

Interview with an Italian RTI Team Reti Televisive Italiane spa, Ms Fabiana Davanzo (Producer)

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1. What do you consider to be the meeting point of Religions in Kolkata and what do you think of Dialogue with World Religions in Kolkata? From your experience in the field of Dialogue, do you think the Ministry of Dialogue can meet the needs of the poor and the marginalized?

Answer:

Kolkata is basically a city of Multi-Religious and Cultural Traditions. The meeting point for Dialogue in Kolkata in the midst of plurality of Religions and cultures is the Human person and its survival. Kolkata continues to grow in the civilization of love and concern for one another. Together with Religious practices among various Faith Communities, Kolkata has a strong political consciousness. The issues of Human Rights and dignity of human persons are some of the main concerns. The City of Joy, in the midst of many pain and suffering is essentially dialogical. The City has the worst of poverty; also it is the city of wealth and riches. People belonging to different Faith, i.e. Hindus, Muslims, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Zoroastrians, Tribals and Ethnic communities co-exist here. There is acceptance, tolerance and healthy interactions of Religious beliefs. It is said, Bengal has 12 months and 13 festivities. It is a city of joyful celebration. People of all faith take part in the celebrations of one another and thus create a harmonious blend. Thus, Kolkata has a strong pluralistic sense to accommodate all Religious groups and ethnic societies. It is a unique city, where people show their care and concern for one another in times of difficulties and crisis.

The Church in Kolkata has been active in the field of Dialogue through its Mission of Education for all, irrespective of caste, creed, colour, race and socio-economical backgrounds, through Health Care and Socio-Economical Development programs. In Kolkata, the Religions are accepted and tolerated. There is a deep desire among the people to be enriched by the inner spiritual strength of one another's Religious and spiritual tents. The Church's contribution in all these areas are much appreciated by the people.

Of course, there are various levels of Dialogue. Depending on people's interest and situation, there is the Dialogue of Action, Life, the Dialogue of Religious experience and

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theological exchange. The Ramakrishna Mission organizes intellectual discourses for the people in Kolkata regularly. Now-a-days, the Universities and its associate institutions are also taking interest in this line. Seminars, workshop, short-term programs are organized to create awareness among people for Dialogue. The Dialogue is done both informally and formally. In Kolkata there have been efforts mainly by the Jesuits for Dialogue in a formal manner. This has been a very specialized field of ministry. The Jesuits with whom I came in touch were Fr. Antoine, Fr. Fallon, Fr. Van Exem and others. They taught in the Universities and associated themselves with the intelligent of Kolkata. They were easily acceptable to the high class Bengali Society. Their contributions in the field of dialogue have been well appreciated.

At the moment, Fr. M. Schillings, SJ is actively involved in this important area of concern through his quarterly periodical, Mohona. The meaning of the term Mohona is "Meeting point". This gives an opportunity for all those interested in Dialogue to come to a common platform. Through this Bengali Inter-religious Journal, the Religious, Spiritual and Moral values are shared by those who want to create a culture of Dialogue among people of all Faith Communities. The personal experiences in the present day context have been the interesting features of this important ministry in Kolkata. Then we have Fr. Moses Korkonios, who is making efforts to establish an Ashram, keeping in mind the rich cultural and Religious heritage that Bengal has. At the University level, Fr. George Pattery is involved in the contextualized Formation of the Scholastics. He is based in Shantiniketan, the institution founded by Rabindranath Tagore. Through this program, the Scholastics are made to be immersed in the very reality of Dialogue in an existential way. This also gives them awareness of the life style of the people their Socio-economic conditions, to listen to the cry of the poor, and to be in touch with their poverty and many such concerns. This sort of efforts in Kolkata will certainly help the future ministers to meet the challenges the Church will be facing in the 21st Century.

Besides the Jesuits, there are quite many small or large groups, who show their concern for the dialogue. Among the minority communities, it's more prevalent. The field of dialogue consists not only of the intellectuals. There are some serious human concerns, which are also taken care of through some humanitarian services. For instant, we have "Asha Niketan", which is a home for the mentally retarded. A French couple coordinates the work at the centre and there are numerous volunteers to work for the inmates. There are homes for the street children. Mother Teresa's homes in Kolkata also create an atmosphere for dialogue. Irrespective of caste, creed, socio-economic background, the inmates are cared in these centres.

Concern for integral human liberation is the central concern of all religions. Hence, the human person-especially the suffering human person-is the meeting point of religions. This is obvious in Kolkata. The works of involvement for human welfare bind the hearts and minds of believers of diverse religions. The millions of poor live in Kolkata City and here a rich plurality of religions is still very vibrant. In some corners, there are joint efforts and commitments to Justice and Peace, Freedom and fellowship. The Church in Kolkata is very much involved in various capacities to serve the poor and the needy. The compassion of Jesus Christ is alive today through the Ministry of the church and its institutions. The Church in Kolkata is essentially dialogical, may not be directly, but indirectly.

