

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since the academic environment has a bridging function, utilizing what the learners bring from their families, communities, and religions, it has the potential to prepare learners for life in the larger society. Schools are important as instruments that enable students to manage diversity through activities that encourage engaging with others, not least in the aspects of religion and faith.

A study by Filipino sociologists proposed that the education system can be a feasible and appropriate ground for the pursuit of interreligious understanding.[31] Due to the increased mobility of populations today, the homogeneity of classrooms has given way to an experience of diversity, exposing students to a multiplicity of cultural and religious identities and expressions.

The learning institution can also offer students safe spaces for discussing other people's customs, beliefs, and practices. If these are handled competently, students can delve deeper into religious issues that divide people and explore possibilities that promise harmony, going beyond superficial discussions on practice, attire, and behavior. Furthermore, the academe can also elicit from the youth a vitality and motivation not only to understand each other's culture and religion but also to inspire them toward empowerment and cooperation. Understanding, respect, and acceptance of the other can blossom into a dialogue of life, a practical dialogue that can lead to a common vision and united action for the good of society and for peace in the world.[32]

Has interreligious dialogue been tried on our campuses, especially in congregational and diocesan institutions? Have there been successful programs for the members of the academic community? Many of the successful ventures in promoting interreligious relations on campus appear to come from other countries, with only some modest and tentative initiatives from our local institutions.

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[31] J. Cornelio & T. Salera, "Youth in Interfaith Dialogue: Intercultural Understanding and Its Implications on Education in the Philippines," *Innovación Educativa* 12:60 (2012): 55.

[32] Cornelio & Salera, "Youth in Interfaith Dialogue," 56–58.

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Faith-based universities in the United States of America have expanded their concepts of campus ministry by introducing chaplaincies staffed with interfaith chaplains and by providing sacred spaces on campus for the use of adherents of different religions, be it for individual prayer or group reflections.[33] In fact, one of these universities recently completed the construction of the first-ever mosque "on a U.S. college campus with ablution stations (places for ritual washing), a spirituality and formation hall, and a halal kitchen."[34] Secular or public universities also run interreligious affairs programs for their students by forming associations of campus religious workers from diverse faiths, promoting student clubs on religion, faith, and spirituality, and managing university offices that promote interreligious harmony and cooperation.[35] In Australia, the Archdiocese of Melbourne has come up with a document on guidelines for interfaith education for all the schools of the archdiocese.[36]

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[33] See the Chaplains and Staff page on the Georgetown University website, available at https://campusministry.georgetown.edu/ourstaff/chaplainsandstaff/# (accessed April 20, 2023), and Campus Ministry page on the Fordham University website, available at https://www.fordham.edu/about/living-the-mission/campus-ministry/ (accessed April 20, 2023).

[34] J. Burger, "Georgetown Boasts Islamic First on U.S. University Campus," *Aleteia* (May 6, 2023), available at https://aleteia.org/2023/05/06/georgetown-boasts-islamic-first-on-u-s-university-campus/?utm_campaign=EM-EN-Newsletter-Daily-&utm_content=Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_source=sendgrid&utm_term=20230507 (accessed May 8, 2023).

[35] See the Association of Campus Religious Workers page on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln website, available at https://www.unl.edu/acrew/home-0 (accessed April 20, 2023); the Office for Religious & Spiritual Life page on the Stanford University website, available at https://orsl.stanford.edu/ (accessed April 20, 2023); and the Religious, Spiritual, Secular, Interfaith Clubs page on the New York University website, available at https://www.nyu.edu/students/communities-and-groups/student-diversity/spiritual-life/religious-and-spiritual-life-on-campus/spiritual-life-clubs.html (accessed April 20, 2023).

[36] Ecumenical and Interfaith Commission of the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne, *Welcoming Each Other: Guidelines for Interfaith Education in the Schools of the Archdiocese of Melbourne* (October 30, 2019), available at https://www.

