

Joe ANTONYDOSS, SVD

MISSIO DEI AS DIALOGUE - INSPIRED BY RELIGIONS



INTRODUCTION

Missio Dei, first and foremost, refers to God and His Mission. Georg Vicedom in his book *The Mission of God* rightly says, “the mission is work that ultimately belongs to God and this

becomes the implication of *missio Dei*. He is the One who gives orders, the Owner, the One who takes care of things.”¹ God is an active subject of the mission that he carries out His Mission faithfully, and the Church becomes an instrument of His own Mission. David Bosch in his famous book *Transforming Mission* says that Mission is not primarily an activity of the Church, but an attribute of God, because our God is a missionary God, who places Mission close to His heart.² This missionary God, who sent His only Son, and together with His Son, He sent the Holy Spirit into the world, in order to extend His personal invitation to all people to participate in His Mission.³ Therefore, this act of God’s sending of His Son and Spirit reveals God’s own «sending» nature.⁴ Thus, «revealing Himself» and «sending» nature of God express God’s self-communication to all people of God. From this point of view, Stephen Bevans rightly puts *mission Dei* as,

The trinitarian emphasis of the missio Dei approach points to the importance of mission as

*involving listening and dialogue. Since mission is first of all God’s work, the first step of mission for Christians and the Church is to discern where God is actually at work: in historical movements and events, in peoples and cultures, in other religions – and then join God in that work. God is present and working in the world before the missionary arrives on the scene, and so she or he needs to approach another people, another culture, and another religion with deep respect.*⁵

1. TRINITARIAN FOUNDATIONS FOR DIALOGUE

One can say that the Mission of God primarily has its foundation in Triune God Himself, and God expands this Trinitarian dimension of communication or conversation, to indicate the importance of His Mission. This approach of intersecting God’s Mission should be a slow steady process, because it involves the deep sentiments and emotions of peoples, cultures, and their religions. The focus of the Trinitarian basis of dialogue is a relationship. Christian Spirituality finds its basis in Trinitarian relationship, and in particular way of being united with God, mediated by Jesus Christ through his ministry, death, and resurrection, and made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit.⁶

Ambrogio Bongiovanni expresses his view on Trinitarian communion of love as God’s gift, which springs from His love to whole humanity. The Father and the Son communicate in the love of the Holy Spirit, who unites the persons of the Trinity and becomes the source of love for all peoples. Thus, this expression of His love becomes a relationship, which reinforce each

¹ Cf. G. F. VICEDOM, *The Mission of God. An Introduction to a Theology of Mission*, St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1965, p. 5.

² Cf. D. BOSCH, *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission*, Maryknoll (NY): Orbis Books, 2011, pp. 381-382.

³ Cf. J. G. FLETT, *The Witness of God. The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community*, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010, p. 5.

⁴ Cf. J. G. FLETT, *The Witness of God*. p. 198.

⁵ Cf. S. BEVANS SVD, “Theologies of Mission”, in: K. KIM, K. JORGENSEN, and A. FITCHETT-CLIMENHAGA (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Mission Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022, p. 112. (111-128)

⁶ Cf. P. C. PHAN, “Asian Christian Spirituality”, in: F. WILFRED (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 511.

other.⁷ Furthermore, there is a true sharing and interchange among the three persons: Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. According to Pietro Rossano, this vertical Trinitarian communication produces horizontal interpersonal communication in which the great novelty of history represents the Christian faith.⁸ From this one can understand that human beings develop a relationship with each other to experience harmony and peace among themselves. Thus, this personal relationship among human beings produces the fruits of communication of the interpersonal relationship, which is “intra-trinitarian” of God, who is in constant love with humans.⁹ This openness leads to knowing the wellbeing of one’s own community and to extending this companionship of love to know the wellbeing of the other communities, cultures, and religions.

Thus, the key themes of understanding Trinitarian relationships are creation, incarnation, and glorification. The experiences with the creation and incarnation lead one to understand and look forward to glorification, which is the experience of communication and communion.¹⁰ Therefore, dialogue involves relationship, which is a necessary dimension for more communion with other faith traditions. This dialogue of relationship moves oneself from one’s own faith tradition to understand the other persons and their faith traditions, by having a mutual enrichment and getting into other shoes.¹¹ Stephen Bevans puts it more concretely that mission is dialogue, and it points out to a basic attitude that every Christian

should engage himself/herself to understand dialogue as relationship, friendship, and receiving and offering hospitality.¹²

Further, Philip Scheldrake says in this regard, the out-working of the co-operative relationship between the persons of the Holy Trinity: Creator, co-creating Word, and life-giving Holy Spirit share a dynamic spiritual economy of love. Therefore, the high weightage is to live as persons in community having an intrinsic relationality with one another.¹³ The spirituality of dialogue, therefore, involves the personal relationship with God and one another, the discipline of appropriate prayer, penance, and service to God and neighbour.¹⁴ Roger Schroeder strongly puts his attempts of understanding the Trinitarian love, the overflowing fountain-like love, that is even working outside the boundaries of the Church, which he means to say, God’s spirit of blessing continues to spread out to all peoples, through their particular culture, experiences, and journeys in faith, which is, often in ways, only known to God.¹⁵

