

**PRESS RELEASE 22TH JANUARY 2007**

## **INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE – AN OPPORTUNITY FOR IRELAND**

Greenhills Ecumenical Conference, 22 January 2007

Speaking Notes of Most Rev. Diarmuid Martin Archbishop of Dublin and Primate of Ireland

Archbishop Diarmuid Martin today addressed the Greenhill's Ecumenical Conference on the subject of Inter-religious Dialogue. Archbishop Martin stressed the theological foundation of such dialogue in the shared recognition of God's existence:

"In recognizing God's existence believers of all faiths open themselves then to the affirmation of the fundamental unity of all humankind and recognize that God is the Father of all and that therefore the entire human race shares a common origin and a common destiny: God, our Creator and the goal of our earthly pilgrimage.

"This affirmation that God is the Father of all is therefore the theological foundation for the affirmation that it is not legitimate for anyone to espouse religious difference as a presupposition or pretext for an aggressive attitude towards other human beings. Demonstrations of violence cannot therefore be attributed to religion as such but to the cultural limitations with which it is lived and develops in time.

Archbishop Martin said that inter-religious dialogue if it is to be effective, must be based on an honest search for the truth and inspired by a sincere wish to know one another better, respecting differences and recognizing what we have in common.

"Inter-religious dialogue has as its aim the seeking both of the truth and of peace. It is not easy to combine these two aims in a world a world in which we are fighting a "war on terror" and where we are told to await a "clash of civilizations". Fear of the other does not create an appropriate climate for fruitful dialogue. Inter-religious dialogue must be carried out in a spirit which fosters a search for truth in a climate of understanding and respect. It must foster a search for truth which does not paper over differences and wish them to disappear so that we can all be polite and go home. Over the past months, for example, there has been a great interest in books on Islam. It is important that the interest in knowledge of each others position be one which springs from a dialogue of respect and love and not one which emerges from fear."

Full text follows:

I entered the seminary in Dublin just one week before the Second Vatican Council began. I was ordained seven years later and returned to a different Ireland and a different Church, such was the pace of renewal that had taken place in those seven years and which was to continue in the years which followed.

"Greenhills" is one of those names whose origins belong to that extraordinary period of renewal, of dialogue and of ecumenical understanding which changed all our Churches and which brought much change to Irish society North and South. I always had a special affection for what I heard about Greenhills, as I associated it with an ecumenism not of the elite or the "purely learned", but of pastors and believers who were interested in ensuring fellowship, friendship and collaboration on the local level. Rather than becoming a closed shop of the enlightened, it offered and continues to offer the possibility for committed practitioners to come back, year after year, to renew their commitment to ecumenical collaboration and gain new understanding of the ecumenical temperature in Ireland and of its consequences for society.

Perhaps because of the demographic make up of Ireland in the past, dialogue with other faiths did not receive the same attention as did ecumenical dialogue with the exception of the dialogue with the

Jewish Community. Recently we celebrated in Dublin the 25th Anniversary of the Council of Christians and Jews and we were able to look back on twenty-five years characterised by a persevering, discrete, and wisdom-filled commitment to furthering dialogue between Christians and Jews.

The religious dialogue between Christians and Jews has its own particular significance. To show the closeness of this relationship, for example, Pope Paul VI insisted that on the Roman Catholic side dialogue with Judaism would be carried out by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and not the Council for dialogue with other religions,

Pope John Paul II, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa* noted that there is need, not just "for acknowledgment of the common roots linking Christianity and the Jewish people, who are called by God to a covenant which remains irrevocable" but also to stress the importance of Jewish-Christian dialogue "for the self-knowledge of Christians and for the transcending of divisions between the Churches"

A recent document published by the Pontifical Biblical Commission on *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (2001), after recognizing the "surprising strength of the spiritual bonds that united the Church of Christ to the Jewish people" (n. 85), concludes by noting that "in the past, the break between the Jewish people and the Church of Christ Jesus might at times have seemed complete in certain periods and in certain places. In the light of the Scriptures, this should never have happened, because a complete break between the Church and the Synagogue is in contradiction to Sacred Scripture" (ibid.).