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In the Philippines, a few educational institutions provide ecumenical or interfaith chapels for their students; examples are a faith-based university in Mindanao and a state university in Manila.[37] A private university in Central Visayas opened a common meditation and prayer room for their multi-faith student population.[38] Familiar to this writer are the instances of a Catholic school that instituted programs for the knowledge, respect for, and appreciation of the cultural gems of its sizable Muslim enrolment population and another school that initiated ecumenical and interfaith representation of students and their respective faith leaders in select campus activities.

Educators who participated in a recent conference on the topic of interreligious dialogue on campus expressed their hopes for training sessions, seminars, and conferences for developing competence in establishing ecumenical and interfaith programs in school settings. A leading public university in Mindanao, for instance, integrates the study of religions in its peace program as an exercise of freedom and basic rights. It also encourages the participation of students from all faith backgrounds, whether Muslim, Christian, or indigenous, in all activities that promote peace and harmony. An exchange of greetings during the religious feasts of each faith tradition is also a priority on campus. Moreover, while the academe does not deal with the sensitive doctrinal divide between believers, this university periodically invites a panel of interfaith leaders to explain the tenets of their communities to students.[39]

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multifaitheducation.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/EIC-Interfaith-Education-Guidelines-2018_V9-2.pdf (accessed April 20, 2023).

[37] See the Campus Ministry Office page on the Ateneo de Zamboanga website, available at https://www.adzu.edu.ph/campus-ministry/ (accessed April 20, 2023), and the PUP-Manila Campus Ministry Home Facebook page at https://www.facebook.com/PUPCampusMinistry/ (accessed April 20, 2023).

[38] See "Meditation Room Reinforces Inclusive Faith-Nurture" (July 14, 2016) on the Silliman University website, available at https://su.edu.ph/2157-meditation-room-reinforces-inclusive-faith-nurture/ (accessed April 20, 2023).

[39] Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation, and Unity, "Learning and Reflection Session on Cultivating Interreligious Dialogue as

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Providing religious spaces for different religious groups is a good thing. Orientation on students' varying backgrounds, cultures, and faiths is commendable. Periodic gatherings or joint activities are laudable and inspiring. However, dialogue that leads to peace among peoples must aim at the progressive intensification of mutual engagement with and between students from different faith backgrounds. This can be done if interreligious dialogue is conducted in such a way that it touches on the different aspects of dialogue instead of merely superficial celebrations of diversity or mere formality in co-existence and acceptance of the presence of others. It will be affirmatively propitious for dialogue partners to be trained to imbibe certain attitudes necessary for facilitating the flow and progress of dialogue.

A Proposal for Interfaith Encounters

A. *Explore the different areas of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue or relations*. This may need the application of the most appropriate area according to the context of the school and considering the level of religious or spiritual awareness of the students. Interreligious dialogue on campus aimed at promoting a culture of respect, openness, and peace needs to consider the various forms or levels of interreligious dialogue to avoid being mere lip-service or a superficial concession to people of different religions. The following are important components or aspects of interreligious dialogue:[40]

Effective Peacebuilding Mechanism in the Academe" [online conference] (April 27, 2023). Hereafter referred to as the OPAPRU Conference. This author was the main speaker at the conference.

[40] This article employs the categories mentioned in the document *Dialogue and Proclamation* and which were also popularized in the talks and conferences of Francis Cardinal Arinze, emeritus President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, now referred to as a Dicastery. Muslim scholar Muhammad al-Sammak used the following instead: dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of discussion, and dialogue of experience. See T. Scheffler, "Interreligious Dialogue and Peacebuilding," *Die Friedens-Warte* 82:2/3 (2007): 176.

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First, we have the *Dialogue of Life*, where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations. Dialogue is not mere co-existence with others or acknowledgment that they exist. It is not meant to be a merely passive recognition of another person's faith. The dialogue of life happens when there is a desire to enter into relationship with others. This can happen for students in several ways: by stimulating an active interest in the other; reading or watching films about them or engaging in direct contact with them; paying reciprocal visits to their places of worship; being present at important occasions in their lives such as marriages, births, deaths, or emergencies; and sending greetings on special celebrations or feasts.

