



# THE PARAMETERS OF DIALOGUE IN A NEW MILLENNIUM

## *Some Comments*

RICHARD RYMARZ

**T**HIS PAPER, drawing on the thought of Avery Dulles, looks at some of the issues that surround dialogue in contemporary Catholic discourse. It argues that cultural changes have necessitated some re-evaluation of the concept of dialogue as the basic expression of the Church's missionary stance. It argues that for dialogue, especially with the wider culture, to be fruitful it must be based on a recognition of certain basic commonly held assumptions. In terms of intraecclesial dialogue an important consideration is that dialogue can be limited. Some issues are not amenable to dialogue, such as those which involve well-defined, substantive beliefs.

### *Introduction*

Dialogue means a conversation between two equals in which consensus regarding the truth is sought. Beinert and Schussler Fiorenza (2000, 174)

In this paper I would like to make some cautionary comments about the use of dialogue in contemporary Catholic discourse. I am aware that such comments could be misconstrued since the value of dialogue can, on occasion, be seen as one of the unchallenged leitmotifs of post-conciliar Catholicism. This brief and in many ways preliminary discussion is part of a growing literature which sees the Council and how it has been interpreted as a contested issue and one where a variety of voices can be heard. I am not suggesting that

dialogue be abandoned but that it must be seen in a historical and cultural context as one aspect of the Church's missionary outreach. Furthermore, dialogue relies on an acceptance of basic assumptions such as truth claims and, therefore, in some circumstances cannot be fruitfully undertaken. A much more pressing challenge is how to address the precursor to dialogue, namely nurturing religious commitment so that the desire and ability to engage in dialogue is evident.

Today, amongst young people especially, the religious quest is often marked by a widening disengagement with religious traditions. This results in a growing population cohort that does not see religious issues, classically conceived, as having much importance. As a result there is not a firm grounding in the language, practices, symbols and narratives of religious traditions. This disengagement is most evident in mainstream Protestant groups but is also a factor in the disposition of contemporary Catholicism. This has major implications for the place of dialogue in contemporary Catholic discourse. In order for religious dialogue to occur, both within communities and as outreach, there must be more than a passing acquaintance with religious language, belief and practice and some type of affective acceptance and acting out of belief.

To illustrate this point, let me use an historical example. I have recently been reviewing *The Golden Years*, a book which looks at, amongst other things, the Melbourne University student apostolate in the years that Fr

Jerry Golden S.J. was chaplain to the university. This period roughly translates to the fifteen years leading up to the Second Vatican Council. There is much to be said for this fine work of narrative history but the point I wish to make here is the extraordinary activity and fecundity that accompanied Catholic student life in this period. One of the questions that preoccupied the apostolate was how to make the Incarnation a reality in a university setting. The idea here was to enter into a closer dialogue with the wider world, especially the environs in which students lived. The apostolate was on the vanguard of a new mentality amongst Catholics that would be fully ushered in by the Council. The emancipation brought about by the Council occurred in an historic instance when many in the Catholic community were ready to go out and engage in an exchange with the world.

The Catholic culture of the era, for all its shortcomings, provided critical mass and was based on a clear sense of common beliefs, values and practices. It prepared people well for the task of dialogue. It was almost natural for those who were brought up in this era to seek to dialogue as they had something fairly well defined to contribute.

In terms of the apostolate, a dialogue with medical students or with those interested in engineering or in law reform could go ahead since those involved each shared something of a particular perspective. In terms of dialogue within the group this was also a purposeful endeavour as many of the common understandings on which dialogue within communities is based were firmly established.

I would argue that we cannot make the same assumptions in the cultural milieu of the new millennium. As a result there is a need to contextualize dialogue within a broader social analysis which begins to examine the preconditions on which genuine dialogue depends.

### *Dialogue and the New Cultural Reality*

No theologian in the English speaking world



*Dr Richard Rymarz holds the Peter and Doris Kule Chair in Catholic Religious Education St Joseph's College, University of Alberta and is a visiting Research Professor with the Social Justice Flagship at Australian Catholic University.*

better articulates the changing context in which Catholic theology operates than Avery Dulles. Dulles pointed out that in the preconciliar era the Church was not disposed to dialogue but rather saw itself in a triumphalistic sense pointing out the errors of others and the superiority of the Catholic position. This mentality quickly, and somewhat unexpectedly, collapsed. As Greeley and many others have pointed out, the tumult of the post-conciliar period was brought about not so much by change itself but by the rapidity of change. Dulles in a memorable commentary describes this era as one where dialogue replaced missionary proclamation as the fundamental expression of the Church's stance toward the world. Here he recognizes, perhaps following Sullivan, that dialogue, evangelization and proclamation are all aspects of the Church's missionary stance. Historical circumstances can privilege one of these aspects but this prioritization can change. Dulles would argue that in these times there is an increasing need for the Church to develop a more proclamatory stance. This is not in opposition to dialogue but recognizes that times change and that what was appropriate in earlier eras may need to be modified in later times.

