

From Fortress of Certitude to Field Hospital

Interreligious dialogue in parish life

By TERESA R. ALBRIGHT

One benefit of modern globalization is an increased encounter with diversity in daily life. Sadly, a visible rise in divisive rhetoric accompanies this pluralism. Parishes are not immune. The generalized rhetoric regarding science and secularism, for example, has made this Gen X wife of a scientist squirm in her pew more than once. But, while parishes stand guard against perceived relativism, differing political views are dividing families. Racial tension is breeding murderous hate, indifference and generational trauma; and the stranger fleeing tyranny is turned away at our doorstep.

Now is the time for the church on defense to become the church in dialogue. Now is the time for parishes to emerge from fortresses of certitude and become field hospitals. Now is the time for parishes to help heal the wounds of division and embrace the call to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. This year Catholics and Protestants commemorate the Reformation's 500th anniversary with a shared spirit of joy and reconciliation only made possible by fifty years of dialogue following the Second Vatican Council. This dialogue is a sign of a unity hoped for in Jesus' prayer (John 17:20-21).

Citing an earlier document, the Pontifical Council on Interreligious Dialogue reiterates that the evangelizing mission of the church is a "single but complex and articulated reality" with several principle elements. In its reflection titled "Dialogue and Proclamation" the council gives two of these elements further consideration and affirms that they are equally important, but not interchangeable. And yet, the mindset of the new evangelization expressed in many U.S. parishes has placed proclamation at the center of parish life and even taken a defensive posture, trading catechesis for apologetics.

In an era of walls, what if parishes became bridges? Imagine what would have been possible had church leaders accepted Martin Luther's request for dialogue. Can you imagine? I believe that ecumenical / interreligious dialogue is the necessary next phase of the new evangelization.

After fifteen years participating in interreligious dialogue I am more fully engaged with my Catholic faith and communities. Studying with learned Jews broke open Scripture to me. With help from patient Buddhists, meditation deepened my restless prayer life and taught me how to be still and know God. Hospitable Hindus sharing vibrant images and stories of the divine gave me insight into the Holy Trinity and the human soul. Faith-filled Muslims challenged me with a trust in God characterized by surrender. And though Protestant partners confided a lament for Catholic ritual, their services gave me profound experiences of what it means to worship in the name of Jesus Christ.

Dialogue has flourished in academia but is largely absent from parishes. I once asked the archbishop of the most diverse U.S. city how we can get parishes more involved in dialogue. Like a good pastor, he challenged me the way I challenge discontented parishioners in my ministries. He said, “I encourage and give my support to any parish wishing to engage in ecumenical / interreligious dialogue.” So, let us become a counter-cultural church in this divided world and make dialogue central to parish life. Here are a few guiding principles I suggest:

- ❖ Enter dialogue with one agenda item — friendship. With no stated goals, my parish paired with a synagogue and together we took a chance on one another. Grace and healing abounded. TM
- ❖ Be not afraid. Dialogue is like crossing a rushing river. Are there dangers? Yes. The passage to unity can swallow us up or purify us. Remember that Scripture and tradition are our stepping stones. But, do not confuse the stone with the step, nor religion with faith.
- ❖ Step into the mystery of Oneness. Dialogue partners share an interior restlessness for a yet undefined unity. Therefore, cling to faith. Without faith, dialogue dissolves into defensive debate or spirals into apologetic soliloquy. We keep our balance with the calm of prayer and stabilizing hand of the parish community.
- ❖ Fear and shame are not of God. Do not abandon parishioners who fear the unknown nor shame those who cannot see dialogue’s relevance. Remind parishioners that Mary would be the first to invite strangers into her home so they could meet her son.
- ❖ The Christian in dialogue has one mission — becoming the face of Christ to the “other.” We “put on Christ” most fully when we participate in the life of the other; celebrating with them in joyful times, suffering alongside them in sorrowful times. I am reminded of a friendship with a Kansas City synagogue that began my lifelong commitment to dialogue. As a new college graduate I worked alongside, ate, studied, laughed and lived the liturgical year with the synagogue community. The congregants could have

suspected my motives, but instead welcomed me into their home. No longer the “other,” they became part of me, and I, part of them. Years later, on the eve of Passover 2014 a white supremacist killed three people at the Jewish Community Center and Village Shalom retirement home in Kansas City. Separated by years and miles, that Passover I wept with my beloved friends and longed to be free from the slavery of “us and them.

Teresa R. Albright is a religious educator, writer and homemaker living in Kansas City, Mo. She has served on diocesan Commissions for Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations in Houston-Galveston and now Kansas City-St. Joseph. She is a lay associate of the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion (NDS)

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