Then there is the *Dialogue of Action*, where women and men of different religions collaborate in the pursuit of a peaceful world and for the integral development of peoples. Promoting peace means working together to achieve it. Interfaith dialogue among the youth carries the potential for youth empowerment, as already mentioned above; they not only attend lectures or talks but can also be inspired to deepen friendships and make more tangible contributions to society. Indeed, some youth interfaith groups already in existence prove that people of different faiths can work together.[41]

There is also a *Dialogue of Theological Exchange*. It is not easy for religions to understand each other fully and agree on each other's beliefs and practices. Theological dialogue, for the most part, is the realm of specialists. If done in the school setting, those who are guiding the students must be well-intentioned and well-formed, especially in their own traditions. To be successful, theological dialogue must be preceded by serious preparation that leaves room for spontaneous discussions. It must avoid polemics and most certainly disavow proselytism while refraining from being merely academic. Some researchers strongly suggest a gradation in this kind of dialogue, one that respects the

[41] Cornelio & Salera, "Youth in Interfaith Dialogue," 57–58.

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capacity of students to understand their own religion as well as that of another.[42]

Finally, we have the *Dialogue of Religious Experience or Spirituality*. People well-grounded in their own faith tend to share their spiritual riches. They want to speak about their life of prayer and contemplation, their ways of searching for God, and their path to finding God's will. People of different faiths can come together to pray especially in times of crisis and disaster. They can also pray together in private, although it might be difficult to find forms of prayer that can easily be shared. Integrity, respect, and humility are necessary for a dialogue of holiness to be successful.

It is worth noting that in Asia, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) previously identified and established the triple dimensions of dialogue proper to the social situation and religious climate of this vast continent. In the words of His Eminence Orlando Cardinal Quevedo at the 2009 FABC Plenary Assembly in Manila,

> the vision of [the] FABC for the Church in Asia is to be in triple dialogue—dialogue with the poor, with cultures and with religions … by organizing seminars, institutes, assemblies, [and] meetings in the areas of inculturation, interreligious dialogue, and human development.[43]

The resources of the FABC can be a profitable mine of wisdom, expertise, and experience for those who wish to explore the possibility of interreligious relations as an educational program that does not touch exclusively on religious matters but also involves integral human promotion as one of its goals.

The FABC's vision of dialogue is committed to the attainment of the peace and harmony of all peoples in Asia, for it believes that "dialogue is always oriented outward in service of people and of God's kingdom."[44] While Asians are a people of diverse religions and pertain

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[42] Abdool et al., "Inter-religious Dialogue in Schools," 554–557.

[43] J. Kroeger, "Dialogue: Interpretive Key for the Life of the Church in Asia," *FABC Papers* 130 (May 2010), 2.

[44] Kroeger, "Dialogue," 50.

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to a rich cultural melting pot, they are, at the same time, in the "common quest for Peace, Justice and Harmony."[45] As the FABC called on "all social forces, organizations, civil society and all people of good will" to contribute toward a culture of dialogue and peace, it is inevitable that academic institutions, especially those belonging to the Church and its affiliates, be concerned with the furtherance of interreligious dialogue in this important sector of society.[46]

B. *Keep in mind the necessary dispositions for entering into interreligious dialogue.* Venturing into interreligious dialogue demands something from both proponents and participants. Among other things, here are five attitudes or dispositions people need to have toward the movement:

a) There is need for a balanced attitude. While not everything in other traditions is good, these must not be dismissed outright as evil or without value. It is always important to adopt a stance of openness, receptivity, and discernment.

b) Participants must possess a strong religious conviction. This is vital for avoiding indifference toward religious values. One needs to avoid aggressive or defensive attitudes. Leaders and participants must have a respectful and receptive approach to others at all times.

c) Openness to truth is another essential disposition. Even if one is convinced that one has the truth or the fullness of truth (as do Christians, for example, in their faith in Christ), this does not rule out openness to the truth others profess.

d) A contemplative spirit is also needed to discover and admire what God is doing through the Holy Spirit, in the world, and in the whole of humanity. Prayer as a

[45] Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences [FABC], "Journeying Together as Peoples of Asia" [Bangkok Document] (March 15, 2023), no. 3.