One of the key reasons for this reconsideration of the relationship of proclamation and dialogue as aspects of mission was a bedrock change in Catholicism in the post-conciliar era. One significant factor was the collapse of religious socialization, which despite some misconceptions is a complex and multilayered phenomenon. One critical aspect of

socialization refers to what Berger and Luckman would call plausibility structures. These enable religious groups to nurture new members but also to provide, amongst other things, a space for religious questioning and mentoring to take place. Plausibility structures allow people to learn and rehearse what it means to be a member of that community. In the post conciliar era, within Catholic circles, plausibility structures were placed under severe strain. As a result, the common understandings that are so important in maintaining coherence were never successfully absorbed by many.

The impact of the Council was not limited to changes in missionary expression. Many Catholic institutions, for example, underwent profound structural and philosophical changes. To select one example, in the United States Catholic universities and colleges took on the critique of John Tracy Ellis who posited that Catholic higher education had become somewhat of a backwater and that the most urgent task facing colleges was to replicate the standards of secular institutions. One of the reasons for this was to enable Catholic educational institutions to enter into a proper dialogue with their secular peers on the basis of similar standards and professionalism. Gleason in a perceptive history of American Catholic institutes of higher learning points out that the colleges that were the target of Ellis' comments have been largely successful in bringing themselves up to the standards of secular institutions. In theory then, the situation should be ripe for a greater dialogue between Catholic and secular universities.

There have been, however, other changes in the era which have seriously compromised the ability of Catholics to engage in dialogue with the wider culture and with each other. The one which I wish to draw attention to here is what Gleason (1995, 320) calls the ideological crises facing many Catholic institutions:

The identity problem that persists is...not institutional or organizational, but ideological.

That is, it consists in a lack of consensus as to

the substantive content of the ensemble of religious beliefs, moral commitments, and academic assumptions that supposedly constitute Catholic identity, and a consequent inability to specify what identity entails for the practical functioning of Catholic colleges and universities. More briefly put, the crisis is not that Catholic colleges and universities do not want their institutions to remain Catholic, but that they are no longer sure what remaining Catholic means.

If coherence and ideological unity, within acceptance parameters, cannot be maintained then dialogue becoming increasingly difficult to sustain.

### *Dialogue with the Wider Culture*

Ideological confusion problematizes the whole notion of dialogue because the basic assumptions that underpin the Catholic position can no longer be taken for granted. To return to my earlier example, one of the factors that made the Catholic university apostolate of the 1950's so outward looking and prescient was that they had something to contribute to wider debates that were based on agreed foundational positions. What may have been overconfidence has been replaced today by a much more ambiguous sentiment which often masks fundamental disagreements amongst Catholics. This reduces dialogue to more of a monologue where the culturally dominant side berates the less well endowed and divided party. Let me illustrate this with a topical example. In May 2009 Barack Obama, whose legislative support of abortion, stem cell research and other life issues, is well known and unblemished was invited by Fr John Jenkins CSC, the President of the University of Notre Dame, to give the spring commencement address and to receive an honorary degree. One of the justifications for this was that it would contribute to greater dialogue. Even on the face of it, this claim seems disingenuous. How can an address to graduating students, with no opportunity for questions, be conceived of as a forum for the exchange of ideas?

The point I wish to stress, though, is a

deeper one and reflective of the ideological divide now very evident in Catholicism. What is the Catholic position on a life issue such as abortion? Is it the moral issue of the century or is it one of a range of teachings each of which has something to contribute to the common good? This is a simple dichotomy and in this paper I do not have the space to elaborate the nuances of the argument. I think my basic premise is sound, that is, on many issues, not just moral ones like abortion, there are a range of positions within the Catholic orbit that are very difficult to reconcile. So if President Obama and others were to be engaged in a dialogue, whom would they be dialoguing with? Dialogue depends, in the first instance, on having something to contribute that is both distinctive and informative. It must also have a certain commonality, especially if it is being conducted between communities. When a person speaks from a certain perspective her views need to be in accord with the community that is being represented; otherwise, it is a dialogue of individuals which is perfectly valid but is of a different nature. I would argue that one of the biggest challenges facing religious dialogue today is the lack of commonly agreed positions between members of religious communities. This is a problem that is certainly evident within the Catholic community.

