

Synodality and conversation

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Martin Buber (1878-1965)

My thinking has been influenced by the writings of Martin Buber. He wrote:

“A time of genuine religious conversations is beginning—not those so-called but fictitious conversations where none regarded and addressed his partner in reality, but genuine dialogues, speech from certainty to certainty, but also from one openhearted person to another openhearted person. Only then will genuine common life appear, not that of an identical content of faith which is alleged to be found in all religions, but that of the situation, of anguish and of expectation” (Martin Buber, Introduction to *Between Man and Man*, London: Collins, 1947/1961, 24).

◆ “Each of us is encased in an armour which we soon, out of familiarity, no longer notice. There are only moments which penetrate it and stir the soul to sensibility. And when such a moment has imposed itself on us and we then take notice and ask ourselves, ‘Has anything particular taken place? Was it not of the kind I meet everyday?’ then we may reply to ourselves, ‘Nothing particular, indeed, it is like this every day, only we are not there every day’” (Martin Buber, Introduction to *Between Man and Man*, London: Collins, 1947/1961, 28).

◆ “I have occasionally described my standpoint to my friends as the ‘narrow ridge’. I wanted by this to express that I did not rest upon the broad upland of a system that includes a series of sure statements about the absolute, but on a narrow rocky ridge between the gulfs where there is no sureness of expressible knowledge but the certainty of meeting what remains undisclosed” (Martin Buber, Introduction to *Between Man and Man*, London: Collins, 1947/1961, 223).

◆ Maurice Friedman reflecting on Martin Buber: “Dialogue is not merely the interchange of words—genuine dialogue can take place in silence, whereas much conversation is really monologue. It is rather the response of one’s whole being to the otherness of the other, that otherness that is comprehended only when I open myself to him in the present and in the concrete situation and respond to his need even when he himself is not aware that he is addressing me” (Martin Buber, Introduction to *Between Man and Man*, Routledge Classics, Taylor and Francis, Kindle Edition).

◆ “For a conversation no sound is necessary” (Maurice Friedman, op cit, page 3)

John O’Malley SJ and the Second Vatican Council (1962 – 1965)

John O’Malley SJ, describes the Second Vatican Council as “a language event” (John O’Malley SJ, *What Happened at Vatican II*, Cambridge, MASS: The Belknap Press, 2008, 12).

◆ “(C)an we go deeper (than the ‘upfront issues’)? Are there issues under these issues, issues of which these were a surface manifestation? I believe there were at least three: (1) the circumstances under which change in the church is appropriate and the arguments with which it can be justified; (2) the relationship in the church of center to periphery, or, put more concretely, how authority is properly distributed between the papacy, including the Congregations (departments or bureaus) of the Vatican Curia, and the rest of the church; and (3) the style or model according to which that authority should be exercised. These issues are a key to understanding Vatican II” (Op cit, 8).

It is the third underlying issue that concerns us here. O’Malley says of that issue:

◆ “No matter where authority in the church is located, in what manner is it to be wielded? That is a third issue-under-the-issues, suggested by the word “charism.” Here the council becomes more explicit by introducing a new vocabulary and literary form. Words like “charism,” “dialogue,” “partnership,” “cooperation,” and “friendship” indicate a new style for the exercise of authority and implicitly advocate a conversion to a new style of thinking, speaking, and behaving, a change from a more authoritarian and unidirectional style to a more reciprocal and responsive model. This change effected a redefinition of what councils are and what they are supposed to accomplish. Vatican II so radically modified the legislative and judicial model that had prevailed since the first council, Nicaea, in 325, that it virtually abandoned it. In its place Vatican II put a model largely based on persuasion and invitation.

“This was a momentous shift. If this third issue is so explicit in the special vocabulary of the council, how can it be an issue under the issues, which would imply hidden from view? Like Edgar Allen Poe’s ‘Purloined Letter,’ it is hidden in plain sight. It is so obvious that little attention had been paid to it except by vague references to the council’s ‘pastoral language.’ I believe, however, that this is the issue captured by the expression ‘the spirit of the council,’ that is, an orientation that goes beyond specific enactments (Op cit, 11).