In Ireland, the relationship between Jews and Christians has, apart from some tragic exceptions, been positive. The Dublin Jewish community has a long tradition. The Jewish community has contributed much to Irish society going back many centuries. In the old Jewish cemetery in Ballybough, near my own house, there are graves dating back to 1777. Regrettably in recent years the Jewish population has been decreasing. It would be marvellous to see that trend reversed and a greater number of Jews once again on this island. Irish society would be all the poorer if it did not have this characteristically "Irish" Jewish community.

Ireland has not traditionally had an Islamic community, with the exception of a small yet constantly changing student population. Britain, our nearest neighbour, because of higher levels of immigration from Commonwealth countries has long had a greater demographic and religious mix in its population.

Europe's history has been strongly marked by Christian-Islamic encounters, marked at times by hostility but overall culturally enriching. Thomas Aquinas and other contemporary scholars had knowledge of Islamic writers. Europe has long had its indigenous Islamic populations; even through we have not always remembered this. I think especially of Bosnia, but also of the European part of Turkey.

Yet despite these facts of history, Vatican II's Declaration on the Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, took the Catholic Church in Europe somewhat by surprise and the dialogue has taken off slowly, driven often more by social and political contingencies rather than from strictly theological investigation. In the preparatory enquiries to set the agenda for the Council very few bishops even mentioned relations with people of other religions. Ecumenical dialogue had been going on already for some time before the Council, so there was already in existence a strong ecumenical movement which Pope John XXIII could count on to support his desire for a Council that would be ecumenical in both senses of the word, reflecting the universal character of the Church and leading to unity among Christians. There was no corresponding inter-religious movement.

Is it possible that a new dynamism in the area of inter-religious dialogue today could have similar long term effects in Ireland as our ecumenical dialogue has had? I hope to present with some reflections, inevitably from a predominantly Roman Catholic perspective, the tradition to which I belong, which look at the question of inter-religious dialogue as an opportunity for Ireland. I look forward to listening to the reactions of representatives of other traditions.

Within the Roman Catholic tradition, the Conciliar document *Nostra Aetate* provided a basic framework for inter-religious dialogue. On the practical level, however, the Church as a whole had to begin from scratch. *Nostra Aetate* was by nature a pastoral document. It did not provide the theological foundations for the dialogue. Indeed the very idea of such dialogue made some Christians feel insecure and feel that in some way the fundamental affirmation of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in the economy of redemption was being undermined.

I remember that I began working at the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace a few weeks after the gathering of religious leaders held in Assisi 1986, at the request of Pope John Paul II, to pray for peace. The idea had struck a positive note in world public opinion, almost as a logical continuation of ecumenical gatherings that had become part of the Christian contribution to society.

Pope John Paul's intuition regarding the Assisi event was inspired above all by a desire for peace. On many occasions I heard him recall his concern about the extent of the nuclear threat at that moment which could have had catastrophic effects on the earth and its populations. He felt that the efforts of the international political community were not making their impact and that it was the turn of religious leaders not just to make their voices heard but to give witness to the fact that peace is a gift of God which must be implored. Indeed he always affirmed that the Assisi event played a significant role in the easing of East West tensions.

Alongside the positive recognition by public opinion, there was a very strong reaction within the Vatican and elsewhere against this event as it seemed to many that it could lead to syncretism, an indiscriminate confusion, founded on a relativistic philosophical understanding, about the distinctive identity and nature of various religions. At the Assisi event itself Pope John Paul felt the need to reassure his critics and noted: "The fact that we have come here does not imply any intention of seeking a religious consensus among ourselves or of negotiating our faith convictions. Neither does it mean that religions can be reconciled at the level of a common commitment in an earthly project which would surpass them all. Nor is it a concession to relativism in religious beliefs".