Furthermore, he says that the metaphorical way of understanding God’s presence in the peoples of multiple cultures and religions, one can analyze the example of taking prism in the hand, it radiates in different colours, so does the Spirit of God through the experiences of people of multicoloured cultures and religions.¹⁶ Here, one should ask questions like, what is spirituality? What make human to search God and initiate dialogue with other religions through spirituality of one’s own tradition? According to Edmund Kee-Fook Chia, “Spirituality refers to the way or path a person takes to cultivate this trust or to engage in the search. It is efforts exerted for the purpose of

⁷ Cf. A. BONGIOVANNI, *Il Dialogo Interreligioso. Orientamenti per la Formazione*, Bologna: Editrice Missionaria Italiana, 2008, p. 125.

⁸ Cf. A. BONGIOVANNI, *Il Dialogo Interreligioso. Orientamenti per la Formazione*, p. 127, see also, P. ROSSANO, *Dialogo e Annuncio Cristiano. L'incontro con le grandi Religioni*, Ciniselo Balsamo (Milano): Edizioni Paoline, 1993, p. 185.

⁹ Cf. A. BONGIOVANNI, *Il Dialogo Interreligioso. Orientamenti per la Formazione*, p. 127.

¹⁰ Cf. P. B. KLEDEN SVD, “Trinitarian Spirituality and Interculturality”, in: L. T. STANISLAUS SVD, M. UEFFING SVD (ed.), *Intercultural Living*, Vol. 1, Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (ISPCK) and Germany (Sankt Augustin): Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut, 2015, p. 24.

¹¹ Cf. H. FERNANDES, *Francis Xavier and The Spirituality of Dialogue*, Pilar (Goa): Xavierian Publications Society, 2012, p. 188-189.

¹² Cf. S. BEVANS SVD, “Theologies of Mission”, pp. 116-117.

¹³ Cf. P. SHELDRAKE (ed.), *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005, p. 536.

¹⁴ Cf. P. SHELDRAKE (ed.), *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, p. 536.

¹⁵ Cf. R. SCHROEDER SVD, “Enriched by the Spirituality of the ‘Other’”, in: L. T. STANISLAUS and C. TAUCHNER (eds.), *Becoming Intercultural. Perspectives on Mission*, Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (ISPCK) and Germany (Sankt Augustin): Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut, 2021, p. 76.

¹⁶ Cf. R. SCHROEDER SVD, “Enriched by the Spirituality of the ‘Other’”, p. 76.

discovering meaning, purpose, and significance within oneself (inward search), in relation to others (outward search), and in relation to that which transcends humankind (upward search).¹⁷ Therefore the constant search of a human person's spirituality calls to dialogue with God, oneself, and with one another honestly to bring unity in diversity, even though we are the people of multicoloured cultures and religions.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF DIALOGUE SINCE VATICAN II DOCUMENTS

Since Vatican II, there are numerous documents, which express the openness in the attitude and sensibility to other religions and cultures. Now, we see, only the deep aspects of dialogue and its tremendous significance in *some documents*, like, *Ecclesiam Suam* (6th August 1964), *Nostra Aetate* (28th October 1965), *Ad Gentes* (7th December 1965), *Gaudium et Spes* (7th December 1965), *Redemptoris Missio* (7th December 1990), *Evangelii Gaudium* (24th November 2013), and *Fratelli Tutti* (3rd October 2020).

In short, we see, how these documents stated above are connected to the importance of dialogue. *Ecclesiam Suam* (6th August 1964) connects the aspect of dialogue more implicitly. Pope Paul VI introduces the term 'dialogue of salvation' (*ES 70*) to all humanity. He continues, that the religion in its very nature, is a deep and true relationship of God and man. It expresses the deep love of God on human through dialogue and this expression culminates in prayer, thus, prayer becomes dialogue. At the same time, God reveals Himself in His own unique essence and in His own way, as pure love and simple (cf. *ES 70*).¹⁸ *Ecclesiam Suam* makes a dialogical turn in Catholic Church's relations with the rest of the world, more specially, with the call for dialogue with religions and cultures of all people of good will, promoting fellowship and harmony of life. To

notice the importance of the word dialogue, one can find in the document Paul VI uses seventy-seven times, to give more concrete and solid foundations to the aspect of dialogue of the Church with others.¹⁹ Furthermore, he sums up in four concentric circles of such dialogue on the part of the Church: dialogue with the world, dialogue with the members of other religions, dialogue with other Christians and families, and dialogue within the Church itself.²⁰