◆ “The language indicated and induced a shift in values or priorities. To that extent it indicated and induced an inner conversion, which is the most profound aspect of this third issue-under-the-issues in Vatican II. (Emphasis added.) This conversion found outward expression in a certain style of behavior especially incumbent upon church leaders. The council’s language-choice largely explains why “the call to holiness” emerged as such a strong and pervasive theme at the council and is one of its most distinctive marks.”

There is a change of mind and heart – *metanoia* – that enables the new way of speaking. And the new way of speaking – at least potentially – enables *metanoia*.

Pope Paul VI

Pope Paul VI’s first encyclical – *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964) – is dedicated to the promotion of *colloquium*. This is very much in tune with the emerging “spirit of the Council”.¹ Its emphasis on *colloquium salutis* offers an especially good theological context for understanding conversation.

However, it is puzzling to me that the Latin word repeatedly used in the encyclical – more than 50 times in fact – is *colloquium*, which, in ecclesiastical Latin, is the standard word for “conversation”. (See Leo F Stelton, *Dictionary of Ecclesiastical Latin*, Peabody, MASS: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997.) The Latin word *dialogus* – which may be translated as either “dialogue” or “conversation” – is not used in the encyclical. The English word “conversation” has common currency and a rich etymology, being linked with our word “conversion”. In terms of *essential meaning*, the words are interchangeable.

◆ “Thus we meet what has been termed the problem of the dialogue between the Church and the modern world. ... its existence and its urgency are such as to create a burden on our soul, a stimulus, a vocation, one might term it, which we would wish, both our self and you, brothers and sisters, who are surely not less experienced than we in this apostolic anguish, to clarify in some way in order to prepare ourselves somehow for the discussions and deliberations which we shall try, together in the Council, to outline in our treatment of a matter so weighty and complex” (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 14).

¹ When Pope VI addressed the Fathers of the Council at the Opening of the Second Session, 19 September 1963, he said the key for relating to the present age is dialogue – see Alberto Melloni, “The Beginning of the Second Period: The Great Debate on the Church” in Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A Komonchak, editors, *History of Vatican II, Volume III, Orbis*, 2000, 36).

◆ “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-splendored 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* 70).

◆ “We need to keep ever present this ineffable, yet real relationship of the dialogue, which God the Father, through Christ in the Holy Spirit, has offered to us and established with us, if we are to understand the relationship which we, ie the Church, should strive to establish and to foster with the human race” (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 71).

◆ “The dialogue of salvation was opened spontaneously on the initiative of God: "He (God) loved us first;"(1John 4:10) it will be up to us to take the initiative in extending to men this same dialogue, without waiting to be summoned to it” (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 72).

◆ “The dialogue of salvation began with charity, with the divine goodness: ‘God so loved the world as to give His only-begotten Son;’ (John 3:16) nothing but fervent and unselfish love should motivate our dialogue” (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 73).

◆ “The dialogue of salvation was not proportioned to the merits of those toward whom it was directed, nor to the results which it would achieve or fail to achieve: "Those who are healthy need no physician;" (Luke 5:31) so also our own dialogue ought to be without limits or ulterior motives” (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 74).

◆ “The dialogue of salvation did not physically force anyone to accept it; it was a tremendous appeal of love which, although placing a vast responsibility on those toward whom it was directed, (cf Matthew 11:21) nevertheless left them free to respond to it or to reject it. Even the number of miracles (cf Matthew 12:38ff) and their demonstrative power (cf Matthew 13:13ff) were adapted to the spiritual needs and dispositions of the recipients, in order that their free consent to the divine revelation might be facilitated, without, however, their losing the merit involved in such a consent. So, too, although our own mission is the announcement of the truth which is both indisputable and necessary for salvation, that mission will not be

introduced in the armor of external force, but simply through the legitimate means of human education, of interior persuasion, of ordinary conversation, and it will offer its gift of salvation with full respect for personal and civic freedom” (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 75).