As far as I am concerned in the field of Dialogue, for me it is a way of life. My upbringing

has been in a pluralistic set-up. In School, where I studied, I sat with Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains. They were all my friends. When I came to College, I had the similar experience. In fact, my association with them strengthened my faith. Never I felt that I am different from them. When I was sent to do my masters in Hindi Literature in Allahabad University, by the Archdiocese, I was challenged to live my faith realistically in a totally Hindu milieu and atmosphere. I was the only Catholic in my Class. The majority of my classmates were Hindus, some Muslims and others from other Religious backgrounds. We used to have weekly "Kavi Sammelan" (young poet's recitations), where we recited our self composed poems. My friends appreciated my contributions. For me, Music and literature has become the tools for Dialogue, which I cherish.

I am associated in the field of Dialogue from the beginning. I have also grown in this area of concern gradually through my Priestly ministries. Since 1995, I am directly involved in the ministry of Dialogue officially in the Archdiocese. This has given me opportunity to create new avenues for dialogue. The ministry of Dialogue requires creativity and many initiatives. Last couple of years, it was possible for me to organize a number of Seminars and Inter-Faith prayer meetings on various occasions through the cooperation and help of others. This way I am able to conscientize people of all Faith for Dialogue. People have invited me to give talks in their own centres, like in Mahanirban Temple, Ballygunj, in Jain Temple, Belgachia, to sing Bhajans and hymns at Belur Math, at Inter-religious prayer services during Saraswati Puja, Bijoya and Deepawali etc., (Hindu Festivals) From my experience I can say, people are very open for dialogue in Kolkata.

Last February, we organized an Inter-Religious Dialogue for Peace and Communal Harmony. The Commission for Ecumenism and Dialogue, CBCI sponsored this Seminar. The participants and speakers were from all faith communities. As a follow-up to this, now we have a team, which consists of members from various faith communities. We have made a vision statement for dialogue in Kolkata. The members are very enthusiastic to come together. Recently it has been given a name as Kolkata Forum for Inter-Faith Dialogue and Harmony. We meet regularly and make plan of actions to be implemented. Our common efforts are to help people to grow in the culture of Dialogue and cultivate the civilization of love. Gradually we are working on the aims and objectives of this Forum.

From the experience I have gained so far, I can say that Dialogue is a process of growing together, keeping in mind our differences and uniqueness. We come to share, discuss and pray together. But there is another dimension to dialogue, i.e. in order to become socially prophetic and productive, dialogue should become conflict resolution. In our pluralistic and democratic in conflict situation can give a sense of interdependence. Through Dialogue we come to know the deeper reality of self and the other.

I have spoken a lot. Now to answer your question regarding, if the Ministry of Dialogue also meets the needs of the poor and the marginalized in Kolkata. Earlier, I have spoken sufficiently with regard to Church's involvement in the service of the poor and the marginalized. The Church in Kolkata is very much in dialogue with the poor. Mother Teresa has become a symbol of the poorest of the poor in Kolkata. It was her commitment to the poorest of the poor and the dying destitute. By opening the home for the dying, the children's home, home for the aged, caring for the released prisoners from Jail etc. she has shown the way to Dialogue with the poorest of the poor, irrespective of caste, creed and socio-economic

background. It is by serving the poor, we come to a deeper realization that God lives in the poor. That's the reason Mother Teresa is venerated by the people of all faiths. There are independent organizations and Associations who organize every year Inter-Religious Prayer services at the Tomb of Mother Teresa on her Death Anniversary and Birth Anniversary. Mother's tomb is gradually becoming a meeting point of all Religions. People are coming more and more to take the blessings of Mother, who touched the hearts of the poor, by her compassionate, love and service. Last year, to celebrate 50th Anniversary of the Congregation, Sr.Nirmala had requested me to organize an Inter-Faith Prayer Service. It was so beautiful to see, at least 11 representatives from various Faith Communities, coming and joining hands to pray together to pay homage to Mother Teresa. Among them were our Archbishop Henry D'Souza and CNI Bishop Raju. Thus, I can say, Dialogue in Kolkata is very vibrant and effective in many levels. It certainly meets the needs of the poor and the marginalized.

I hope, I have done justice to your queries, I think you sincerely for calling me to share my experiences of Dialogue in Kolkata. I wish you all best in your effort to promote the ministry of Dialogue through your programs. May God bless you and your unit.