This relationship of God the father extends His love to all humanity, in and through Christ and the Holy Spirit (cf. *ES 71*), and this love of God extends concretely to four circles, namely, world, other religions, our own Christian brothers and sisters, and within the Holy Catholic Church. Paul VI clearly puts his vision on dialogue in these four circles, where he concentrates on the first circle, the entire human race – the world, with full sharing of common nature, a common life, with all the gifts, and the problems (cf. *ES 97*). In spite of all the challenges and difficulties to dialogue the entire human race, Paul VI suggests, "We do not therefore give up hope of the eventual possibility of a dialogue between these men and the Church" (*ES 105*). Thus, through dialogue, we spread peace among all people of God (cf. *ES 106*). Second circle would emphasize more on worshiping the Supreme God, who is common for all the religions, even though the great Afro-Asiatic religions would not compromise with monotheistic religions, like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, one cannot avoid the existence of other faith traditions, which has common origin and destiny in God, who wishes may be to be known, loved and served in that way. This attitude does not in any way reduce our Christian religion, but it involves hope that will bring all people, who look for God and worship Him alone (cf. *ES 107*). Thus, it is clear, the Church wants to give more importance to spiritual and moral values of non-Christian religions, which promotes spheres of religious liberty, human brotherhood

¹⁷ Cf. E. CHIA, "Spirituality, Mission, and Liturgy. A Sacramental Perspective", in: K. KIM, K. JORGENSEN, and A. FITCHETT-CLIMENHAGA (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Mission Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022, p. 206.

¹⁸ Cf. PAUL VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, Encyclical Letter, 6 August 1964, in: AAS 56 (1964), pp. 609-659.

¹⁹ Cf. T. WRIGHT, "The Dialogue of Spirituality from *Ecclesia Suam* to Pope Francis. A Tree that has to become a Forest", *Journal of Dharma* 43/4 (October-December 2018), p. 374.

²⁰ Cf. J. DUPUIS SJ, *Christianity and the Religions. From Confrontation to Dialogue*, Maryknoll (New York): Orbis Books, 2001, p. 218.

and sisterhood, education, culture, and social justice and welfare with a genuine mutual respect for one another (cf. *ES* 108).

Now coming to the third circle of our own Christian brothers and sisters, who were divided once upon a time, to look into the things which we have common than the division (cf. *ES* 109). The two important steps of Catholic Church are to have full communion with our Christian Churches and promote Christian unity, which has the deep message of Christ's prayer in John's Gospel, «that they be one (Jn 17:21) ». The last circle is for us Catholics, where Paul VI desires, «that this dialogue with Our own children may be conducted with fullness of faith, with charity, and with dynamic holiness (*ES* 113) ». Finally, this dialogue should impart the virtue of listening, and this readiness to listen to the variety of views in today's world, calls us to make us strong (cf. *ES* 113). These four circles in *Ecclesiam Suam* should foster among all people of God.

Therefore, God initiates dialogue through His goodness, so that, one can expand this dialogue to others with deep respect and with sincere hearts. Furthermore, Jacques Dupuis in his work explains, this dialogue between God and humanity must continue for the greater cause and it must be the role of the Church to enter into dialogue with the entire world.²¹ Therefore, in a nutshell, the spirit of this encyclical, in line with the importance of dialogue is to establish the relationship of the Church and the world in a profound way, and that becomes the true nature of dialogue, which involves the dynamics of actions and conducts a dialogue with dignity (cf. *ES* 76-78).²² To put it more concretely, the *Ecclesiam Suam* invites all the people of God, both pastors and the faithful, to get engaged in dialogue genuinely to produce fruits in abundance. By doing this, one can experience the truth through love, which includes everyone to reach to the common destiny, who is God Himself. This beautiful attitude of coming together through genuine dialogue with one another calls each of us to work together for justice and peace without violence and deceit, in order to promote harmony in the world (*ES* 92).

²¹ Cf. J. DUPUIS SJ, *Verso una Teologia Cristiana del Pluralismo Religioso*, Brescia: Editrice Queriniana, 1997, p. 229.

²² Cf. PAUL VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, pp. 609-659.

Now to move on to the next important document, *Nostra Aetate*, one should know, for the first time, there was a positive approach in the history of the Church, which is, the declaration on the relationship of the Church to non-Christians, which deals more explicitly and examines more closely her firm relationship with the people of other faith traditions. The great task of the Church is to promote unity and love among all peoples of the earth, to understand the common origin and the common destiny, that is, in God.²³ From this declaration, we look into only the section of relationship with Hinduism. The declaration – *Nostra Aetate* clearly says that the people of Hindu religion contemplate on the divine mystery and express their deep search through philosophical enquiry. They seek God through a profound meditative life, ascetical practices, and flight to God with love and trust (cf. *NA* 2).²⁴ Thus, encountering other religions and showing deep mutual respect to sentiments of the other faith traditions, Catholic Church admits strongly, that a ray of that Truth, which enlightens all people for the ways of good conduct of life, and promoting spiritual values for life, Church does not reject, what is considered true and holy by these religions (cf. *NA* 2). However, the Church continues to proclaim that, Christ is the way, the truth, and the life (Jn 14:6), in whom fullness of life is experienced and God had reconciled all things to Himself.²⁵

