

# To Bind, To Heal, To Reconcile

## The Church and Interreligious Dialogue

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“**H**ow good and pleasant it is when God’s people dwell together in unity.” When I read the title of this session for the first time I recalled immediately these words of Psalm 133, the fruit of the reflection of our Jewish forebearers. At the same time, however, I was struck with the terrible reality of the sufferings caused by persons who have for centuries closed themselves from those who do not look as they do, or speak as they do, or most regrettably: believe as they do. This despite belonging to religious traditions that at their best call each of us to healing, reconciliation, and peace.

Pope Francis has from the beginning of his papacy, and before as priest and bishop, called upon his readers and hearers to “create

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unity in diversity.” He desires, particularly, his coreligionists to build bridges. In his letter *Evangelii Gaudium*, he challenges the whole church to an “attitude of openness in truth and in love,” calling interreligious dialogue “a necessary condition for peace in the world.”<sup>1</sup>

Most recently, the Holy Father has called for a Jubilee Year of Mercy. He sees it as “a well-spring of joy, serenity, and peace.”<sup>2</sup> He calls mercy “the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life . . . the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to a hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness.”<sup>3</sup>

Pope Francis would be the first to note that despite this truth, failure to follow it has led to many times, places, and persons facing horrendous conditions. In his time, Saint John Paul II called the church to atonement and repentance. The Holy Father building upon the sentiments of his predecessor has challenged the church to “announce the mercy of God . . . which . . . must penetrate the heart and mind of every person. . . .The Church makes herself a servant of this love and mediates it to all people: a love that forgives and expresses itself in the gift of one’s self.”<sup>4</sup>

The opportunity given to people of faith is not a new direction of the church as much as it is a renewal of the covenant of love established centuries ago between God and humankind and witnessed to by men and women of vision. Building upon the *hesed* of the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus taught and lived covenant

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1. No. 250.

2. “Bull of Induction for the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy,” no. 2.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., no. 12.

love as he sought to make his disciples ministers of healing, reconciliation, and peace. He instructed them to realize that their challenge is to change themselves from the inside out and to seek not after the values of the world that too often divide people and diminish human dignity. Those first followers encountered a Christ who called them to be servants. He instructed them that they are to realize “the first among you must be the last.” He showed them as he washed their feet, a task performed at that time by slaves, that inasmuch as he did this as the Master, so they must do for each other. He touched the minds and hearts of his Jewish community as well as those who were outcasts because of disease or of different beliefs such as the Samaritans. And appearing to them after the traumatic events leading to His crucifixion, he uttered the word *Shalom*. This was not simply a greeting but a word of reconciliation: “Let us be at one.” Past failures are forgotten. The mission of healing, bringing peace, and reconciliation lies ahead.

The early church under the leadership of the apostles developed a strong sense of community, welcoming all to share its prayer, work, and goods. As a rationale for the existence of the church, the members relied upon the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, the participation of all in decisions such as who will assume positions of leadership and service, and the letters of apostles, evangelists, and others. Most noteworthy for our purposes are the words of James, who spoke of the need for the elders to be present to those in need of healing, and John, who in the clearest fashion told his hearers and readers that someone who states that he or she loves God but not his or her neighbors is a liar and not a true believer. Both these ancients encouraged all to be active in charity and the process of bringing about a community reconciled in the Christ.

As time went on, different forms of reconciliation came about. Methods of atonement and mercy varied, and some seemed almost too arduous. As a result, the practice of private confession came about as a way of bringing oneself into communion with God and one’s brothers and sisters. Religious Orders developed practices of penance that would bring about a personal integration of soul, mind, and body and many of these were shared with the laity in the places where their churches and monasteries were formed.

Out of this environment came St. Francis of Assisi, who was concerned with the beauty of creation, the dignity of every human being, and the conditions in which each person lives. He also recognized the need for interreligious dialogue. So impressed with Francis’s faith and his personal fortitude, the Islamic leaders of his time entered into fruitful exchanges, which resulted in mutual respect. Even to this day, the holy places of Jerusalem are still under the care of his Franciscan brothers.

But a faltering humanity, with goals not identified with the highest purposes of religious formation, came about as individuals and groups separated themselves by proclaiming that all truth was possessed by them. They condemned all who were different in their thoughts. This period lasted too long and still survives in the minds of too many who cut themselves off from their brothers and sisters of other religious traditions as well as within the church itself. But as a Catholic community, we could see a shift away from the paradigm of “exclusiveness”—the belief that only Christians are saved—certainly by the beginning of the twentieth century. Individuals saw the harm that self-serving aggrandizement inflicted on all humanity. The tragedy of constant wars has put all on notice of the need to become reconciled. *Humanity needs healing, creation needs healing, and we need healing.*

As the secular community stressed peace between nations, the watershed event for the church was certainly the Second Vatican Council which met from 1962 to 1965. Brought into existence under the guidance of Pope John XXIII and nurtured by Pope Paul VI, both of happy memory, it called us to deny a place to “doomsayers” and to open the windows to new possibilities of growth in understanding the world in which we all share, including those who have different religious views and life experiences.

For the first time, people of all faiths observed the workings of the church as their opinions were sought by the council fathers. We did not witness new doctrinal proclamations so much as we saw a desire for a deeper interaction by the faith community, an intensity in encountering God in God’s word, and a greater commitment to communicate to all humankind. The documents on religious freedom and our relationship with other faith traditions certainly exemplify the latter. Seeking healing, reconciliation, and peace, groups were formed internationally, nationally, and locally. All members of the church were urged to dialogue so that all might revere the truth as it is found in each other’s traditions. Such actions have not ceased as popes since that time have seen the importance to humanity of prayers and works for peace and healing.

This attitude of the church has entered all of us, we who have seen too much starvation, too much torture, too much poverty, and too much violence. Pope John Paul II took a dramatic step when he called the world’s religious leaders to Assisi in 1986. He addressed the gathering:

For the first time in history we have come together from everywhere. Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities and World Religions, in this sacred place dedicated to Saint Francis, to witness before the world each according to his

own conviction, about the transcendental quality of peace. The form and content of our prayers are very different. . . . Yet in this very difference we have discovered anew that regarding the problem of peace and its relation to human commitment, there is something which binds us together. The challenge of peace, as it is presently posed to every human conscience, is a problem of survival for humanity, the problem of life and death. . . . There is no peace without a passionate love for peace. There is no peace without a relentless determination to achieve peace. Peace awaits its prophets. . . . Peace awaits its builders. . . . Peace is a universal responsibility: it comes through a thousand little acts in daily life.<sup>5</sup>

With words of confirmation in the same Franciscan town, twenty-five years later Pope Benedict confirmed that the multi-religious meeting is:

a case of being together on a journey towards truth, a case of taking a decisive stand for human dignity and a case of common engagement for peace against every form of destructive force. I would like to assure you that the Catholic Church will not let up . . . in her commitment for peace in the world. . . . We are animated by the common desire to be “pilgrims of truth, pilgrims of peace.”<sup>6</sup>

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5. “Address of John Paul II to the Representatives of the Christian Churches and Ecclesiastical Communities and of the World Religions,” October 27, 1986, nos. 3, 4, 7.

6. “Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI at the Meeting for Peace in Assisi,” October 27, 2011.

We know that Pope Francis will echo this theme as he shares his hope for all creation. May what we hope for be revealed in our efforts at self-conversion, dialogue, reaching out to our religious communities, and, *together*, to humanity that suffers social ills in our cities. We have practices of binding, healing, and reconciling that in dialogue can contribute to the realization of this hope.

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