Pope John Paul stressed very clearly that at Assisi people of different religions, yes, had "come together to pray", but had not "come to pray together". In fact the sessions of prayer were separate for the different religions and even at the final gathering of all leaders, prayers were said on a rostrum visibly separated from the common platform. A similar pattern is used at the religious sections of official events organized by the Irish government.

Ecumenical dialogue has as its ultimate goal the reunion of all believers in Jesus Christ. Inter-religious dialogue does not aim at unity as such, but has different objectives which we shall look at as we continue our reflection. At times, with the best of intentions, people prepare inter-religious ceremonies to accompany local events using the model of ecumenical gatherings, without taking into consideration the specific difference on inter-religious dialogue.

For the moment allow me to continue on the path of the problems that inter-religious dialogue must address. Some years after the Assisi event, the Holy See published a controversial document *Dominus Jesus*, in the light of further developments in the area of inter-religious dialogue, reasserting the definitive and complete character of the revelation of Jesus Christ., It should be noted that the controversy about this document centred mainly on certain expressions regarding relations between the Christian Churches. There were more favourable comments from leaders of various Christian

denominations about the principal affirmations of the document, namely the unique role of Jesus Christ in the economy of salvation.

The document stresses that only the revelation of Jesus Christ introduces into our history a universal and ultimate truth which stirs the human mind to ceaseless effort. Dominus Jesus therefore rejected any theory which would consider the revelation of Jesus Christ limited, incomplete, or imperfect, or which would be complementary to that found in other religions. Such a position, Dominus Jesus asserts, would claim to be based on the notion that the truth about God cannot be grasped and manifested in its globality and completeness by any historical religion, neither by Christianity nor by Jesus Christ.

The document also unambiguously stresses a distinction between theological faith and belief in the other religions. Dominus Jesus affirms that "belief, in the other religions, is that sum of experience and thought that constitutes the human treasury of wisdom and religious aspiration, which man in his search for truth has conceived and acted upon in his relationship to God and the Absolute". However it also stresses that "God, who desires to call all peoples to himself in Christ and to communicate to them the fullness of his revelation and love, does not fail to make himself present in many ways, not only to individuals, but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches". It asserts that the sacred books of other religions, which in actual fact direct and nourish the existence of their followers, receive from the mystery of Christ the elements of goodness and grace which they contain.

Vatican II had stressed that: "Since Christ died for all and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to everyone the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery". (Gaudium et Spes, 22)

I hope that my extensive quoting from texts of the Popes has not alienated the representatives of the other Christian Churches and other faiths. I have deliberately gone a little out of my way to bring into sharp focus one of the principle theological difficulties which inter-religious dialogue must address.

Indeed, some might ask how is possible for us to enter into real dialogue from a position which stresses the uniqueness of the role of Jesus Christ in the economy of salvation?

Pope Benedict XVI spoke precisely about this topic on the twentieth anniversary of the Assisi event. He noted that "when the religious sense reaches maturity it gives rise to a perception in the believer that faith in God, Creator of the universe and Father of all, must encourage relations of universal brotherhood among human beings".

"Despite the differences that mark the various religious itineraries", Pope Benedict stressed, "recognition of God's existence, which human beings can only arrive at by starting from the experience of creation (cf. Rom 1: 20), must dispose believers to view other human beings as brothers and sisters".

In recognizing God's existence believers of all faiths open themselves then to the affirmation of the fundamental unity of all humankind and recognize that God is the Father of all and that therefore the entire human race shares a common origin and a common destiny: God, our Creator and the goal of our earthly pilgrimage.

This affirmation that God is the Father of all is therefore the theological foundation for the affirmation that it is not legitimate for anyone to espouse religious difference as a presupposition or pretext for an aggressive attitude towards other human beings. Demonstrations of violence cannot therefore be attributed to religion as such but to the cultural limitations with which it is lived and develops in time.