The next important decree on the mission activity of the Church, which is, *Ad Gentes*, calls the whole Church to promote a pastoral and missionary activity with a great zeal. The decree *Ad Gentes* which deals with the Church's missionary activity reflects on the Church's new understanding of her mystery, her openness to all that is good and her new attitude towards other religions. As the continuation of God's mission manifested in Jesus Christ through the Spirit, the Church is missionary by its very nature (cf. *AG* 2). The Catholic Church continues her mission of making present God's love and realize the divine reign, while discerning salvific presence in the plurality of

²³ Cf. PAUL VI, *Nostra Aetate*, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, n. 1, 28th October 1965, in: AAS 58 (1966), pp. 740-744.

²⁴ Cf. PAUL VI, *Nostra Aetate*, n. 2.

²⁵ Cf. PAUL VI, *Nostra Aetate*, n. 2.

religions and cultures. Consequently, proclamation of the Good News in a pluralistic context demands an integrated process of inter-religious dialogue, inculturation, and work for justice, both for humans and the whole earth. Before having the dialogue with other religions, one should be deeply rooted in one's own faith, so that the true spirit of dialogue takes place. The right methodical exercise and scientific preparation for this task is expected to dialogue with non-Christian religions and cultures (cf. AG 34). In today's context of having dialogue with other religions is most emphasized in some of the countries in Asia, more specially, in India. People from different religions come together for various purposes in day-to-day life. They meet in the working places, schools, colleges, and marketplaces. Therefore, sharing, conversing, and dialoguing among themselves in various possible ways in their lives are much seen and lived.

The pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world, *Gaudium et Spes*, which highlights the necessity of dialogue among religions with human dignity. The important role of the Holy Spirit and Spirit's presence in the world, which is in and through Jesus Christ, are implicitly expressed in this document. Moreover, it is the Spirit, which moves the world in order to promote harmony and peace among all the religions. Thus, Christ, who is first born, through the Spirit, dwells in all the people of God. Therefore, Christ wishes to pour down His grace to all, because He died once and for all the people of God, who are having good will in whose hearts grace works enormously (cf. GS 22).²⁶

Now, this presence of the Holy Spirit calls everyone in the world for its constitutive openness, mutual respect to other religions, and prayerful atmosphere. Thus, the presence and the activity of the Holy Spirit in other religions touches both the individual and the society, history, peoples, cultures, and religions. Therefore, now, the members of the other religions respond positively to the invitation of God through the presence of the Holy Spirit.²⁷

²⁶ Cf. PAUL VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, n. 22, 7 December 1965, in: AAS 58 (1966), pp. 1025-1115.

²⁷ Cf. M. DHAVAMONY SJ, *The Kingdom of God and World Religions*, Documenta Missionalia 31, Roma:

This document emphasizes the importance of human dignity, freedom, and rights. This human dignity transcends one's own religious set-up and makes the foundation for dialogue with other religious people or faith traditions. This action is done to promote peace and justice, together with all the people of God, because trusting and respecting one another will enrich the inner spirits and talents to foster the brotherhood and sisterhood (cf. GS 78).²⁸

REDEMPTORIS MISSIO: INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE – A NECESSITY

The Mission of Christ is at the center of the missionary work of the Church according to Pope John Paul II in this document. In the following presentation, however, this document would address the dimension of interreligious dialogue, as an important task of the missionary work of the Church on the threshold of the third millennium. In this document, the main task of the Church's mission is, to direct man's gaze, to direct the conscience, and experience of all humanity towards the mystery of Christ.²⁹

Interreligious dialogue is part of the evangelizing mission of the Church.³⁰ The important aspect of the path of dialogue is knowing oneself, one's faith, one's own spirituality, and one's openness to dialogue. In dialogue, the Church intends to discover the "seeds of the Word",³¹ which are found in the people and religious traditions of humanity. Further the distinctive contribution of Pope John Paul II points out the necessity of a broader understanding of the theology of religions, emphasizing the operative aspect of the Spirit of God in religious life of non-Christians, and in their religious traditions.³² Through this affirmation, Pope John Paul II continues to lay the theological foundations, which is the core aspect of the Church, for giving more significant importance to interreligious

Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2004, pp. 102-103.

²⁸ Cf. PAUL VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 78.

²⁹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio*, Encyclical Letter, n. 4, 7 December 1990, in: AAS 83 (1991), pp. 249-340.

³⁰ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 55.

³¹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 56.

³² Cf. J. DUPUIS SJ, *Verso una Teologia Cristiana del Pluralismo Religioso*, p. 233.

dialogue, with the true love, respect, and openness.³³ Therefore, the place of Christ in relation to the faithful engagement in dialogue must be preserved. While dialogue with other religions, even if difficult and demanding, will help the Church and the missionaries, to see the work of God in others and other religious traditions, through the Spirit of God. From here, it is possible to know each other better and witness the fullness of God's revelation that the Church has received.