◆ “The dialogue of salvation was made accessible to all; it was destined for all without distinction; (cf Colossians 3:11) in like manner our own dialogue should be potentially universal, ie all-embracing and capable of including all, excepting only one who would either absolutely reject it or insincerely pretend to accept it” (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 76).

◆ “The dialogue of salvation normally experienced a gradual development, successive advances, humble beginnings before complete success. (cf Matthew 13:31) Ours, too, will take cognizance of the slowness of psychological and historical maturation and of the need to wait for the hour when God may make our dialogue effective. Not for this reason will our dialogue postpone till tomorrow what it can accomplish today; it ought to be eager for the opportune moment; it ought to sense the preciousness of time. (cf Ephesians 4:16) Today, ie every day, our dialogue should begin again; we, rather than those toward whom it is directed, should take the initiative” (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 77).

◆ “The conversation 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 conversation, conducted in this manner, the union of truth and charity, of understanding and love is achieved” (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 81-82).

◆ “Before speaking, it is necessary to listen, not only to the other's voice, but to the other’s heart. People must first be understood – and, where they merit it, agreed with. In the very act of trying to make ourselves pastors, fathers, mothers and teachers of all, we must make ourselves their brothers and sisters. 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 (Cf. John 13: 14-17)” (*Ecclesiam Suam*,87)

Pope John Paul II

◆ “Paul VI selected this present-day consciousness of the Church as the first theme in his fundamental encyclical beginning with the words *Ecclesiam Suam*. Let me refer

first of all to this encyclical and link myself with it in this first document that, so to speak, inaugurates the present pontificate. The Church's consciousness, enlightened and supported by the Holy Spirit and fathoming more and more deeply both her divine mystery and her human mission, and even her human weaknesses – this consciousness is and must remain the first source of the Church's love, as love in turn helps to strengthen and deepen her consciousness. Paul VI left us a witness of such an extremely acute consciousness of the Church. Through the many things, often causing suffering, that went to make up his pontificate he taught us intrepid love for the Church, which is, as the Council states, a "sacrament or sign and means of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind" (*Lumen Gentium* 1)" (*Redemptor Hominis*, (1979) 3). (*NOTE: In this his first encyclical, Pope John Paul aligns himself with the program of the Second Vatican Council and, perhaps even more significantly, quite explicitly aligns himself with the call to colloquium set out by Pope Paul VI in Ecclesiam Suam.*)

◆ “To make the Church the home and the school of communion: that is the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning, if we wish to be faithful to God's plan and respond to the world's deepest yearnings. But what does this mean in practice? Here too, our thoughts could run immediately to the action to be undertaken, but that would not be the right impulse to follow. Before making practical plans, we need to promote a spirituality of communion, making it the guiding principle of education wherever individuals and Christians are formed, wherever ministers of the altar, consecrated persons, and pastoral workers are trained, wherever families and communities are being built up. A spirituality of communion indicates above all the heart's contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us. A spirituality of communion also means an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body, and therefore as "those who are a part of me". This makes us able to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship. A spirituality of communion implies also the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God: not only as a gift for the brother or sister who has received it directly, but also as a "gift for me". A spirituality of communion means, finally, to know how to "make room" for our brothers and sisters, bearing "each other's burdens" (Gal 6:2) and resisting the selfish temptations which constantly beset us and provoke competition, careerism, distrust and jealousy. Let us have no illusions: unless we follow this spiritual path, external structures of communion will serve very little purpose. They would become

mechanisms without a soul, "masks" of communion rather than its means of expression and growth" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte* (2001) 43).

◆ "Consequently, the new century will have to see us more than ever intent on valuing and developing the forums and structures which, in accordance with the Second Vatican Council's major directives, serve to ensure and safeguard communion" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte* (2001) 44).

Pope Benedict XVI

◆ “‘God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them’. (1 Jn 4:16). These words from the First Letter of John express with remarkable clarity the heart of the Christian faith: the Christian image of God and the resulting image of humankind and its destiny. In the same verse, Saint John also offers a kind of summary of the Christian life: ‘We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us’. We have come to believe in God's love: in these words the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his or her life. Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (*Deus caritas est* (December 25, 2005)).