In his later writings Dulles commented on the need for Catholic institutions now and in the future to focus on providing a clear and cogent message to a culture where religious affiliation was increasingly threatened not by a vigorous secularism but by a more diffuse one which pushed religion from the public square and into the private domain. In such a cultural matrix there is a strong tendency for the Catholic view to be further atomized and to be seen as a discretionary position and not one that is binding. The costs and benefits of such a fragmentation can be discussed at length, but the point that I return to is that genuine dialogue is very difficult if there are too many competing and disparate voices.

### *Dialogue within the Community*

Dialogue is often rooted in an aspect of mission—*ad gentes* (or ‘to the nations’). To be sure, this idea of dialogue as an exchange between the culture of the Church and the wider culture is found in many of the documents of the Council and in later writings. There is, however, another aspect to dialogue that deserves some comment, and that is dialogue within the ecclesial community. In many ways, when the topic of dialogue is raised in contemporary Catholicism, this is the sense in which it is being used.

Dulles argued that one of the characteristic features of genuine dialogue is that it was restricted. For those especially who are coming from a religious perspective, there are some topics on which dialogue is fruitless. These include either defined positions or those which form the ideological basis of the community. The ongoing controversy surrounding Fr Peter Kennedy in Brisbane seems to be a good illustration of this point. Fr Kennedy appealed constantly in the early stages of the dispute for more dialogue, inviting the archbishop to visit his home and his congregation as a way of reconciling differences. At the same time Kennedy undermined the basis of dialogue, at least amongst Catholics, by announcing his unorthodox views on a number of seminal issues such as the Virgin Birth and the divinity of Christ. There is no need here to go into a theological discussion of the merits of these views. The point is that, as Archbishop Bathersby correctly pointed out, Kennedy seemed to be determined to put himself outside the Catholic communion. To put it another way, dialogue with Fr Kennedy, at least as it is understood as an intraecclesial phenomenon, was now impossible. This is because the common understandings on which intraecclesial dialogue is based were no longer operating.

Unless there is substantial agreement on basic terms, common meanings and shared beliefs, then, no amount of dialogue can ever bring about a consensus. If Catholics do not

share this common ideological position then dialogue can only be divisive as the groups do not share a fundamental unity of belief.

I would argue that one of the reasons for the zeal of the Melbourne University apostolate in the pre-conciliar period was that amongst its members there existed this commonality. This unravelled in the post-conciliar period for reasons that cannot be elaborated on here but without internal co-gency dialogue becomes a forum for disparate views that have little chance of being reconciled. Without a common ideology, dialogue is based on a false premise, namely, that what is being undertaken is an exchange between persons who share foundational positions. This view need not be taken to an extreme; rather it should be seen in a historical context. It could be argued that in the recent past too much of Catholicism was defined and commonly upheld. This could preclude a genuine diversity of views. At this time, however, the need is for what D'Antonio and his colleagues call a reestablishment of boundaries.

### Conclusion

I have written in the past of a salient experience that, in my view, speaks well to the changed cultural context in which Catholicism operates. This was a project that I was approached to run in 2003 that was supposed to investigate various aspects of Catholic university student life. The project was never undertaken because in so many campuses there was no functioning Catholic student

group. The reasons for this are many but it does unequivocally underline the change in culture between the third millennium and the period just before and after the Council. The Melbourne University apostolate of the 1950's was quite understandably preoccupied with the need for a greater and more far-reaching dialogue both within the Church and with the wider culture. They were operating from a position that was reflective of strength from at least a sociological perspective. These groups had critical mass, a shared ideology, mechanisms for nurturing and maintaining religious commitment and a more benign general culture to operate in. Today the situation has changed. The more important issue is that of first identifying and then developing religious plausibility. This could be seen as a precursor for dialogue.

For dialogue to be productive it must arise from a strong communal sense of shared and deeply held beliefs, practices and actions. The challenge facing contemporary Catholicism is to find ways to nurture religious commitment to such a degree that those formed in this way are in a position to engage in purposeful dialogue with their religious contemporaries and with the wider culture. There is little danger in the present time of a return to the excesses of triumphalism. What is needed, though, are ways in which the faith community, especially youth and young adults, can be reinvigorated so that Catholicism has something that is powerful, life-shaping and genuinely emancipatory to contribute to dialogue in all its senses.

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