[46] FABC, "Journeying Together as Peoples of Asia," no. 3.

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solid foundation is a trait that those who engage in dialogue must practice and possess.

e) One needs to have patience and perseverance. One cannot look for quick results since there are many obstacles one will encounter, such as ignorance, prejudice, suspicion, self-sufficiency, and sociopolitical factors. One should not get easily discouraged if the desired results are long in coming.

This writer's own experience of working together with people of other faiths attests to the results of a personal assimilation of the aforementioned attitudes. Once, in a Ramadan celebration he attended, the leader of the Muslim community unexpectedly introduced him to the crowd as his "brother." Surprised by these words, he asked the Muslim leader to explain why, for the first time in many years, he introduced his dialogue partner in this way. The Muslim leader then said that it took him many years to realize his Christian partner's sincerity and perseverance in relating with him and his community through joint activities. Once he ascertained the authenticity of the goodwill extended to him and his people, he made the decision to consider his Christian friend as a true brother, even promising that once a Muslim extends this kind of kinship, it signifies his willingness to lay down his life for the person he has spiritually adopted. Years later, when the same Muslim leader was critically ill and nearing death, he allowed only this writer to visit him in the hospital and humbly asked him for a healing prayer and a blessing. It was a powerful experience and witness to interreligious dialogue that will forever linger in this writer's memory.

Conclusion

By works and words, the Lord Jesus Christ revealed his universal predilection toward all peoples, be they Jews, Samaritans, or Gentiles. By the same token, we find, in the actions and magisterial writings of Pope Francis, material for kindling interest in interreligious relations in our day. These inspirations can help people today explore the academe as fertile ground, as a fitting avenue for the pursuit of peace

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and harmony through interreligious dialogue, especially if this will be done in an authentic spirit and with the proper attitudes.

The final question on our minds may be this: Is interreligious dialogue effective in bringing about peace? Hans Küng, a theologian who labored in the area of dialogue until the end of his life, once said that "there will be no peace between the civilizations if there is no peace among religions! And there will be no peace between the religions without a dialogue between the religions!"[47] Scheffler pointed out that while no interreligious dialogue, so far, has been instrumental in "ending" conflicts (peacemaking) anywhere in the world, it has been proven that such initiatives were most effective in terms of conflict prevention (peacekeeping) and stabilizing peace after violent conflict (peacebuilding).[48]

Local schools that have implemented peace education programs involving interreligious harmony on campus attest to the efficacy of interfaith relations in dispelling conflict and instilling peace. A participant in the previously mentioned conference of educators and peace promoters noted that there has not been a single instance of conflict ignited by religious motives on his campus, which maintains the tri-people representation of Muslims, Christians, and *Lumads* or indigenous peoples. Instead, the students develop friendships and bonds that continue beyond their school days. Representatives from other schools echoed the same observation based on their own experience with their campus ministry or student affairs programs.[49]

The academic environment can indeed be a promising locus for conflict prevention or peacekeeping since it aids in the formation of attitudes and values that promote respect, unity, and peace. It can also do the same in terms of stabilizing peace or peacebuilding when it offers an environment where everyone, regardless of culture, race, or

[47] Cf. Scheffler, "Interreligious Dialogue and Peacebuilding," 173.

[48] Scheffler, "Interreligious Dialogue and Peacebuilding," 184.

[49] From the group sharing session of the OPAPRU Conference.

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religion, feels safe, accepted, protected, and valued as a person made in the image and likeness of the God who created us all.

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