◆ “If God is a dialogical unity [referring to the Trinity], a being in relation, the human creature made in his image and likeness reflects this constitution: thus he is called to fulfil himself in dialogue, in conversation, in encounter” (Pope Benedict XVI, Homily for Trinity Sunday (2008)).

Pope Francis

◆ “One of the titles of the Bishop of Rome is Pontiff, that is, a builder of bridges with God and between people. My wish is that the dialogue between us should help to build bridges connecting all people, in such a way that everyone can see in the other not an enemy, not a rival, but a brother or sister to be welcomed and embraced! My own origins impel me to work for the building of bridges. As you know, my family is of Italian origin; and so this dialogue between places and cultures a great distance apart matters greatly to me, this dialogue between one end of the world and the other, which today are growing ever closer, more interdependent, more in need of opportunities to meet and to create real spaces of authentic fraternity” (Pope Francis Audience with the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See, Friday, 22 March 2013).

Miscellaneous

◆ “In human societies there will always be differences of views and interests. But the reality today is that we are all interdependent and have to coexist on this small planet. Therefore, the only sensible and intelligent way of resolving differences and clashes of interests, whether between individuals or nations, is through dialogue. The promotion of a culture of dialogue and nonviolence for the future of mankind is thus an important task of the international community.” (Dalai Lama, Speech to the "Forum 2000" Conference, Prague, 4 September 1997)

◆ “We exist solely for this, to be the place He has chosen for His presence, His manifestation in the world, His epiphany.” (“A Letter on the Contemplative Life” in

Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master – The Essential Writings, edited by Lawrence S Cunningham, Paulist Press, 1992, 425. Merton wrote this letter on August 21 1967.)

◆ “The deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are” (Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, New Directions, 1975, 308.) [NOTE: This is the last paragraph of a brief and informal talk delivered at Calcutta in October 1968.]

◆ Thomas Merton wrote some notes for a paper – “Monastic Experience and East-West Dialogue” – which was to have been delivered in Calcutta in October 1968. He is writing here of the kind of communication that a monk can participate in. It has reference beyond the world of monks: “He must be wide open to life and to new experience because he has fully utilized his own tradition and gone beyond it. This will permit him to meet a discipline of another, apparently remote and alien tradition, and find a common ground of verbal understanding with him. The ‘postverbal’ level will then, at least ideally, be that on which they both meet beyond their own words and their own understanding in the silence of an ultimate experience which might conceivably not have occurred if they had not met and spoken.

“This I would call ‘communion.’ I think it is something that the deepest ground of our being cries out for, and it is something for which a lifetime of striving would not be enough” (Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, New Directions, 1975, 315-16). [NOTE: Merton goes on to note that one of the essential requirements for this ‘communion’ is that we get beyond “interminable empty talk, the endlessly fruitless and trivial discussion of everything under the sun, the inexhaustible chatter with which modern man tries to convince himself that he is in touch with his fellow man and with reality” (ibid).]

◆ (Tim Costello) used (‘the politics of grace’) to describe the relationship with his brother, whereby the two men disagree on many issues but maintain a dialogue. He used it to describe his conversion to the merits of at least some aspects of a goods and services tax. Costello asks: ‘Can the politics of tribe yield to the politics of grace – politics in which people are free to speak their convictions, and at times to be strongly disagreed with, but without fear of intimidation. Tribal politics demand that you are either for us or against us. If you’re not one of us then we’ll cut you off. It’s epitomised in the way Hansonism demarks the white tribe off from Aborigines,

newly-arrived immigrants and single mothers. The politics of grace includes the belief that we can be a diverse but inclusive family, that while we may often disagree, we will always keep the conversation going” (Tony Stephens, “Reconciliation Revisited”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, January 16, 1999, 34).