EVANGELII GAUDIUM: AN ATTITUDE OF OPENNESS

The very fact that Pope Francis started writing this document *Evangelii Gaudium*, he had enough and more pastoral approaches in his thoughts and actions. He insisted on dialogue between the religions more and more and to strengthen the pastoral field. He clearly expresses that this dialogue should have an openness in truth and in love. He continues to encourage us through his words that despite of various obstacles and difficulties, and experiencing great religious fundamentalist attitudes, one should work for the peace constantly, with the help of strong commitment. In this way, one learns to accept others and get involved to work for social justice, harmony, and peace to the society, where we all live together. He accentuates on the important aspect of dialogue as, "mutual listening", which enriches all.³⁴ Further, Pope Francis marked the necessity of dialogue, by giving the example of what Indian Bishops expressed about dialogue, that is, "being open to them, sharing their joys and sorrows."³⁵ Furthermore, in *Evangelium Gaudium* Francis states,

Interreligious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world, and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities. And in this dialogue, "ever friendly and sincere, attention must always be paid to the essential bond between dialogue and proclamation, which leads the Church to

³³ Cf. J. DUPUIS SJ, *Verso una Teologia Cristiana del Pluralismo Religioso*, p. 484.

³⁴ Cf. FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*. Apostolic Exhortation, n. 250, 24 November 2013, in: AAS 105 (2013), pp. 1019-1137.

³⁵ Cf. FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 250.

maintain and intensify her relationship with non-Christians." This should spur religions to dialogue among themselves for the sake of protecting nature, defending the poor, and building networks of respect and fraternity.³⁶

FRATELLI TUTTI: DIALOGUE AND FRIENDSHIP

In this encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis deals exclusively in the sixth chapter, on «dialogue and friendship in society». He says, "approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground: all these summed up in the one word "dialogue". If we want to encounter and help one another, we have to dialogue (FT 198)." Furthermore, he emphasizes more on genuine dialogue and true openness to others. He continues saying that in a true spirit of dialogue, one can definitely grow and experience others to grasp the significance of what they try to do to us and speak to us (cf. FT 203).³⁷ Through this genuine dialogue, actually, one builds the true friendship with other faith traditions. Mustafa Genc says, "Building social friendship between groups with a history of being different is not dependent on the absence of war, but allowing people to show self-expression, and to reciprocate the skills of listening, looking, knowing, understanding, and finding common ground that suits each other."³⁸ This attitude of openness to dialogue certainly builds up the Kingdom of God together for peaceful atmosphere in the society, and it helps everyone to work for justice, peace, and to integrate wholeness in all the creation. Moreover, Genc points out in his article about *Fratelli Tutti* as "the culture of encounter, which follows the path of truth and peace."³⁹ Further, he personalizes the word «encounter» as a slow and steady process of listening patiently and accepting others.⁴⁰

³⁶ Cf. M. DE GIORGI, "Interreligious Dialogue in the Context of Mission", in: P. BAEKELMANS CICM, and M. H. ROBERT OLA (ed.), *New Trends in Mission. The Emerging Future*, SEDOS, Maryknoll (New York): Orbis Books, 2022, p. 223.

³⁷ Cf. Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*. Encyclical Letter, 3rd October 2020, n. 203.

³⁸ M. Genc, "Fratelli Tutti: An Interpretation of Dialogue and Friendship in Society: An Islamic Perspective", *The Journal of Social Encounters* 5/1 (2021), pp. 33-36.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁴⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*

3. GOD COMMUNICATES AND REVEALS

HIMSELF

God communicates and reveals Himself through His deep love to all the peoples of all the nations, in Christ and the active presence of the Holy Spirit, the Church becomes the sign of that love of God (cf. *DM* 9). God's communication to all His people is out of His love and own personal interest to all people, in order to save everyone and give eternal life to all. God, who is the beginning and the end, can be experienced by all people through the deep communion with Him, even at the present state of ourselves (*DV* 6). This deep communion involves dialogue between God and human. In this perspective, Church too opens herself for a genuine dialogue with other faith traditions. Therefore, the dynamics of Christians should lead to listen to others patiently, and strive to understand, what other faith traditions try to communicate to us in order to profit the gifts, which God bestows on all more generously (cf. *DM* 21). Dialogue is the norm and necessary dimensions of every form of Christian mission, as well as simple presence, witness, service, and direct proclamation in the community, where we all live together in the pluralistic circumstances.

