UNITY IN GOD

I start by recognizing the diversity in religious affiliation of people in my social setup. This is in addition to the cultural diversity that characterizes our communities. The different religious groups are: Christians, Moslems, Hindus and African Traditional Religions. The different faith groups have got a clear identification either in the way of dressing or in the places of worship like churches, mosques, and shrines (even if these are at times hidden in the courtyards). One notices a certain respect that members of the various faith groups have for their religious leaders: pastors and clerics enjoy a lot of respect and their authority counts a lot in society.

Countrywide, statics reveal “Religious Affiliation in Uganda” as follows:¹

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>1991 census</th>
<th>2002 census</th>
<th>2014 census</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>85.4%</td>
<td>85.2%</td>
<td>84.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>44.5%</td>
<td>41.9%</td>
<td>39.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church of Uganda (Anglican)</td>
<td>39.2%</td>
<td>35.9%</td>
<td>32.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pentecostal</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh-day Adventist</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthodox Christian</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Christian</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahá’í Faith</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other non-Christian</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above religions are united under “The Inter-Religious Council of Uganda (IRCU) which is “an initiative that brings together different religious institutions to address issues of common interest. Established in 2001, IRCU is affiliated to the World Council of Religions for Peace (WCRP) and the African Council of Religious Leaders (ACRL).” The IRCU has programs in the areas of HIV & AIDS; Peace, Justice, and Governance; and Coordination, Networking, and Partnership Function.”²

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CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF UNITY IN GOD

- The word of God

In the book of the prophet Isaiah 56:7, God Himself told His chosen people, referring to the temple in Jerusalem which was a symbol of heaven for them, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. In response, God gave us His son Jesus Christ that whoever believes in him may not perish but live forever (John 3:16). During his ministry on earth, Jesus had no distinctions between people. He welcomed everyone. There is no one who approached him in faith and returned unattended. In the scriptures, Jesus is seen breaking down the societal walls that separated people on grounds of race, color, culture, status, … He was a Jew but shared out God’s favors to non-Jews as well (the Samaritans, Canaanites, sinners, Romans, gentiles …). In Mathew 15:21-28, the Canaanite woman acquires healing for her daughter not because she belonged to a chosen race but because she had faith in Jesus.

This shows that for Jesus, what really brings us salvation is not our religions, cultures, races but our faith in God. Following his master, St Paul became an apostle to the gentiles, took pride in their service even arousing envy in his own people who had rejected the faith because great things were being done to the gentiles through faith in Jesus (Romans 11:13-14).

The Gospel of Saint John chapter 17 is Jesus’ prayer for unity to His Heavenly Father, the night before He died also known as the Farewell Discourse. Jesus offered a moving intercessory prayer on behalf of His apostles and all who would believe in Him. In this priestly appeal, Jesus prays for Himself (verses 1-5), for His Disciples (Verses 6-19), and for those who believe through the word of the disciples (verses 20-26).

"That they may be one" 3 Were the words expressed five times in Jesus’ prayer to manifest His desire for our unity – not only a unity of the original apostles – but also of all who have followed in their footsteps, generation by generation. We Christians for that reason understand and believe that our union with God and His son Jesus shall not be realized until we have made Their will and interest our greatest desire. The unity Jesus speaks of here is a unity in the truth, particularly the truth that the Father sent His Son for the salvation of the world. Hence, the unity we pray and work for is a unity in the gospel.

- CANON LAW

The law of the church encourages us in many ways to live in unity most especially regarding the responsibility of Papal Legate: “The principal task of a papal legate is continually to make more firm and effective the bonds of unity which exist between the Apostolic See and the particular churches. (Can. 364) Within the territory assigned to him, it is therefore the responsibility of the legate to: work with the bishops to foster appropriate exchanges between the Catholic Church and other Churches of ecclesial communities, and indeed with non-Christian religions.” (Can. 364 n.6). Canon 383 §4 also explains who should be part of the bishop’s flock. can. 256, §2 shows the place of our unity as it talks about the training of seminarians and we could add /those in religious formation/. can.1170 too talks about the recipients of blessings.

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3 African Bible, John chapter 17: 1-26
DOCUMENTS OF VATICAN II: Declaration of the relationship of the church to non-Christian religions (Nostra Aetate -pages 660-668)

This also gives a lot to reflect on our unity God. Somewhere it indicates: “….Religions to be found everywhere strive variously to answer the restless searching of the human heart by proposing ways, which consist of teachings, rules of life and sacred ceremonies. **The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions.** She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed She proclaims and must ever proclaim Christ, the way, the truth, and the life (John14:6), in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself (2Corithians5:18-19).

The church therefore has this exhortation for her sons: prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men, as well as the values in their society and culture.

Upon the Moslems, too, the Church looks with esteem:

- They adore one God, living and enduring, merciful and all-powerful, Maker of heaven and earth and Speaker to men.
- They strive to submit wholeheartedly even to His inscrutable decrees, just as did Abraham, with whom the Islamic faith is pleased to associate itself.
- Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet.
- They also honor Mary, His virgin mother; at times they call on her, too, with devotion.
- They await the way of judgment when God will give each man his due after raising him up.
- Consequently, they prize the moral life, and give worship to God especially through prayer, almsgiving, and fasting.”

