

# CONVERSING WITH OTHERS

## *Interreligious Dialogue in Catholic Health and Aged Care*

GERARD HALL SM

WE MIGHT THINK that ‘conversing with others’ is a rather limp expression of what Catholic mission or ministry is about. However, I would like to suggest that the notion of conversation or dialogue is actually central to the Catholic understanding of the Church’s life, identity, mission and pastoral ministry. This is articulated in a coherent and sustained fashion in major ecclesial documents since the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). In particular, as I will show, the call to interreligious dialogue is given particular emphasis as an integral expression of Christian mission. While the applications need to be made by all Catholic institutions—indeed, all Christians—our task here is to raise questions and issues on the specific role of interreligious conversation in the context of identity, mission and pastoral praxis of Catholic Health and Aged Care.

### *Mission and Dialogue*

There was a time when the notion of the Church’s mission seemed to preclude real dialogue with people and cultures. After all, it seems reasonable to argue that the Church’s task is to proclaim Christ to the world. Indeed, the argument went, the salvation of all people depends on their acceptance of what the Church has to proclaim, namely the Lordship of Jesus Christ. If dialogue played a role, it was more or less a preliminary activity which may more effectively enable people to hear what the Church teaches.

What, then, is wrong with this approach? Let me begin by saying that the Church in no

way disowns its mission of proclaiming Christ to the world. Proclamation of the Gospel is, was and always will be central to the Church’s evangelizing mission. However, proclamation and catechesis—announcing the truth of Jesus Christ and explaining the Church’s teaching—have never been understood as the only aspects of Christian mission. Presence and witness, working for social justice and human liberation, the place of worship and contemplation, to name a few, are also essential aspects of mission. So too, as we will see, is interreligious dialogue.<sup>1</sup>

### *Vatican II*

How, then, does dialogue fit within the view of Christian mission that emerged from the Church’s call to renewal at the Second Vatican Council? In the words of Dario Vitali, who teaches church history at Rome’s Gregorian University, ‘the Council represented a Copernican revolution for the church, which challenged itself by asking how it could reopen a dialogue with the modern world’.<sup>2</sup> Commenting on the Council, John O’Malley states: ‘There is scarcely a page in the council documents on which *dialogue* or its equivalent does not occur’.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, it is worth noting that, on being elected Pope during the Council, Paul VI’s very first encyclical focused on dialogue—within the church, with other Christians, other religions and the entire world—as the heart of the church’s program of renewal.<sup>4</sup> The Council’s most developed document which both promotes and engages in, at times, profound dialogue with contemporary society

is its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.<sup>5</sup>

Specifically in regard to interreligious dialogue, the Council's Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions challenged Christians 'to enter dialogue and collaboration with members of other religions' in order to overcome divisions, foster friendly relations, achieve mutual understanding, and to work together with people of all faiths for peace, freedom, social justice and moral values.<sup>6</sup> In its Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, an even more profound theological rationale for dialogue is proposed when Christian missionaries are told they should enter dialogue with those among whom they live in order to 'learn of the riches which a generous God has distributed among the nations'.<sup>7</sup>

### *John Paul II's Pontificate*

It is probably fair to say that nobody has had a more positive impact on the importance of interreligious dialogue at the heart of the Church's life and mission than John Paul II. In his very first encyclical, he refers to the one 'Spirit of truth' uniting all religions.<sup>8</sup> In his missionary encyclical, he explicitly recognizes that interreligious dialogue is an integral element of the Church's evangelizing mission.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, he led by example in such symbolic initiatives as: his visit to the synagogue of Rome (1986); praying at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem (2000); inviting religious leaders to join him in prayer for World Peace in Assisi (1986 & 2002); and his public apologies for the church's negative impact on women, Jews and Indigenous peoples.

The most important document which articulates the Church's official position regarding the place of interreligious dialogue as an expression of pastoral mission is called 'Dialogue and Proclamation'.<sup>10</sup> This is a particularly rich exposition which confronts head on the varieties, skills, obstacles and challenges involved in interreligious dialogue for Chris-



*Gerard Hall SM is Associate Professor of Theology, Australian Catholic University, and Queensland State Co-ordinator for the Asia-Pacific Centre for Interreligious Dialogue.*

tians. It is to be read in conjunction with John Paul II's missionary encyclical.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, I note it is particularly directed to Catholics—but not only them—who have 'a leadership role in the community or are engaged in formation work'.<sup>12</sup> The document acknowledges there are diverse understandings of dialogue, but is here referring to those 'positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment'.<sup>13</sup> The notion of mutuality is important. Such dialogue goes beyond the desire to develop a respectful and friendly spirit with people of other religious faiths. It also wants to learn from them the ways in which the mystery of God is understood and experienced by them.<sup>14</sup>

