

CATALYST SUGGESTION SHEET #5

GOOD REASONS FOR CONVERSATION

In recent generations, both within the Church and wider society, there has begun a massive, profound and rapid shift. This is reflected at all levels of our human experience - in our institutions, customs, perceptions of right and wrong, good and evil, our expectations of governance, our attitudes to religion, our appreciation of symbols and rituals and so on. Among other things, amidst this flux, and the opportunities and dangers it offers, we need to remember the value of people and human relationships. We need each other in our struggles to connect with God at work in the world. Good conversation can contribute immeasurably to this.

Pope John XXIII - reading the signs of the times - called for adaptation and renewal. In particular, the Church had to take both the Gospel and the world more seriously. Pope John's new spirit is perhaps nowhere better summed up than in the following words from his speech at the opening of the Second Vatican Council in October 1962:

"At the outset of the Second Vatican Council, it is evident as always, that the truth of the Lord will remain forever. We see, in fact, as one age succeeds another, that the opinions of people follow one another and exclude each other. And often errors vanish as quickly as they arise, like fog before the sun. The Church has always opposed these errors. Frequently she has condemned them with the greatest severity. Nowadays, however, the Spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than that of severity. She considers that she meets the needs of the present day by demonstrating the validity of her teaching rather than by condemnations. Even more important, experience has taught people that violence inflicted on others, the might of arms, and political domination, are of no help at all in finding a happy solution to the grave problems which afflict them."

Pope Paul VI picked up on that same spirit in his first encyclical - *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964) (sometimes referred to in English as *Paths of the Church*) - some eighteen months before the final session of the Council. Pope Paul focused most particularly on the need for dialogue. (NOTE: When you read the texts from Pope Paul below, you will see that the word "dialogue" has a much broader meaning than that usually implied by the word "conversation". For example, in the first reference below (*Ecclesiam Suam*, n.64), "dialogue" seems to be another word for apostolic outreach, any movement to engage the world with a view to proclaiming the Good News. More frequently, however, the word "dialogue," as used in Pope Paul's document as well as other documents from Rome, means "conversation". It is that more common sense that we wish to highlight in this reflection, noting the rich spirituality that it implies.)

The word "dialogue" is used more than one thousand times in the Vatican Documents and subsequent Church documents from Rome. It clearly indicates that Pope Paul's focus on dialogue or conversation has been accepted as a central feature of the Church's thinking and vision. Is it any wonder? When we start to reflect on the nature and implications of dialogue and conversation, it not only throws us up against human nature and its yearning for connection and loving relationship, it also reminds us of the nature of God, the eternal loving relationships of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Trinitarian conversation.

Dialogue and conversation point to the heart of our humanity as well as the heart of our faith. When we enter on the path of genuine dialogue and conversation we are moving more deeply towards our nature as human beings baptized into Christ, members of the Mystical Body. There is, potentially, a rich spirituality in human conversation. The pastoral instruction on the uses of the modern means of communication (*Communio et Progressio* (1971)) puts it nicely: "Communication is more than the expression of ideas and the indication of emotion. At its most profound level it is the giving of self in love" (n.11).

Dialogue and conversation are about connecting with others in a joint pursuit of truth and goodness. They require, among other qualities, trust, magnanimity, commitment, care, respect, willingness and ability to listen, honesty, humility and patience. Dialogue and conversation may be pursued in different ways: formal, structured negotiations, debates and discussions; informal shared conversations about Scripture, theology, renewal and aspects of the spiritual life; more ad hoc

conversations about the things that matter to us; conversations such as we have at Spirituality in the Pub or the Catalyst Dinners, and so on. Dialogue and conversation are obstructed when people are combative, engage in win-lose interactions, are aggressive, will not listen, show little or no respect for others, are bombastic, ideological or dogmatic and so on.

The baptized believe this dialogue or conversation has its roots in the life of God - the Trinity of Persons in an eternal and loving conversation. Our human existence is produced by that eternal conversation of love, we reflect it and feel it in our beings. We are relational beings, like God. We are urged by our divine roots, by our nature, to relate well with - that is, love - others. We do not do this automatically or even easily. We must choose to facilitate it and give ourselves generously to the task that is at times extremely trying. In the end loving relationships emerge as grace, as pure gift, amidst our generous efforts and hard work. Good conversation, likewise, emerges as grace. And grace is no more nor less than the presence of God. Where grace is, there is transformation. Good conversation is transforming.

