

Principles of Interreligious Dialogue: Bridging a Relations Gap Between the Roman Catholic Church and the Zimbabwean State

Shelton Sylvester Zimondi, O.Carm.

Introduction

Conflict is a reality of life. It seems to characterise the daily order of the world today. Africa and Zimbabwe in particular are not exceptions. Almost every facet of social life is caught up in conflict and violence at religious, social and political spheres, among other aspects of daily living.¹ This article aims to demonstrate how the principles of interreligious dialogue (IRD) may assist in bridging the relations gap between the Roman Catholic Church and the Zimbabwean state. To achieve this aim, the writer will begin by defining key terms followed by a brief discussion on dialogue. Thereafter, the author will show how the ten principles of IRD according to Leonardo Swidler may assist in resolving the conflict between the aforementioned parties. Eventually, the writer will give a critique and draw a conclusion that through the pedagogical, informative and personal aspects of the principles of IRD the relational gap between the Catholic Church and the state would be narrowed down.

About dialogue

The term dialogue comes from two Greek words: dia, meaning “through” and logos, interpreted as “word or meaning”, as such, to dialogue is to engage in constructing meaning through written or spoken word.² According to Leonard Swidler, a dialogue entails a conversation on a standard subject between two or more parties with diverse views whose primary purpose is to learn from each other in order to change and grow.³ A principle is a fundamental guiding rule or value for behaviour or evaluation that is used as a foundation for reasoning or conduct. Thus, in dialogue a principle governs or brings about a standard. For the purposes of this article, the term church will refer to the Roman Catholic Church in Zimbabwe.

Patently, dialogue demands an active search of building bridges of understanding and bringing down walls of prejudice and hostility.⁴

Dialogue entails conversation and active communication, of which these in turn overcome conflict and violence. Of capital importance, oneness is the goal of dialogue. As such, a mature institutional dialogue is the one which seeks to overcome all divisions, paving a way to consensus on matters of belief, doctrine and practice.⁵ Clearly, through serious engagement with the other, dialogue leads us into learning about our own prejudices and grey areas as well as discovering new insights about our convictions and traditions. Subsequently, dialogue would help to dispel prejudice and hate, and to boldly confront tensions and conflicts, diffusing them with great sensitivity and humility.⁶ Cognisant that society encounters vast conflicts among other challenges today, engaging into a dialogue where common ground for addressing these challenges is created and respect for divergence of views is valued, signifies joint efforts focused on a common goal, benefiting all. Put differently, dialogue seeks not standardisation of society but promotes unity in diversity – a global village where differences are accommodated and respected. Nevertheless, how can an effective dialogue take place to resolve conflict, injustice and violence? The principles of IRD serve as the ground rules to achieve a smooth and fruitful dialogue.

What relations gap?

To mention the need to bridge a relations gap between the Catholic Church and the Zimbabwean state presupposes a conflict. But what could be the conflict? In this article, the writer would like to recall the misunderstanding evidenced by the reaction of the Zimbabwean government through its Minister of Information, Publicity and Broadcasting Services, Mrs. Monica Mutsvangwa who emotionally reacted to the Pastoral Letter written by the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC) on 14 August 2020 as the conflict. In their Pastoral Letter, the bishops categorically mention that the nation is in a crisis, yet, the state says there is no crisis. The ZCBC highlights that there is multi-layered crisis convergence of economic corruption, human rights abuses, poverty, food insecurity, collapse of the healthcare system, egoistic economic policies impacting the common good, unresolved Gukurahundi tribal massacre, to mention but a few.⁷ Undeniably, the issues enumerated in this Pastoral Letter did

not augur well with the state. For that reason, it issued a prompt response through the Minister's statement which was characterised by, distasteful language castigating the bishops. Mutsvangwa named and shamed the Catholic bishops. She described the claims of the Pastoral Letter as false and seeking to divide the nation. For the state, the letter is riddled with political undercurrent.⁸ In fact, it seeks to incite the peace-loving citizens to overthrow the government. From the bishops' perspective, they were fulfilling one of their episcopal mandates of being the voice of the voiceless, emancipating those suffering under the yoke of the government – they were executing their prophetic mission. From the Pastoral Letter, one would deduce that the bishops were concerned about human dignity and common good. For the bishops, speaking for human dignity and common good is apolitical and a Gospel tenet. On the contrary, for the state this was demonic, misleading and uncalled for. Ultimately, the bishops highlighted in their letter: "As Bishops we have tried to open an honest dialogue on our health care personnel and the health care institutions and the door was shut in our face".⁹ Therefore, it is evident that there is a conflict of ideas between the Church and the state.