There are, of course, different forms of dialogue which the document calls: the dialogue of life; dialogue of action; dialogue of theological exchange; and dialogue of religious experience.<sup>15</sup> While much could be said about each of these, each form of dialogue should in some way enable 'Christians and others ... to deepen their religious commitment (and) to respond with increasing sincerity to God's personal call and gracious self-gift'.<sup>16</sup> Interreligious dialogue should, then, involve the ongoing experience of conversion in which participants are moved 'to give up ingrained prejudices, to revise preconceived ideas, and even sometimes allow the understanding of their faith to be purified'.<sup>17</sup> Specifically in regard to Christians, the document enunciates a number of fruits of dialogue before declaring

that ‘far from weakening their own faith, true dialogue will deepen it’.<sup>18</sup>

### *Growing in Mission Consciousness*

At this point it may be tempting to leave the theological theory behind and focus entirely on the Catholic hostel, hospice or hospital. But before that I need to say, like Jesus at the Wedding Feast of Cana, I have left the best bit till last. If we want to focus on how we do ministry and dialogue together, we have a rather wonderful example. Of course, I am speaking of Jesus himself. Our mission, the Church’s mission, and the mission of any Catholic institution is primarily an extension of Jesus’ own mission which is about the reign of God in the world. When Jesus begins his mission, he does not start with a theory—and theologians may be horrified to discover he does not appeal to theological principles. He simply goes to the scroll and reads the words of the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me and  
anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor,  
to proclaim liberty to captives,  
to give sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to proclaim the time of the Lord’s favour.  
(Luke 4: 18f.)

If I may say so, Jesus’ mission is dialogical in two senses: he is in dialogue with God through the experience of God’s own Spirit in his life (and it is for this that Jesus often goes off by himself in the desert to pray); and he is in dialogue with the people of Israel, especially those on the margins of society. This too is an experiential dialogue. He establishes living contact with the poor, the blind and the lame; he reaches out to the despised tax collectors, drop-outs, prostitutes and sinners; he establishes life-giving relationships with his disciples and friends including Magdalene, Lazarus, Martha and Mary. Even this was counter-cultural in terms of the day by bringing women into his circle of intimate friends.

Yet, as with all of us, Jesus grows in the understanding of his mission. Initially, he does not think his mission is meant to go beyond Israel and even forbids his disciples to go the Gentiles (Matt. 10:5f.). Yet he is approached by a non-Jewish ‘Syro-Phoenician’ woman, a Canaanite, probably a half-caste (Matt. 15: 21-28). She asks for Jesus’ blessing for her sick daughter, but initially neither he nor his disciples seem very interested. Jesus ignores her. Then, at the disciples’ behest, he rebuffs her: ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’. But she persists: ‘Lord help me’. Jesus’ reply, however we explain it, seems harsh, even rude and insulting. He says: ‘It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs’. To this she replies: ‘Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table’. It is not so much that Jesus is outsmarted; rather, he grows in awareness that his mission for God’s reign in the world includes those who are outside the fold. His dialogue with this non-Jewish woman disrupts his worldview, enlarges his consciousness and changes his attitudes and behaviour.

We see this in Jesus’ subsequent approach to ‘foreigners’ with whom he enters into dialogue in a fully respectful manner. For example, he engages in a long conversation with the Samaritan woman and speaks to her of a time when true worship will not be restricted to any particular people or place. When the disciples return, John tells us that ‘they were astonished’ to find him speaking with this woman—though no one asked ‘Why are you speaking with her?’ (John 4: 22-27). Jesus often performs healing miracles for foreigners (Mark 7: 24-30; Matt. 15: 21-28). He also recognizes in the Roman centurion a greater faith than in all of Israel (Matt. 8: 10). Moreover, Jesus seems far less concerned about people’s beliefs than their attitudes and actions. At the heart of his prophetic ministry are the words of the Beatitudes (Matt. 5: 3-12) where he speaks of universal human values of righteousness, peace, justice and mercy.

Our own Church has come to such a mo-

ment in which our understanding of mission is enriched by the increasing contact Christians have with people of other traditions. What is required is a positive and open attitude evident, for example, in Paul's speech to the Athenians where he praises their religious spirit (Acts 17: 22-34) or in the writings of the early Fathers of the Church, such as Justin, Irenaeus and Clement, who recognize God's universal presence throughout history both before and since the coming of the Son of God in Jesus Christ. The danger of Christian mission, evident in too many historical incidents, is a type of religious triumphalism that seeks to convert the other without recognizing our own ongoing call to conversion. This is where recent emphasis on interreligious dialogue as an essential component of mission is so valuable. What we witness to in dialogue is our own belief that Jesus is the Word of God and that the Spirit of God is truly present in our midst; but what we learn in dialogue is that the Word and Spirit of God are also manifest in other peoples, traditions and religions in ways that confront our narrowness of vision and challenge us to see the mystery of God's ways in the stranger, foreigner and religious other.

