



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

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In the October of 1965 The Second Vatican Council issued a little referred to document upon which all subsequent inter –faith relationships have been predicated. *Nostra Aetate*, born of the heady hopefulness of that extraordinary and revolutionary period, laid charges against the walls of the defences of Christendom’s historic self-understanding and sought to find a way forward in dialogue, born of understanding and well-intentioned, if naive, hope.

The starting point was a desire, to quote the text ‘as people drew closer together and bonds of friendship are being strengthened’, to revise the hitherto and judgemental dismissal of other faiths. Thus we were encouraged to see in Hinduism – not the pantheism of paganism but an exploration of the divine mystery in the ‘limitless riches of myth and accurately designed insights of philosophy’. In Buddhism, a way of life ‘by which people can, with confidence and trust’ attain a state of ‘perfect liberation and supreme illumination through their own efforts or with divine help’. Islam is highly praised for its submission to God, prayer life, honouring of Mary and ‘end – time’ teachings. Pausing only to note that Jesus is a prophet not God in Mohammed’s scheme of things, His superiority now relegated below that of the founder of Islam.

For our Jewish neighbours there is the beginning of a recognition that we are of the same stock and a beginning of the process of unwinding the

historic prejudice and persecution which had so often stained the history of Christendom.

Dialogue is henceforth encouraged. Understanding sought. Unarguable virtue. The rub comes in a little throwaway line in which *Nostra Aetate* urges us to ‘forget the past’. This is almost always unwise counsel. We may ask God to redeem it but not to pretend it never happened. We do not start with a *tabula rasa*, a blank sheet. We live with our history and, while it is good that we should disavow the malign wish to murder each other’s sons, we should never confuse forgiveness with forgetfulness, nor romanticism with realism.

Nostra Aetate, in a few short pages, is in danger of removing the urgency of evangelism. If Christianity is simply ‘a better way’, more fulfilled, then we might ask ourselves by what right we should seek to disrupt the cultural patterns of millennia and seek conversions from the other Faiths – something Judaism has always rejected and Islam has seen as its inalienable mission.

In the half century since its publication, little progress has been made with the dialogue with the pantheism of Hinduism or the fundamental atheism of Buddhism. Unsurprisingly. Indeed the rise of Hindu nationalism has made life very uncomfortable for the native Christian communities.

The Jews were considerably encouraged by the work of St. John Paul II, a man who had seen Jew-hatred first hand in wartime Poland, and his affectionate appellation of them as ‘elder brothers in the faith’.

Trickier was his 1999 apparent act of kissing the Koran – as an act of respect – thereby giving credence to a work that fundamentally denies the divinity of Christ and militates against the Faith. This has been compounded by the recent initiative of the present Pope in the Abu Dhabi accord in which, with the Grand Imam, the Pope agrees that the diversity of religions is willed by God.

This is clearly problematical on all sorts of levels and, as usual, no clarification has been forthcoming. Why does it matter? Why can't we just rub along with things as they are? That would, at least temporarily, be more comfortable.

Well, there are two reasons. One is the practical reality. Such a view emasculates the mission and pretends that Islam is similarly minded to 'draw stumps' on its fundamental purpose of submitting all the world to its prophet. But primarily because of today, the Feast of the Holy Trinity. Christian understanding is always puzzling to our fellow monotheists. We believe in one God but appear to have three. If we could just cut our losses and jettison the difficult bits about the divinity of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, then a natural ecumenism would result. No? Happily we do not have such an option. Because our whole understanding of God rests on the revelation of this divine mystery. We do not follow a Faith which is delineated by racial solidarity nor tribal law. We are not subject to a distant god whose weapons are but judgement and fear. We preach a God who is relational. Law and belonging and judgement are not absent BUT they are ever in the context of the loving purposes of God. This God does not sit above the Heavens waiting for Man to slip and fall into the eternal abyss. He incarnates in His Son, Jesus Christ. He shares the burden of our humanity, yet without sin. He undergoes the humiliation of the Cross and the human encounter with death. Raised up from this He takes our full redeemed, death free, sin destroyed humanity into Heaven. From thence He sends the Holy Spirit that we might ever know and be aided by the Presencer, the power by the Word of the Father that brought all things into being, who overshadowed Our Lady and opened the portal of Heaven, who brings Christ present to the altars of Christendom in the Mass. Herein lies the huge and not so secret difference. In the mystery of the Trinity, Man's hope lies, not in some tolerance of our mortality in a better place but in the Apotheosis of Man

in Christ. As God has become Man in Christ so, in Christ, risen ascended , glorified, Man is lifted into the divine.

His place in the eternity of God assured by this co-inherence.

Jesus commanded his disciples to go out and baptise in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. This was not intended as some theological assault course for the finest minds to wrestle over evermore but the final statement of the revelation of the divine reality in which we live and move and have our being and to which all men are called. It is both the highest doctrine of God and the highest doctrine of Man. It is why we preface all we pray with this transcendent proclamation of the Glorious and Most Holy Trinity. It is the non-negotiable context of the ultimate reality and the reason for our ministry and our mission.