◆ “We say that we ‘conduct’ a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a genuine conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led. No one knows in advance what will ‘come out’ of a conversation. Understanding or its failure is like an event that happens to us. Thus we can say that something was a good conversation or that it was ill fated. All this shows that a conversation has a spirit of its own, and that the language in which it is conducted bears its own truth within it – ie that it allows something to ‘emerge’ which henceforth exists” (Hans-Georg Gadamer *Truth and Method (Second Revised Edition)*, trans revised by Joel Weisheimer and Donald G Marshall, Crossroad, 1989, 383).

◆ “The art of dialectic is not the art of being able to win every argument. On the contrary it is possible that someone practicing the art of dialectic – ie the art of questioning and of seeking truth – comes off worse in the argument in the eyes of those listening to it. As the art of asking questions, dialectic proves its value because only the person who knows how to ask questions is able to persist in his questioning which involves being able to persevere in his orientation toward openness. The art of questioning is the art of questioning ever further – ie the art of thinking. It is called dialectic because it is the art of conducting a real dialogue” (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method (Second Revised Edition)*, trans revised by Joel Weisheimer and Donald G Marshall, Crossroad, 1989, 367).

◆ “The individual thinker may also recognise that hermeneutical understanding can be understood on the model of authentic conversation. Yet, what is authentic conversation as distinct from idle chatter, mere debate, gossip or non-negotiable confrontation? As the classical model for conversation in the Western tradition, the Platonic dialogue, makes clear, real conversation occurs only when the individual conversation partners move past self-consciousness and self-aggrandizement into joint reflection upon the subject matter of the conversation. The back-and-forth movement of all genuine conversation (an ability to listen, to reflect, to correct, to

speak to the point – the ability, in sum, to allow the question to take over) is an experience which all reflective persons have felt. Authentic conversation is a relatively rare experience, even for Socrates! Yet, when conversation actually occurs – in a chance meeting, a discussion with friends and colleagues, a particular seminar session – it is unmistakable. (David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, Crossroad, 1981, 100-101)

◆ “Talking happens a lot. It is often monologue. Conversation is rarer, by far. It is always dialogue. No one takes leave of a real conversation the same as when one entered into it. Our conversations create us. Conversation and risk and conversion belong together. Conversation is dangerous, therefore to anyone unwilling to embrace or at least to accept transformation” (Michael A Cowan and Bernard J lee SM, *Conversation, Risk and Conversion: The Inner and Public Life of Small Christian Communities*, Orbis Books, 1997, 1).

◆ “Suppose we were able to share meanings freely without a compulsive urge to impose our view or to conform to those of others and without distortion and self-deception. Would this not constitute a real revolution in culture?” (David Bohm, *Changing Consciousness*.)

◆ (David Bohm writes in his book *On Dialogue*: “Our purpose is really to communicate coherently in truth” ((p. 17). Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition).

◆ “We are here to counsel with each other. We must build spiritual and scientific bridges linking the nations of the world.” (Albert Einstein, 1947.)

◆ “Simple and friendly conversation about spiritual topics, with individuals or groups, was one of the chief means of apostolic ministry employed by St Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) and his companions who joined him in founding the Society of Jesus; and this procedure penetrated and undergirded all the other more visible activities to which the success of these first Jesuits is often attributed, such as preaching in crowds, giving the Spiritual Exercises, or organising men and institutions” (Editor’s Foreword to Thomas Clancy, *The Conversational Word of God*, The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978).

◆ “Human personhood creates and relies upon conversation and communication. Our own individuality develops as we prove willing to listen not to ourselves but to others, who address their words to us and ask us to respond with our own words. This mystery of self-identity affirmed through self-forgetfulness and relationship is one that many human beings can explore and experience. But it is the particular

presumption of faith that fullness of life and personhood depends not only on encountering and hearing other men and women, but on being addressed by God. And that entails the conviction that the God who is there, and who needs to be heard if we are to be truly human, does *address* us, uses words, is a sort of ‘speaker’ and thus a kind of ‘person’ too – perhaps *the* person par excellence, *more* truly personal than we are” (Alan Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday*, William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001, 18).

◆ “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 people, people wise, free, serene and strong; that is what we earnestly desire our family conversation to be” (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 113).