Principles of Interreligious Dialogue Bridging the Relational Gap

First and foremost, to bridge the relations gap presented above, both the state and the Church would need to be aware that a dialogue, as it were, is not a debate. Its primary thrust is not to win the argument nor to change the other. Instead, the object of the dialogue between the parties in question is for them to draw closer to each other and by doing so, they would understand each other better.¹⁰ As such, they need to listen to each other as openly and sympathetically as possible.¹¹ In the light of the first principle that, we engage into a dialogue to learn, grow, and change ourselves, the two parties would need to individually allow themselves to learn and accept that they have different viewpoints with regards to the situation in the country. To elucidate, the state has to accept the Church's view that there is a crisis in the country. Likewise, the Church has to accept the opposing view of the state that there is no crisis. But one would ask: how does this work? Fundamentally, this would proportionally reshape their attitude toward each other and in turn change both partners. In fact,

it is of capital importance for the partners to recognize and celebrate the diversity of views and be willing to accept and respect the differences.¹² By doing so, each partner will be open to the learning process. Certainly, there is a need for receptivity and active communication between the Church and state. Further, the second principle is that the dialogue must be two-sided.¹³ In other words, the dialogue must not only be between the Catholic Church and the Zimbabwean state, but rather, each participant should also dialogue with co-partners. For instance, the Church can dialogue with coreligionists, with fellow Catholics and likewise, the state can enter into dialogue with fellow politicians to share with them the fruits of the dialogue. This affirms the communal nature of dialogue.¹⁴

Third, for the dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Zimbabwean state to be fruitful, honesty and sincerity are critical.¹⁵ It is imperative that each participant enters dialogue with complete honesty and sincerity.¹⁶ Without trust there is no dialogue. If embraced faithfully, this principle would be of great help in creating a conducive platform for an authentic conversation between the Church and the state. This means that both dialogical players must clearly stipulate the direction in which the major and minor thrusts of their ideology move, the future projections, and possible difficulties which a participant may face with regards to one's own ideology.¹⁷ As such, each participant must at least assume that similar honesty and sincerity is adhered to by the other partner thereby promoting openness between the Church and the state. Essentially, the idea is to move towards a more profound interaction in which the Catholic Church and the state are encouraged to honestly reflect on and struggle together over potentially sensitive and provocative matters.¹⁸ Since generally their bone of contention is whether or not there is a crisis in the country, each partner should be accorded a platform to define what constitutes a crisis for them without judging them and their perspective must be respected by others. For example, the state should furnish how the signing of the 1987 Unity Accord resolved the Gukurahundi issue, and in the same manner, the Church should explain why they view the issue as still unresolved. As the fourth principle states, comparison should only be permitted where there are similar ideas. Fifth, an opportunity must be availed to each partner to define who they are, what it means to be an authentic Catholic

Church and to be a state. Only the members of a specific group can define themselves. That is, in dialogue only a state official can define the policies and vision of the state. Similarly, only a Catholic can define the Catholic principles and doctrines.

Sixth, for the Church and the state to engage in a sound dialogue each participant needs to suspend all prejudices and preconceptions, thus, as to where the areas of disagreement lie. In fact, the Church should strive to agree with the state as far as possible without losing its missionary and prophetic nature. Likewise, the state must not merely listen to what the Church is saying but rather, attempt to agree insofar as their integrity is not compromised. However, where either partner absolutely would “agree no further without violating one’s own integrity, precisely there is the real point of disagreement”.¹⁹ As such, this principle would reveal the point of divergence. To clarify, despite that the Church is so much influenced by the Aristotelian and Thomistic tradition that human beings are social and political beings whose autonomous good cannot be separated from the common good, on the contrary, the state might have a different view altogether on this matter.²⁰ Seventh, as the Vatican Council II states: “*par cum pari*” (equal with equal), both the Church and the state must be ready to learn from each other and this would certainly position them equally.²¹ Again, this principle would allow not a one-way dialogue but a collective one.