THE RULE OF ST BENEDICT

St Benedict exhorts his followers to show hospitality to all in chapter 53. “All” reflects the concern that guests be given honor in light of their relationship to Christ rather than in terms of their rank in society. Hospitality for him is the love that extends to strangers; it’s a movement through which we move towards strangers letting them come in so that they, through our love and friendliness become our friends. This love overcomes the rift created by our natural feelings towards strangers. Strangers become friends through free giving and accepting the gift.

In chapter 72, St Benedict teaches on the good zeal which Monks ought to have. That which separates from vice and leads to God and to eternal life. He ends by asking his followers to prefer nothing whatever to Christ and so he prays: “may He lead us all together to everlasting life.”

“He” was referring to Christ Jesus who is reconciling the world unto Himself.

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4 DOCUMENTS OF VATICAN II: Declaration of the relationship of the church to non-Christian religions (Nostra Aetate - pages 660-668)

5 Rule of st Benedict
After narrating some of the ways Christians understand their unity in God, the first question that comes to one’s mind is whether it is appropriate to talk about inter-religious dialogue or “inter-religious co-existence” in my social environment. I am not very sure if “inter-religious dialogue” is taking place. If I am asked to inquire from the people of my locality about this dialogue, I don’t know which answer I would receive. One thing is sure: many are aware of the fact that people of different religious affiliations are living together. It would be important to make a reflection about the kind of dialogue taking place between them. There are many instances where people of different religions find themselves together.

Clans: It is a fact that members of the extended families (clans) have different religious affiliations, yet the blood relation obliges them to belong together. It is, thus, not clear whether these members carry out a dialogue of faith or not.

Mixed neighborhoods: There are people who find themselves in the same neighborhood and are obliged to live according to the traditional “good neighborhood policy”, yet are not necessarily doing any dialogue. Of course there are moments where neighbors invite each other to celebrate the different religious festivities: Christmas, closure of Ramadan etc. Those could be moments for a kind of conversation but the contents of such conversations are rarely religious.

Mixed institutions: It is observable that many institutions like schools and health facilities stand on religious/denominational foundations. In fact, there are no “neutral religious foundations”. We have many schools that are “catholic founded” or “Islamic founded” but accommodating others who belong to other faith communities. The leadership of these institutions is taken over by the founding bodies and sometimes the predominant religious culture is that of the founding religious denomination.

Common development projects: In some communities projects have been initiated with a representation from the various religious groups. Examples for this are the many Financial Saving Associations (SACCOS). These bring people together to work for a common goal. Does inter-religious dialogue take place also here?

Interfaith-marriages: It is true that people of different religions fall in love with each other and some get married. Many a times the difference in religion becomes an obstacle for the official marriage. Whereas some seem to take it lightly, others especially Muslim men use the love relationship to convert women (and of course children) to their religion.

In all the above and other circumstances, it is thus, not clear whether these members use the occasions to carry out a dialogue of faith or not.

There is a phenomenon of increasing missionary work (one sees many long bearded men from Arabic countries on mission) accompanied by a mushrooming of mosques in many trading centres. Some people talk of the “Gaddafi effect”. Gaddafi is said to have sponsored the construction of mosques. Is this to make the presence of the Islamic religion felt or is it a sign of the increasing number of Moslems? Can dialogue take place in this environment or is competition programmed?
The increasing number of sub-groups in the main stream religions seems to make dialogue more difficult. The Moslems have their sects (Tabliq, etc.) and Christians. In fact it seems easier for a catholic to be engaged with a Moslem in a peaceful conversation than with a “born again” Christian. Can we speak of inter-religious dialogue or inter-denominational dialogue?

It is common for politicians to exploit the religious affiliations for their own interests. There is an unspoken question that many use while casting their vote: to which religion does the candidate belong?

In the end there remain more questions than answers. What should be the goal of dialogue? Mutual understanding, respect for religious sentiments, creating a peaceful community, reverence for the mystery revealed in each religion…etc.? Nevertheless, I see the need for common knowledge about the different faith-expressions in the different religions. There is need to overcome ignorance and prejudices. There is need to work and ensure religious freedom and avoid violent fundamentalism.

It is possible to try all possible means for “practical dialogue” rather than theoretical dialogue left only for experts and professionals. There is need to distinguish between “structured/organized religion” and “spirituality” that is inherent in all religions. Inter-religious dialogue should foster “inter-religious prayer” where God (common to all religions) can draw people of different religions together.

All the followers of Christ are called to work for reconciliation, for in Christ “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.” (Col 1, 19-20). We should be first ones to make the first step towards the others. We ought to see God manifesting His goodness also in the others. No single group should monopolize God in order to judge and disrespect others!

I conclude with a reflection from Vima Dasan. In His book, His Word Lives, “Heaven is open to all whose faith in Christ is personal, persistent, cheerful and practiced daily, especially in the service of others.” And he explains using a story: One day, it seems a certain curious person in heaven asked st. Peter; “How many Hindus are in heaven?” St Peter replied: “No Hindus.” Then he asked: “How many Muslims?” “Not even one,” replied St Peter. The man was surprised. He said: “Oh, then, there are only Christians in heaven?” “No, there are no Christians in heaven either,” replied Peter. “How many Catholics?” “No Catholics either.” Then St Peter said, “Heaven is not meant for any particular group of people. Here, there is no distinction between Hindus, Muslims, or Christians for all are welcome in heaven.”

Prepared and presented by sr Markline Naturinda, OSB

“\textit{That in all things God may be glorified!”}