A vision of inter-religious dialogue based on the human and spiritual unity of our origins and our destiny will obviously be focused on our contribution as believers to the quest for fundamental values, especially those characteristic of our time. These values must include the widespread longing for justice, respect for human rights, development, solidarity, freedom, the defense of life, security, peace protection of the environment and of the resources of the earth. While respecting the legitimate

autonomy of temporal affairs, all believers in God have a specific contribution to offer in the search for proper solutions to these pressing questions. In an increasingly pluralist Ireland, inter-religious dialogue can reinforce the fact that pluralist does not mean secularist and that citizens who are believers have the right to bring the values which spring from their belief into the public square of debate on society.

Believers from all religions in Ireland today are called in a special way to bring credible witness to the question about the meaning and purpose of life, for each individual, for Irish society and for humanity as a whole. In today's successful Ireland there are also many signs of emptiness. Behind the outward face of self confidence in the new Irish prosperity there are many signs of fragility, especially among the young; the outward clothes and culture of success all too often serve to hide signs of disillusionment and despair; there are signs of a desire for wealth and possession which fails to fill the hunger for self esteem and value.

A dialogue between all believers should aim to work together, so as to help society to open itself to the transcendent. Such a dialogue, if it is to be effective, must be based on an honest search for the truth and inspired by a sincere wish to know one another better, respecting differences and recognizing what we have in common. In Ireland today there is still a huge deficit in mutual knowledge about religions. Even those who look on the presence of other religions benignly would probably not do well in an examination about the content and traditions of each other's belief! This is in fact not a healthy situation as it could easily drift into the "tolerance of simple politeness" which is embarrassed by difference, rather than into the rigorous investigation and honesty which alone can build true respect in the face of difference.

We need therefore a series of dialogues. We need dialogue on the academic and intellectual level where mutual knowledge of each other's teachings is explored and debated. We need to share our experts and form a generation of theologians who are acquainted with the views of different religions in their integrity. Our various theological institutes should be leading the way. Our public universities should also offer an appropriate space in which to foster such academic inter-religious dialogue, which in its turn would foster the debate in Irish life about the relationship between faith, science and culture.

One lesson that has been learnt from the practice of inter-religious dialogue elsewhere is that there is a need to be rooted in one's faith. The sincerity of inter-religious dialogue requires that each enters into it with the integrity of his or her own faith. Those who have insufficient formation in their own faith are not the people best suited to expose themselves to inter-religious dialogue.

On a wider level, within our communities, in the earlier stages of dialogue the stress could be on the dialogue of life, the sharing of experiences and working together in the area of common concerns so that knowledge of each other and confidence can be built up. It is important that this fundamental core of understanding and respect be built up early in order to be able to react rapidly to the emergence of any forms of racial or religious intolerance. In other countries, it was only when these negative traits had made their appearance that the local religious communities came together, unfortunately then too late.

I have personal experience on an international level of different attempts to carry out a dialogue among representatives of different religions in the context of international development, such as the World Faiths Development Dialogue linked with the World Bank or the C-100 group made up of religious leaders, politicians and the business community to build up a stronger understanding for cooperation between Islam and the West. It is not just a matter of working together so that development goals can be better achieved by involving the commitment of religious groups. It is also the challenge of drawing out from religious reflections concepts and ideas which enrich the very concept of international development. While results have been limited, such types of cooperation help

overcome the notion that religion is a factor which divides our world rather than being a potential force for unity.

Inter-religious dialogue has as its aim the seeking both of the truth and of peace. It is not easy to combine these two aims in a world in which we are fighting a “war on terror” and where we are told to await a “clash of civilizations”. Fear of the other does not create an appropriate climate for fruitful dialogue. Inter-religious dialogue must be carried out in a spirit which fosters a search for truth in a climate of understanding and respect. It must foster a search for truth which does not paper over differences and wish them to disappear so that we can all be polite and go home. Over the past months, for example, there has been a great interest in books on Islam. It is important that the interest in knowledge of each others position be one which springs from a dialogue of respect and love and not one which emerges from fear.

In this sense Inter-religious dialogue does offer a unique opportunity for Ireland. Ireland is going to have a very different religious demography in the years to come. It is especially important that young people can face that situation with a sense of mutual knowledge and respect. I am very pleased to find such respect developing from an early stage in primary education in schools around Dublin, and particularly, I have to say, in the Christian denominational schools which offer a welcome to children of many religions.