Thus, dialogue is based on *Missio Dei*. Just God is dialogical in Godself and He engages in the world, so also, the Church must give her service to the world, and learn from the world, its cultures, and religions.⁴¹ Therefore, in dialogue, Christians should share their faith experiences of Christ with the brothers and sisters of other faith traditions. On the other hand, Christians should be ready to listen to the faith experiences of other religious faith traditions more attentively to promote and build the Kingdom of God (cf. *DM* 40).⁴² As we know, the focus in *Nostra Aetate* indicates clearly the love of God and paves the path of love of neighbor, which are intrinsically present in Christian spirituality. God is love and communion. As in the Gospel of John, we read, God is love (cf. Jn 4:16), who communicates to the human beings to

strengthen the human relationship, which is the foundation of dialogue.⁴³ In the present scenario, we are facing new challenges and opportunities, when we speak about religious pluralism, and this involves a new way of approaching our evangelization in the new circumstances of the people of other faiths. One of the essential needs for the proclamation of love of God among the people of different faith traditions is knowing the spirituality of interreligious dialogue,⁴⁴ because it helps to go deeper to understand the reality of the society, where the people of other faith traditions live together.

Stephen Bevans puts it in a nutshell, the understanding of dialogue is all about respecting the other person, being open towards the other person, and prompt willingness to learn from the other. Further, he continues his thoughts to go deeper, to respond to the Christians, by saying that Christians should engage in the mission, by making people of other religious tradition as their friends, exchange of true respect, and welcoming them as their own guests. From this action of doing dialogue, one can do the prophetic work of sharing the Gospel message.⁴⁵ Thus, he concludes, a good relationship should not stop in making only friends, and appreciating cultures and religions, but mission is about sharing the good news of the Kingdom of God.⁴⁶

4. DIALOGUE IN THE BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

To know the strong foundation for dialogue in the biblical perspective, one can cite a few strong points, where God involves Himself in the communication or dialoguing with humans. To take this standpoint, one can notice, in the Old Testament the dialogue of God makes His deep relationship through His covenant relationship. More profoundly, one can say, God's activity extends beyond the confines of the chosen people to all other peoples of the earth. To substantiate this claim, we see, the covenant relationship of God made with all

⁴¹ Cf. R. SCHROEDER SVD, "Interculturality and Prophetic Dialogue", *Verbum SVD* 54 (2013), p. 14.

⁴² SECRETARIATUS PRO NON CHRISTIANIS, *The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions. Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission*, Città del Vaticano: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1984.

⁴³ Cf. A. BONGIOVANNI, *Spirituality of Interfaith Dialogue. A Call to Live Together*, pp. 134-135.

⁴⁴ Cf. H. FERNANDES, *Francis Xavier and The Spirituality of Dialogue*, p. 2.

⁴⁵ Cf. S. BEVANS SVD, "Theologies of Mission", p. 116.

⁴⁶ Cf. S. BEVANS SVD, "Theologies of Mission", p. 117.

peoples at the beginning of creation (Gen 1:1), the covenant with Noah (Gen 9), and the prophets who brought a universal perspective of salvation that extends beyond and through Israel to the nations (Is 52:10). Moreover, from the beginning, God made the covenant with all peoples (Gen 1-11) and indeed, people who were not Israelites are proposed by New Testament writers as models of faith (Heb 11:4-7).⁴⁷

The Church has remained faithful to Jesus' mission mandate, namely, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15) and "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19) are the clear signs to proclaim the Word of God to the ends of the earth. In Acts, St. Paul, for an instance, at the Areopagus in the city of Athens, engaged in dialogue, to proclaim the Word of God. From this, one can clearly understand that proclaiming involves dialogue, and dialogue with the people of other faiths.⁴⁸ Generally presumed that, Bible does not show more interest directly to dialogue, and actually throughout the Bible there are quite a lot of rejection of other religions especially in the Old Testament, indicating that only our religion is right, only YHWH is a real God. For instance, in the book of Exodus, Lord God Says to the Israelites, "I am the LORD, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgement" (Ex 6:6). In Isaiah, God says, "For I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, do not fear, I will help you" (Is 41:13). Still some more strong words, God says, "I am the LORD, there is no other; besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me" (Is 45:5). On the other hand, the expressions in many verses in the bible, exclusively in the New Testament, which shows that the love of God leads to love other persons as your own. For instance, in the Gospel of John, Jesus gives us a new commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you

are my disciples, if you have love for one another (cf. Jn 13:34-35). In this sense, dialogue with other religious faith traditions would mean, sharing of our own experiences with their experiences, which are the foundation for the faith, sensitivity, mutual openness, and mutual respect.⁴⁹

Mission has its deepest source in God, who is in His wisdom and goodness chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (cf. Eph 1:19), by which, through Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh (Jn 1:14), humans have access through the Holy Spirit to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (cf. Eph 2:18, 2 Pet 1:4). Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (cfs. Col 1:15, 1 Tim 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to all people as friends (cfs. Ex 33:11, Jn 15:14-15) and lives among them (cf. Bar 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself (cf. DV 2). Therefore, in short, one can say, God reveals Himself to all people, and further, He invites all to make friendship with Him and to live in fellowship and communion with Him. Thus, the initiative comes from God, and He wants all to come to share in the divine nature to have life in abundance.⁵⁰

Now referring to the New Testament, one can see, the Mission of Jesus, which goes beyond the boundaries to reach out to the lost sheep of Israel, and at the same time, the open attitude towards all peoples. Jesus had dialogue with all, and gave an open invitation to all nations, to experience the Kingdom of God, which is not confined to the chosen people.⁵¹ Moreover, tracing God's active presence in all religions, Jacques Dupuis says, considering from the biblical themes, one can understand the

⁴⁹ Cf. A. BONGIOVANNI, *Spirituality of Interfaith Dialogue. A Call to Live Together*, p. 2-4.

