

LIVING THE DIALOGUE IN THE CHURCH

by Lilia Sebastiani

Today, “dialogue” is a loved and very diffused word, even if or perhaps the reality it refers to is still on the run.

Our culture has transmitted different kinds of acceptation:

a) the didactic-persuasive dialogue of a Platonic derivation, in which the one who is forward tries to persuade or convert the other, b) the dialogue-encounter, in which the interlocutors aim, above all, at knowing each other to enter in relation; they try to grow in a reciprocal acceptance and appreciation, eliminating every prejudice. It is in this sense that today we speak of dialogue among religions and civilisations (with good peace of him who instead prefers to speak about clashes of civilisations); or of dialogue within the Church.

The dialogue as unfulfilled prophecy

The dialogue has become a declared fundamentally valuable theme in the Church starting from Vatican II. This is true not only because its concept is very much present - for instance it constitutes the central idea of *Gaudium et Spes*, No.92, as well as of the declaration *Nostra aetate* which turns to the dialogue with non-Christian religions, but for the council event itself. The dialogue is not a doctrinal truth; it is not just an ingredient, essential though it is. It is the figure of a new way of “being Church” and of “building Church”. It is a way characterised by the attention to the other and to the values, which the other takes with himself, rather than by the anticipated persuasion of one’s own superiority and, therefore, by the judgement (in the sense meant by Jesus when he tells his disciples “do not judge”: an *ipso facto* condemnation and marginalisation of the diversity).

In the preparatory phase of Vatican II (a960.62), what filtered outwardly was only some news on the themes to be debated and on the foreseen work of the commissions. The curia area had imposed silence, just the simple communication constituted an element of weakness and not a dialogue with the world (which they had not yet spoken about). In this phase, as we know, part of the council fathers, with Cardinal Ottaviani as leader, would have liked a dogmatic Council to insist with clarity on the traditional Catholic truth. Another part instead, voiced by Cardinal Bea, aspired to establish at least the premises for an authentic dialogue with the world, with the non-Catholic Christians and with the believers of other religions.

Vatican II reached much beyond its premises. It was a pastoral, ecumenical Council, deliberately non dogmatic-defining. It succeeded in generating a dialogue praxis and free discussion on the emerging questions, on what was going on being proposed by and discussed in the Council (therefore, not only on what was approved, as the traditionally oriented fathers would have liked). This happened not only in Rome, but also in local churches. In many cases (let us think of the liturgical reformation) the spirit of the Council pushed itself prophetically much more forward than the letter.

Today, nobody could deny as a principle that the diversity is richness and that unity is not uniformity. Yet today’s situation highlights signs of weariness and ultraconservative policy, if compared to the “council spring”, so much missed by those who were lucky to live it. The Church goes on speaking of dialogue quite often. However, this happens preferably with outsiders, without perceiving the parallel exigency of a true dialogue within her. The laypersons, whose importance and dignity nobody theoretically disowns, have no voice and no active space within the institutional church. Even the channels of communication, the places for dialogue and confrontation are missing.

Words are not missing, rather they abound; “big ecclesial events” also are not missing. In fact they are extraordinarily visible and arouse the interest of the mass-media. Yet they are not places of dialogue. We cannot say that the communication, which takes place in them, is dialogical, since it is pre-disposed and unidirectional.

In the immediate post-council, there were violent, and sometimes little balanced conflicts, yet there was altogether a strong sense of our being Church. Today perhaps it is not so. The contesting spurs have weakened and scattered. This is not necessarily a signal to rejoice at. In fact, it may mean that there is not much to hope for, that we have lost the desire or the strength of committing ourselves actively; that we have lost trust in the interlocutor and in the chances to be listened to.

Many have made commitment and disapproval private, to the point of determining what, at times, we rightly define as submerged schism. Many have gone far from the ecclesial community without banging the door. It is a serious silent haemorrhage, which keeps on subtracting from the Church part of her best energies, but just because it happens silently, we can easily ignore it..

This situation questions the Church in all her components, to seek spaces, times and instruments for the dialogue, even inedited ones, and to give value to the existing ones. The dialogue is not a method, a strategy and episodic event. It is a way of being, in which the identity of the Church is manifested. We cannot understand the magisterium of the Church outside the dynamic of a church in the journey of history.

The Gospel, the good news is in the hands of human beings who have the responsibility of proclaiming and transmitting it. “Communication” is not a stranger to the good news.

A God in dialogue

For a believer the dialogue is not only a method. It is not a circumscribed event, but rather a life-style, an ethical imperative, we could say, rooted in the logic of creation/redemption. Sure, the word dialogue does not exist in the Bible, neither the corresponding technique, but we cannot say that the reality and the ethic of dialogue are missing. The Covenant is based on the idea of a God in dialogue, in search of men: a God who is near, capable of listening, of withdrawing part of his infinity to create a space for the finiteness of his creatures. These, of course, are finite, but not crystallised in their limits. They are in a journey of a permanent evolution.

Jesus of Nazareth, *an inedited, deep man of dialogue*, has brought to us especially and definitively the closeness of this God, since it is in Him that we have an access to the dialogical nearness of God. Of course, Jesus is there as prophet and master. Therefore, from our viewpoint he is one who teaches, one who speaks and others listen to him, yet he is extremely serious with his interlocutors, including the most immature and ill-disposed ones. He questions deeply, but allows also the other to question him. He changes the life of those whom he meets, but he, too, reacts in his depth to the persons before him, to the extent of changing, in some cases, his own Messianic programme, as in the case of the Syria – Phoenician.