Eighth, to foster a fruitful dialogue, mutual trust is vital. This suggests that the dialogue between the Church and the state must take into consideration and approach first those issues most likely to provide common ground.²² Given that the bishops in their Pastoral Letter directly pointed to the state difficult problems such as, the unresolved Gukurahundi tribal massacre, state officials’ corruption perpetrated by the ‘catch and release’ system, and human rights abuse, among others, it would be wise to tackle such issues later and not in the beginning of the dialogue. Such an approach would assist in building human trust. Subsequently, as the personal trust gradually deepens and expands, the thornier matters can be undertaken – thus, moving from the known to the unknown.²³ To illustrate, prior to the discussion of the thorny issues the commonly agreed matters or less controversial issues like the collapse

of the healthcare system, care of the corporate or common good, servant leadership, and poverty, may be discussed first.

Nineth, it is of paramount importance in the dialogue process that both the Catholic Church and the state be at least minimally self-critical of themselves and of their own ideas and convictions.²⁴ Above integrity and conviction, each participant has to introspect and make a self-assessment so that each can learn. For instance, the state may need to reflect and evaluate whether or not the set up Special Anti-Corruption Unity and the Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission are effective and independent. A lack of self-criticism suggests that one part has all the correct answers thereby making it difficult or unnecessary or unfeasible to dialogue.²⁵ Undeniably, this principle would assist participants to comprehend not only the other's position, belief and understanding, but their own perspective more intimately. Accordingly, the Church and the state's acknowledgement that they are not all-knowing would permit dialogue, learning and appreciation of the other. Lastly, both parties must attempt to experience the other partner's ideology.²⁶ Above all, the dialogue between the Church and the state should be ethical and value based, which would help each participant to progressively see the possibility of gain in losing previously held misconceptions and biases.²⁷ This means that the Church has to unlearn some misconceptions about the state and vice versa. Ultimately, such an authentic dialogue would help the two participants to explore new areas of reality, meaning, and truth which perhaps neither of them has ever recognised before.²⁸ Therefore, the above principles of dialogue would bridge the relations gap between the Catholic Church and the state.

Critique

Although the principles of IRD would be of great value and assistance in bridging the relations gap between the Catholic Church and the Zimbabwean state, one would wonder to what extent the participants would be faithful to the dialogical process. Specifically, given the two diverse or parallel positions the parties hold, would it be easy to initiate the dialogue in the first place. Indubitably, it can be a mammoth task to initiate a dialogue. The bishops' attempt to dialogue with the state

with regard to the incapacitation of the healthcare system where the door was closed on their face is a typical example. The dialogue became difficult to undertake. As such, should the ZCBC continue trying to call for dialogue with the state? Certainly yes! Persistence pays. Furthermore, given the human tendency of secretiveness, egoistic and self-defence, it would be interesting to note to what extent both parties would trust, be honest, sincere, minimally self-critical, create an equal dialogical environment and have areas of common agreement. Again, there also seems to be a tendency for human beings wanting to convert the other or to convince them, to compare ideas and judge others. It is also incontestable that acceptance and learning of new ideology is not desirable, rather, one would prefer to remain with and safeguard what he or she believes. But, does all these render dialogue useless? Definitely not! Dialogue demands commitment and courage. Therefore, in order to resolve conflict and hate, and bridge the relations gap between the Church and the state, commitment, dedication, devotedness, discipline and courage are vital elements. Above all, the principles of IRD would only be helpful if both parties are authentic in dialoguing.

Conclusion

This article has vividly shown that the principles of interreligious dialogue can actually help bridge a relations gap that exists between the Catholic Church and the state. Nonetheless, all that the parties have to do is to ensure that they enter into dialogue ready to learn, committed, without preconceptions and prejudices. Trust, self-critical, honesty and sincerity are also critical elements in authentic dialogue. The article has also proven that since dialogue is not contention or controversy, there is no need to be defensive or to prove an error in the other participant. Unequivocally, through the educative, informative and personal aspects of the principles of IRD dialogue the relations gap between the Catholic Church and the state would be resolved or narrowed down.

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- ⁵ *Called to Dialogue, Interreligious and Intra-Christian Dialogue in Ecumenical Conversation: A Practical Guide*. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2016.)
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- ⁷ Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference. Pastoral Letter: The March is Not Ended, 1. <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/08/zimbabwe-bishops-pastoral-letter-140820.pdf>. Accessed: 20 October 2020.
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