Pluralism in religious belief has now entered into a new chapter in its history in Ireland. In this new reality the school must become a primary focus for fostering a climate of knowledge about various religions and about dialogue and mutual respect among different religious traditions.

I have on more than one occasion expressed my opinion that the fostering of plurality of educational patronage is something desirable and welcome in Ireland today, North and South, and could bring benefit to all, also in allowing the specifically Catholic school to be more distinctively Catholic.

In the Republic of Ireland all religious confessions have the right to expect the respect and the support of the State in education within one’s own denomination and tradition. Is this something which divides the community? I do not believe so. Dialogue does not mean abandoning identity. Identity within a specific religious tradition can also be one open to and respectful of other religious traditions and of those who do not hold any religious faith.

The State should be neutral in addressing religious diversity in the sense that it does not favour any individual religious community, except where such a community may suffer disproportionate disadvantage because of size or other reason. But there is no evidence that a totally “religiously neutral secularist society” is the best space in which to foster dialogue between religions. Pope Benedict XVI has noted that: “The pathology of religion is the most dangerous sickness of the human spirit. It exists within the religions, yet it exists also precisely where religion as such is rejected and relative goods are assigned an absolute value”. There are indeed forms of secular society in which hostility to religious values force religious groups into a dangerously narrow perception of their culture and thus sharpen religious differences.

I fully value the role of denominational schools and I have no problems with schools under the patronage of any other religion, provided that there is a guarantee of the quality of teaching and curriculum. I personally favour the provision of denominational education in any form of State school that might emerge in the Republic in the future, along the lines of current community schools and colleges.

Inter-religious dialogue has an important role to bring into reflection on the values which should inspire our society. But all faiths have to avoid any form of fundamentalism, fundamentalism in their own faith, fundamentalism about the role of religion. Religions are obliged to respect the legitimate

autonomy of the secular order and of reason. Religions do not have a worked out political programme as to how to run the world or how best to preserve the integrity of creation and to cultivate it responsibly in the name of the Creator. These are matters to be worked out in detail by reason, a process which always includes free debate among diverse opinions and respect for different approaches. Imposing a specific political programme in the name of God is to make yourself into God. I quote from an earlier writing of Benedict XVI: "Whenever a religiously motivated moralism sidesteps this often irreducible pluralism, declaring one way to be the only right one, then religion is perverted into an ideological dictatorship, whose totalitarian passion does not build peace, but destroys it".

Inter-religious dialogue is certainly part of the road-map to peace. If I were to look back at my lengthy activity in international life, for example, I can clearly remember one moment when I felt powerless and sad. It was in late 1991, when an extraordinarily far-seeing United States diplomat, himself a Jew, came to me saying that there was only one hope of avoiding a horrendous conflict in the then disintegrating Yugoslavia. He said the only way is to get the leaders of the Catholic, Orthodox and Islamic communities to take the lead and to rise above the tribalism of their political leaders. That did not happen, even though the religious leaders were for the most part truly men of peace. Had there been more robust and courageous leadership among all, then perhaps the story of Europe at the end of the twentieth century would have been a happier one.

Is inter-religious dialogue an opportunity for Ireland? An opportunity, yes, and a necessity! Will inter-religious dialogue bring to Irish society something similar to the benefits gained by the ecumenical movement? In the short term probably not, given the smaller number of believers of other faiths! But inter-religious dialogue and understanding has a value in itself which it would be dangerous to put to one side. It would also be, curiously, a renunciation on the part of the Christian community of an integral part of its mission, namely that of fostering in our world an understanding of the unity of humankind, in that we are all children of the same God.

ENDS

For further information please contact:

Clare Roche  
Communications Office,  
Archbishop's House,  
Dublin 9.  
Ireland

Telephone: (01) 836 0723

Facsimile: (01) 836 0793

**The Catholic Communications Office is an Agency of the Irish Bishops' Conference**