***The Pastoral Challenge—Interreligious Dialogue in Catholic Health and Aged Care***

If we accept that interreligious dialogue is an essential component of Christian mission, this needs to be incorporated into mission statements, policies, planning and strategies in all Catholic institutions including Health and Aged Care. It should be especially evident in areas of pastoral ministry. This does not mean a watering down of Catholic identity; to the contrary, it requires a depth-commitment to Christ and the Gospel as its starting point.<sup>19</sup> Interreligious dialogue is not served, for example, by replacing explicit references to the mission of Jesus with more generalized statements of care and compassion for the sick and the aged.

I appreciate the issue of religious symbols such as Crucifixes or artistic representations of the Divine can be particularly problematic for those of some religious traditions—one thinks especially of Islam. This seems to me an example of where sensitive dialogue with persons of other faith-traditions comes into play. On the one hand, there needs to be a sense of proportion: such religious symbolism, though important to Catholics, is not an absolute. So there is room for dialogue, negotiation and, in certain situations, a particular image or statue could be temporarily covered or removed as an expression of respect for that person's beliefs. On the other hand, the presence of such images may be fertile ground for religious dialogue. In other words, interreligious dialogue is at the heart of the discernment process.

A Catholic hospital or hospice will naturally provide, as far as possible, an extensive range of religious services including the Eucharist and other sacraments. However, this does not mean that ecumenical and interfaith services—nor the provision of specific non-Catholic religious rituals—are neglected. Again, this requires sensitive dialogue with chaplains, ministers and members of the hospital or hospice staff and patients. Religious services will only have meaning on the basis of the quality of pastoral care. Evidently, this means that the Catholic institution will be a place of hospitality in which every attempt is made to respond to the pastoral, spiritual and religious needs of all staff, patients and their families.

The practice in many Catholic institutions of establishing Pastoral Teams inclusive of chaplains from various faith traditions—at least appointing sessional chaplains from those traditions—seems an excellent way of establishing interreligious dialogue as central to its pastoral planning and ministry. The need for someone skilled in interfaith activities to lead such a team and work with chaplains from a range of traditions is more important today than ever before. I would add that, in the con-

text of Catholic health and aged care, such a person should be a Catholic who is both committed to and knowledgeable about his/her Catholic faith-tradition and the mission focus of the particular institution. Pastoral Care Assistants, including volunteers, have an invaluable contribution to make and should include, as far as feasible, people with theological and/or liturgical skills as well as the ability to work sensitively with chaplains and people of all faiths in pastoral ministry. The desirability of providing chaplains and others with specific formation in interreligious dialogue is evident.

In today's secular culture, our understanding of interreligious dialogue needs to extend to those who espouse no specific religious tradition. They may describe themselves as 'spiritual' rather than 'religious'. In this situation, it may be better to speak of spiritual or cultural dialogue relating to people's attitudes towards life, illness and death. This may lead to the exploration of religious beliefs. In any case, what John Paul II once called the 'method of dialogue' is the way that pastoral ministers need to engage with their hearers. In other words, interreligious dialogue in this broad sense remains at the heart of pastoral praxis even with those who come from a non-religious, perhaps anti-religious, stance. Conversing with others and sharing their concerns is always Jesus' starting point evident, for example, in his conversations with the Samaritan woman (John 4: 24) and the disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24: 13-35).

### *Conclusion*

In a recent issue of *Health Matters*, Therese Vassarotti identifies the essence of Catholic health ministry in terms of 'maximising the dignity of people' as distinct from 'the commodification of their needs'.<sup>20</sup> She goes on to quote the words of John Paul II who calls

the new millennium a 'time for a new 'creativity' in charity, not only ensuring that help is effective but also by 'getting close' to those who suffer, so that the hand that helps is not seen as a humiliating handout but as a sharing between brothers and sisters'.<sup>21</sup> This challenge, important as it is for all Christian ministry, is crucial when that ministry involves people of other faith traditions.

Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas speaks of encountering the face of the other as the most profound of all human experiences. As a survivor of the Jewish holocaust, he asks: 'What right have I to be, to live, in the face of the other person's suffering and death?' The face of the other not only makes ethical and human demands on me but is also a source of revelation where 'I hear the Word of God'. This demands we fully respect the 'otherness' of the faces we meet in pastoral ministry:

Every face we encounter is a face of otherness. Every face says, 'I am other to you'. Every face says, 'I am not you'. Every face says, 'Don't kill me; don't absorb me into your world; don't obliterate me by making me the same as you. I am other. I am different. I am not you'.<sup>22</sup>

Ministry to the sick and elderly has always been a cherished expression of Christian love. Here one encounters the face of the other in a situation of vulnerability. If we are to 'maximise the dignity of people' in such a situation, we need to fully respect their diverse cultural, spiritual and religious identities by making ourselves vulnerable through dialogue. In particular, by focusing on the importance of interreligious dialogue we can be assured our ministry will be experienced, not in patronising terms, but as a genuine, mutual sharing of brothers and sisters. In theological terms, this is nothing less than a continuation of the mission of Jesus that has universal outreach in witnessing to God's continuing covenant with humanity.<sup>23</sup>

### NOTES

1 Discussion of the connection between mission and dialogue, with particular reference to Austral-

ian Catholic Agencies, is provided in the edited work by Neil Ormerod, *Identity and Mission in*

*Catholic Agencies* (Strathfield, St. Paul's, 2008).