⁵⁰ Cf. T. ASCHEMAN SVD, "All Things to All People. Ongoing Formation for Intercultural Life and Mission", in: L. T. STANISLAUS SVD, M. UEFFING SVD (eds.), *Intercultural Living*, Vol. 1, Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (ISPCK) and Germany (Sankt Augustin): Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut, 2015, p. 311.

⁵¹ Cf. PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND THE CONGREGATION FOR EVANGELIZATION OF PEOPLES, "Dialogue and Proclamation. Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue", 19 May 1991, n. 21, in: AAS 84 (1992), pp. 414-446.

⁴⁷ Cf. M. Q. NGUYEN, "Proposal of Ways for Preaching the Good News in the Digital Age", *Verbum SVD* 65/1-2 (2024), pp. 49-50.

⁴⁸ Cf. M. Q. NGUYEN, "Proposal of Ways for Preaching the Good News in the Digital Age", pp. 48-49.

expansive nature of religious experience, the revelation of God in creation, and the awed awareness that God and His Spirit range far beyond the boundaries of the human capacity, clearly indicates the links with non-Christian religions. Further, he adds, in such complex situations, concerning a theological evaluation of other religious tradition on the part of God's chosen people in the Old Testament and Christian Church in the New Testament cannot claim to be in a comprehensive way. Therefore, such negative attitude towards other religions can be cured today in a mutual comprehension and openness to dialogue, in which the theological evaluation moves to have positive approach to the other religious traditions.⁵²

Ambrogio Bongiovanni points out very clearly in his book, *Interreligious Dialogue. Orientations for the Formation*, about the self-communication of God in the human history serves as an understanding of God's revelation to initiate dialogue with human beings. This dialogue is understood in terms of personal relationship of God with human beings, and it manifests an authentic encounter between human and the Absolute. Thus, God becomes common origin and goal of all peoples.⁵³ Furthermore, Bongiovanni formulates his thoughts from Second Vatican Council that God's communication with human beings becomes God's desire to make all peoples to participate in His grace.⁵⁴ Thus, in this sense, love of God becomes a relationship with human beings, which further pushes every human to experience God in return. From this point of view, the vertical relationship is strengthened and after experiencing the love of God, one moves out of his/her way to strengthen horizontal relationship, which is to work together for promoting harmony and social justice in the wounded world.

5. GOD'S PLAN FOR THE ENTIRE UNIVERSE

God has a plan for the entire universe or cosmos is revealed in and through Jesus Christ (cfs. Eph

1:9-10, Col 1:26-27), where God reconciled Himself, to set free from all the bondages, and to draw the entire humanity into communion with Himself.⁵⁵ Thus, one can understand the love of God, which is, the self-emptying love, and it reached to the climax of giving oneself on the cross.⁵⁶ St. Paul says, God our Saviour, desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the Truth (cf. 1 Tim 2:3-4). From this point of view, one can be sure, there exist other religious traditions, which are not entirely the creation of humans, rather it is the initiative of God. Hence, these various religions and their spiritual traditions of the world, can be a great gift from the divine, and it is to be seen as in the realm of religious pluralism.⁵⁷

To put it more concretely, one can say that it is through this understanding of building up the Kingdom of God in dialoguing with other religious faith traditions, one moves oneself to practice one's own religion faithfully, that the followers of that religion reach God. Therefore, God is active, both in the Church and in other religious traditions of the world, where everyone participates to build the Kingdom of God through dialogue with one another, and further, the Church enters into dialogue to recognize and to encourage the richness of God in other faith traditions, and to walk together towards Truth, which is ultimately the plan of God for the whole humanity.⁵⁸ As Ambrogio Bongiovanni expresses the deeper meaning of interreligious dialogue is a great gift, that allows all the people of God to be open to the hope for the true search and meaning for the entire humanity, and together to have a great goal of building up the Kingdom of God.⁵⁹ In this

⁵⁵ Cf. J. KUTTIANIMATTATHIL, *Practice and Theology of Interreligious Dialogue. A Critical Study of the Indian Christian Attempts Since Vatican II*, Bangalore: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 1998, p. 580.

⁵⁶ Cf. F. WILFRED, "Dialogue Gasping for Breath? Towards New Frontiers in Inter-Religious Dialogue," *Vidyajyoti* 51 (October 1987), pp. 457-460.

⁵⁷ Cf. J. KUTTIANIMATTATHIL, *Practice and Theology of Interreligious Dialogue. A Critical Study of the Indian Christian Attempts Since Vatican II*, pp. 582-583.