His parables also are an instrument of dialogue, sometimes surprising and paradoxical: a way to encounter in the concrete life an interlocutor, who could react negatively to a more theoretical speech. Sometimes a parable tends to disconcert, more than letting us understand clearly; this also is dialogue, intensified communication born from love and tending to love.

Hosting the other in us

Once again, love is the key of everything. In a Christian-personal sense, the dialogue is not a formal fact, an alternate speaking at snip-snap. In fact, there is a speaking in turn, which is not a dialogue at all (Let us think of some TV debates). The dialogue is not essentially relation; it expresses itself in words, but not only in words. It happens in the recognition, respect of the interlocutor’s identity as the “other”. This means neither an enemy to win, nor the prolongation of myself or a

resonance-box of my thought. A relation rooted in a fundamental communion, which exists already in the project of God and in the common structures of humanity, but which needs to be explicit and living. It tends to a nearing, to a deeper union, to a reciprocal good, which is bigger also than the persons and groups in dialogue.

When two persons (or groups) succeed in assuming an authentic attitude of dialogue between them, it is the whole tissue of the interpersonal relations, the entire human community to benefit of it, not only their relation.

To dialogue is not enough to speak together, though this is anyhow important, a “human” acting par excellence. To dialogue demands the awareness of one’s own limit in both sides. To be in dialogue means to open oneself to the other, to host him in oneself and to get transformed inwardly, even ignoring the dialectic success (namely who will be right at the end, a thing often not clear). It means, rather, accepting to become a little bit “the other” after the confrontation with him, without losing one’s own identity. Indeed, this becomes stronger and more fruitful, once we purify it from its offensive opacities. However, very often to listen is only a silent sharpening of the weapons, waiting for one’s own turn to speak and to gain victory.

The word “to convince” is beautiful in this sense because it evokes a winning together; the winner is the one who is right, but also the other in as much as it grows, overcoming at least partly a position, which limited him.

In case the full possession of truth existed, the dialogue would effectively have nothing to offer, not even as an intellectual exercise. We discover instead that unsuspected results and precious fragments of the unique Truth, which we are called to serve, can be revealed to us through unusual ways. The word itself of one who does not believe can disclose a new authenticity and unexpected resonance of our faith. All of us have the duty to serve the Truth. However, we must be aware that to presume of possessing and reducing the truth to an unchangeable datus, or to identify it with our own more or less enlightened, but always partial, contextual, provisional truths, would mean to betray it (at least as far as formulation and translation into life).

To be in dialogue we need a spirit of vigilant and critical faith, supported by a certain historical knowledge. This helps to enlighten many conflicts, helping them to evolve in “confrontation”. We need authentic faith, lived in the Holy Spirit and His work.

Believing women for the dialogue

Perhaps, to speak of “dialogue in the Church” is too little. It is the matter of edifying a Church in dialogue, which has existed so far almost as a prophetic intuition, as a dream of the Church. Women have a particular role and responsibility in this. Always, though perhaps excluded from power, they have developed a particular sensitivity to the dynamic of listening and interpersonal relations. We must appreciate these dynamics. We must not consider them as duty or grazing reserved to the women. All the human relations must be qualified both in the Church and in the secular society. Not only the relations of private and intimate nature, but, as far as possible, also the more enlarged realities and the institutions themselves - always exposed to the risk of losing the soul, of becoming an end to themselves and of surviving in function of one’s own survival.

To become inspirer, protagonists, authors of intra and inter-ecclesial dialogue (we think to be very difficult that only one out of the two sides can flourish alone: we think that *simul stabunt simul cadent*), the women are questioned by precise duties: the generic desire, the generic availability are not enough. The first duty is that of studying, hoping that we may not understand this issue in a flatly mental sense. It is so: if we do not learn how to understand the language of the other to the extent of speaking it when required, it remains difficult to analyse it and to diagnose its limit. It is difficult to realise something different and better; it is difficult to edify together an integral theology at the service of a fraternal Church. To study is indispensable so that a Church still masculine and used to celibacy may not find easy to ignore the women as interlocutors. It is indispensable also in itself to be set free

from the spiritual and intellectual subjection to the clergy. There can't be any communion until there is subjection. There can be no dialogue until both interlocutors are at par.

Moreover the women must occupy all the ecclesial spaces, which are already open at the present moment, though fully acknowledging their own insufficiencies, and occupy them generously, well qualified and efficaciously, always remembering that there is something else to be done.

In this historical moment, more than in any other perhaps, to exercise the prophetic ministry of disapproval is a responsibility, which we cannot elude. We need to do it without allowing ourselves to be neutralised. However, one's own disapproval also needs to undergo discernment and permanent purification. We must be aware of the fact that to manifest loyally one's own disapproval, when required, with authentic love and in full *parrhesia*, is a qualified and necessary way to serve the Church.

At this point it seems almost superfluous to remember the third issue, fundamental for every believer, no matter his condition: to grow in faith, hope and charity. Faith does not devalue, but illuminates the exercise of intelligence, of conscience and critical thinking. Hope is not an easy optimism and it is not generic, but tends to incarnate itself in the historical commitment. Theological love, as a response to the infinite love with which God loves us first, is a love that calls us to live and that transfigures. It is a demanding love full of tenderness, patient and challenging, always dialogical - even in the disquieting moments of apparent silence of God. In fact, the moment when God seems to be silent are moments in which God waits for our autonomous word: the apex of the dialogue.