2 Cited by John Thavis, 'Forty years later, Vatican II continues to reverberate through Church' in *CathNews* (12 October 2005). [Accessed 3 August 2008]: <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0505787.htm>

3 To this, O'Malley adds that 'dialogue manifests a radical shift from the prophetic I-say-unto-you style that earlier prevailed and indicates something other than unilateral decision-making'. Cited by Michael Whelan, 'Ways of Knowing: Clearing the Ground for Conversation' in *Australian eJournal of Theology*, Issue 11 (March 2008), 14. [Accessed 3 August 2008]: [http://www.acu.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/92536/Ways\\_of\\_Knowing.pdf](http://www.acu.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/92536/Ways_of_Knowing.pdf)

4 *Ecclesiam Suam* (6 August 1964). Available at *Vatican Web-site*. [Accessed 3 August 2008]: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_06081964\\_ecclesiam\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam_en.html)

5 *Gaudium et Spes* (7 December 1965). Available at *Vatican Web-site*. [Accessed 3 August 2008]: [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_cons\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html)

6 *Nostra Aetate* (28 October 1965), 2-3. Available at *Vatican Web-site*. [Accessed 3 August 2008]: [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html)

7 *Ad Gentes* (7 December 1965), 11. Available at *Vatican Web-site*. [Accessed 3 August 2008]: [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651207\\_ad-gentes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html)

8 *Redemptor Hominis* (3 April 1979), 6. [Accessed 3 August 2008]: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_04031979\\_redemptor-hominis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis_en.html)

9 *Redemptoris Missio* (12 July 1990), 55. [Accessed 3 August 2008]: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_07121990\\_redemptoris-missio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio_en.html)

10 *Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* (19 May 1991); hereafter DP. Joint document of the Pontifical Council for

Interreligious Dialogue [PCID] and the Congregation for Evangelization of Peoples. Printed version available from Columban Mission Institute, Locked Bag 2002, Strathfield NSW 2135. Also available at *Vatican Web-site*. [Accessed 3 August 2008]: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/interelg/documents/rc\\_pc\\_interelg\\_doc\\_19051991\\_dialogue-and-proclamatio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html)

11 DP, 4.

12 DP, 7.

13 DP, 8. Citing a prior document of PCID, 'Dialogue and Mission', 3 (1984).

14 'While keeping their identity intact, Christians must be prepared to learn and receive from and through others the positive values of their traditions'. DP, 49.

15 DP, 42.

16 DP, 40.

17 DP, 49.

18 DP, 50.

19 As Mark Shaw argues, Catholic health institutions need to develop a sense of mission and pastoral programs based on the Church's theological and pastoral tradition. 'A Pastoral Paradigm of Catholic Health Care', *Australian eJournal of Theology*, Issue 12 (June 2008), 5. [Accessed 8 August 2008]: [http://www.acu.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/107468/Mark\\_Shaw\\_Catholic\\_health\\_care.pdf](http://www.acu.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/107468/Mark_Shaw_Catholic_health_care.pdf)

20 Therese Vassarotti, 'Identifying the Catholic in Catholic Health and Aged Care', *Health Matters*, Issue 46 (May 2008), 15.

21 John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (6 January 2001), n. 50. Cited by Vassarotti, 15. [Accessed 8 August 2008]: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_letters/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_20010106\\_novo-millennio-ineunte\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20010106_novo-millennio-ineunte_en.html)

22 Terry Veling, *Practical Theology: 'On Earth as it is in Heaven'* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2005), 123. For a helpful overview of Levinas' philosophy, see Veling, Chapter 7, 115-135.

23 Henri Nouen's definition of pastoral care. Cited in Mark Shaw, 'A Pastoral Paradigm of Catholic Health Care', *Australian eJournal of Theology*, Issue 12 (June 2008), 2. [Accessed 8 August 2008]: [http://www.acu.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/107468/Mark\\_Shaw\\_Catholic\\_health\\_care.pdf](http://www.acu.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/107468/Mark_Shaw_Catholic_health_care.pdf)

***This presentation was prepared for Catholic Health Australia  
Annual Conference, Surfers Paradise, August 2008.***