⁵⁸ Cf. SECRETARIATUS PRO NON CHRISTIANIS, *The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions. Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission*, Città del Vaticano: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1984, n. 13.

⁵⁹ Cf. A. BONGIOVANNI, L. FERNANDO SJ, V. EDWIN SJ, and G. SABETTA (ed.), *Interfaith Spirituality. The Power*

⁵² Cf. J. DUPUIS SJ, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Maryknoll (NY): Orbis Books, 1997, pp. 29-30.

⁵³ Cf. A. BONGIOVANNI, *Il Dialogo Interreligioso. Orientamenti per la Formazione*, pp. 119-120.

⁵⁴ Cf. A. BONGIOVANNI, *Il Dialogo Interreligioso. Orientamenti per la Formazione*, p. 122.

regard, every religion, culture, and faith tradition want to preserve their own identity, because people are frightened in today's global context of losing the religious identity, when they come together for an encounter of dialogue. As a result, everyone tries to push the borders and identities too hard and not willing to co-operate and cross the boundaries to go beyond, thus one becomes lesser and lesser human. Therefore, in this sense, Thomas Kunnunkal says that in today's modern world, to be religious means to be open to inter-religious, to be cultural means to be inter-cultural, and to be human is to be inter-human,⁶⁰ which can enlarge the communitarian aspects and dimensions of living together.

CONCLUSION

Besides conflicts and obstacles, the urgent need and call for dialogue in today's world are an increasingly major concerns of interreligious dialogue between the followers of different religions, cultural backgrounds, and ethnicities. People are living in a global world with multiple communities, religions, beliefs, ideologies, and practices. Colourful flowers of mutual harmony and prosperity can be blossomed through interreligious dialogue in the society at large. Interreligious dialogue is the best source of spreading the teachings of the Catholic Church and promote Gospel values, in which tolerance and acceptance of different diversities of spiritual traditions can come together and have a harmonious living.

Interreligious dialogue can also be a powerful communication at the human level and deeper level of understanding the other persons and faith traditions. The projections on the conflicts and obstacles of dialogue show the difficulties in mission, to spread out the harmonies living in the society. In this sense, Marcello Zago says, «Religions that cohabit the same region not only meet but sometimes clash. The only constructive way forward for humanity and for

religions themselves is dialogue, which presupposes mutual respect and co-operation. »⁶¹ Finally, taking into the considerations of thoughts, teachings, and reflections of Pope Francis regarding interreligious dialogue make a foundational base for all people of God, who want to engage themselves willingly in dialogical ministry.

In this regard, Pope Francis makes a strong statement for a reflection at the *Vigil of Pentecost with the Ecclesial Movements* on 18th of May in 2013 addresses the faithful at the Peter's Square saying: «The Church must step outside herself. To go where? To the outskirts of existence, whatever they may be, but she must step out. Jesus tells us: "Go into all the world! Go! Preach! Bear witness to the Gospel!" (cf. Mk 16:15). But what happens if we step outside ourselves? »⁶² We encounter the other, because with the full of faith, we encounter Jesus in the other. Jesus sets several examples to encounter the other in Gospel accounts. With faith, one must cultivate a "culture of Encounter" and "culture of friendship" with the other, and especially those who hold other beliefs⁶³ or faith traditions. Pope Francis says that in this "stepping-out", one is ready for an encounter,⁶⁴ which is also a cardinal focus and a keyword in interreligious dialogue. Thus, dialogue becomes an essential characteristic for a profound way of evangelizing the Gospel and its values through our own lives and actions.

of *Confluence*, ISPCK, Delhi: Allianz Enterprises, 2014, p. xiv (introduction).

⁶⁰ Cf. T. KUNNUNKAL SJ, "The Imperative for Cross Border Community Building", in: A. BONGIOVANNI, L. FERNANDO SJ, and V. EDWIN SJ (ed.), *Dialogue in a Pluralistic World*, Delhi: ISPCK Publications, 2013, pp. 13-14.

⁶¹ M. ZAGO OMI, "The New Millennium and the Emerging Religious Encounters", *Missiology: An International Review* XXVIII/1, (2000), p. 5.

⁶² POPE FRANCIS, "Vigil of Pentecost with the Ecclesial Movements", Address of the Holy Father Francis, *Saint Peter's Square*, (18 May 2013), in: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco_20130518_veglia-pentecoste.html (accessed on: 03.04.2025).

⁶³ Cf. S. P. PUTHENPURACKAL SVD, "Missionary Constants: Relational Anchors in Mission as Encounter", *Verbum SVD* 61/2-3 (2020), p. 349.

⁶⁴ Cf. POPE FRANCIS, "Vigil of Pentecost with the Ecclesial Movements", Address of the Holy Father Francis, *Saint Peter's Square*, (18 May 2013), in: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco_20130518_veglia-pentecoste.html (accessed on: 03.04.2025).