The following references to Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* give some indication of the roots, meaning and implications of the dialogue and conversation spoken of above. These references also give some indication of the central role of dialogue and conversation in Pope Paul's vision for the Council and the Church in the years ahead:

1. The nature of the dialogue and the responsibility of all the baptized: "An attitude of preservation of the faith is insufficient. Certainly we must preserve and also defend the treasure of truth and of grace which has come to us by way of inheritance from the Christian tradition. 'Keep safe what has been entrusted to thee,' warns St. Paul. But neither the preservation nor the defence of the faith exhausts the duty of the Church in regard to the gifts which it possesses. The duty consonant with the patrimony received from Christ is that of spreading, offering, announcing it to others. Well do we know that 'going, therefore, make disciples of all nations' is the last command of Christ to His Apostles. By the very term 'apostles' these men define their inescapable mission. To this internal drive of charity which tends to become the external gift of charity we will give the name of dialogue, which has in these days come into common usage." (*Ecclesiam Suam* n.64) (Emphasis added.)
2. The origins and universality of the dialogue: "The fatherly and holy conversation between God and humanity, interrupted by original sin, has been marvellously resumed in the course of history. The history of salvation narrates exactly this long and changing dialogue which begins with God and brings to humanity a many-splendoured conversation. It is in this conversation of Christ among us that God allows us to understand something of Himself, the mystery of His life, unique in its essence, Trinitarian in its persons; and He tells us finally how He wishes to be known; He is Love; and how He wishes to be honoured and served by us: Love is our supreme commandment. The dialogue thus takes on full meaning and offers grounds for confidence. The child is invited to it; the mystic finds a full outlet in it." (*Ecclesiam Suam* n.70)
3. Dialogue implies a special kind of relationship: "This type of relationship indicates a proposal of courteous esteem, of understanding and of goodness on the part of the one who inaugurates the dialogue; it excludes the a priori condemnation, the offensive and time-worn polemic and emptiness of useless conversation." (*Ecclesiam Suam* n.79)
4. Speaking specifically to priests a message that should be taken up by all the baptized: "And before speaking, it is necessary to listen, not only to people's voices, but to their hearts. People must first be understood - and, where they merit it, agreed with. In the very act of trying to make ourselves pastors, fathers and teachers of people, we must make ourselves their brothers. The spirit of dialogue is friendship and, even more, is service. All this we must remember and strive to put into practice according to the example and commandment that Christ left to us." (*Ecclesiam Suam*, n.87)
5. In general, of the way the Church must engage the world: "The dialogue is not proud, it is not bitter, it is not offensive. Its authority is intrinsic to the truth it explains, to the charity it communicates, to the example it proposes; it is not a command, it is not an imposition. It is peaceful; it avoids violent methods; it is patient; it is generous. Trust, not only in the power of one's words, but also in an attitude of welcoming the trust of the interlocutor. Trust promotes confidence and friendship. It binds hearts in mutual adherence to the good which excludes all self-seeking. In the dialogue, conducted in this manner, the union of truth and charity, of understanding and love is

achieved. In the dialogue one discovers how different are the ways which lead to the light of faith, and how it is possible to make them converge on the same goal. Even if these ways are divergent, they can become complementary by forcing our reasoning process out of the worn paths and by obliging it to deepen its research, to find fresh expressions. The dialectic of this exercise of thought and of patience will make us discover elements of truth also in the opinions of others, it will force us to express our teaching with great fairness, and it will reward us for the work of having explained it in accordance with the objections of another or despite that other's slow assimilation of our teaching. The dialogue will make us wise; it will make us teachers. Many, indeed, are the forms that the dialogue of salvation can take. It adapts itself to the needs of a concrete situation, it chooses the appropriate means, it does not bind itself to ineffectual theories and does not cling to hard and fast forms when these have lost their power to speak to people and move them." (Ecclesiam Suam, nos. 81-85)

7. Dialogue with members of other Christian traditions: The principle that we are happy to make our own is this: Let us stress what we have in common rather than what divides us. (Ecclesiam Suam n.109)

6. Dialogue within the Church: "It is our ardent desire that this conversation with our own children should be full of faith, of charity, of good works, should be intimate and familiar. We would have it responsive to all truth and virtue and to all the realities of our doctrinal and spiritual inheritance. Sincere and sensitive in genuine spirituality, ever ready to give ear to the manifold voice of the contemporary world, ever more capable of making Catholics truly good men and women, men and women wise, free, serene and strong; that is what we earnestly desire our family conversation to be." (Ecclesiam Suam n.113)

One of the last documents of the Second Vatican Council - The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (November 1965) - indicates in one brief paragraph just how deeply this desire for dialogue and conversation was operating within the Council: "For the cultivation of good human relations, truly human values must be fostered, especially the art of living fraternally with others, cooperating with them, and initiating conversation with them." (n.29)

SUGGESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Form a small group to reflect on the contents of this and other Catalyst Suggestion Sheets.

In reference #1 above, Pope Paul VI offers a description of "dialogue". What do you think he means?

In what sense can we say dialogue or conversation is "Trinitarian"?

What can it mean to say that human beings are relational by nature?

What are the biggest obstacles to good conversation?

What assists good conversation?

What might Pope Paul mean by "offensive and time-worn polemic and emptiness of useless conversation"? (#3 above)

Does conversation play a significant part in your life? Why?

What does it mean to listen to another's "heart"? (#4 above)

What are the implications for you of the thoughts expressing reference #6 above?

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