

## Reference to Buddhists and Buddhism in Document of the Catholic Church Since 1964

### Conciliar Texts and Encyclicals and other Papal Magisterial Letters

**Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*)** 16-17, Nov. 21, 1964

. . . “But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these there are the Muslims, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind. Nor is God far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is He who gives to all men life and breath and all things, (Cf. Acts 17,25-28.) and as Savior wills that all men be saved. (Cf. 1 Tim. 2, 4.) Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. (Cfr. *Epist. S.S.C.S. Officii ad Archiep.* Boston.: Denz. 3869-72.) . . .

. . . Through her work, whatever good is in the minds and hearts of men, whatever good lies latent in the religious practices and cultures of diverse peoples, is not only saved from destruction but is also cleansed, raised up and perfected unto the glory of God, the confusion of the devil and the happiness of man.”

**Vatican II, Declaration on the Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*)** 2, Oct. 28, 1965:

“The religions which are found in more advanced civilizations endeavor by way of well-defined concepts and exact language to answer these questions...**Buddhism** in its various forms testifies to the essential inadequacy of this changing world. It proposes a way of life by which men can, with confidence and trust, attain a state of perfect liberation and reach supreme illumination either through their own efforts or by the aid of divine help.”

**Vatican II, Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church (*Ad Gentes*)** 11, Dec. 7, 1965

“. . . Even as Christ Himself searched the hearts of men, and led them to divine light, so also His disciples, profoundly penetrated by the Spirit of Christ, should show the people among whom they live, and should converse with them, that they themselves may learn by sincere and patient dialogue what treasures a generous God has distributed among the nations of the earth.”

**Apostolic Exhortation of Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*** 53, Dec. 8, 1975

“This first proclamation is also addressed to the immense sections of mankind who practice non-Christian religions. The Church respects and esteems these non-Christian religions because they are the living expression of the soul of vast groups of people. They carry within them the echo of thousands of years of searching for God, a quest which is incomplete but often made with great sincerity and righteousness of heart. They possess an impressive patrimony of deeply religious texts. They have taught generations of people how to pray. They are all impregnated with innumerable "seeds of the Word" [References to Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, *Ad Gentes* 11, *Lumen Gentium* 17] and can constitute a true "preparation for the

Gospel," [Reference to *Praeparatio Evangelica* and *Lumen Gentium* 16] to quote a felicitous term used by the Second Vatican Council and borrowed from Eusebius of Caesarea."

**Encyclical of John Paul II, Mission of the Redeemer (*Redemptoris Missio*) 55, 91, 1990**

Originally a quote from a letter of John Paul II to Fifth Plenary Assembly Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (June 23, 1990), this quotation is incorporated into the encyclical: "Although the Church gladly acknowledges whatever is true and holy in the religious traditions of **Buddhism**, Hinduism, and Islam as a reflection of that truth which enlightens all men [Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*], this does not lessen her duty and resolve to proclaim without fail Jesus Christ who is 'the way, and the truth and the life....' The fact that the followers of other religions can receive God's grace and be saved by Christ apart from the ordinary means which he has established does not thereby cancel the call to faith and baptism which God wills for all people." (55)

"The missionary must be a "contemplative in action." He finds answers to problems in the light of God's word and in personal and community prayer. My contact with representatives of the non-Christian spiritual traditions, particularly those of Asia, has confirmed me in the view that the future of mission depends to a great extent on contemplation." (91)

\*\*\*\*\*

**Papal Speeches and Addresses:**

**Paul VI to Thai Buddhist Monks coming to Rome (1972)**

"In your country **Buddhist** thought has long devoted itself with seriousness and concentration to the search for an adequate understanding of the deepest mysteries that surround human existence...We have a profound regard for the spiritual, moral and socio-cultural treasures that have been bestowed on you through your precious traditions. We recognize the values of which you are the custodians, and we share the desire that they should be preserved and fostered.

**Paul VI to Laotian Supreme Buddhist Patriarch (1973)**

"The Catholic Church considers its [Buddhism's] spiritual riches with esteem and respect and wishes to collaborate with you, as religious men, to bring about real peace and the salvation of men.

"'Peace' and 'salvation' are two ideals that are deeply rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which we have the mission to proclaim, as also, in some ways, in the Buddhist tradition you follow. They both refer us to the Eternal, to the Super-terrestrial (*lokuttara*), and require from man an attitude of detachment, inner freedom, truth, justice and benevolence as the indispensable condition to reach true peace and salvation." Goes on to say that our intention in Laos is none other to love and serve while sharing the suffering and hopes of others."

**Paul VI to Japanese Buddhists (1973)**

"**Buddhism** is one of the riches of Asia: you teach men to seek truth and peace in the kingdom of the Eternal, beyond the horizon of visible things. You likewise strive to encourage the qualities of goodness, meekness and non-violence."

**Paul VI to Japanese religionists including Buddhists (1974)**

“The religions represented here today, like all the great religions of the world, are rich in teachings and examples for men who sincerely seek to establish peace in their own hearts. According to the varying emphases of our different beliefs we can find our own inner tranquility in the contemplation of God’s beauty in the world he has created, by the mortification of our senses and the practice of asceticism and by making use of our privileged share in God’s life to overcome the legacy of original sin. A common emphasis is given to the need to liberate the things of the spirit and to give help to our fellow men.”

**Paul VI to the Ven. Gyalwa Karmapa, a Buddhist leader of Tibet (1975)**

“All of us are pilgrims to the Absolute and the Eternal, who alone can fulfill the heart of man.” (John Paul II repeated this to a group of Japanese visitors, 1980)

**Paul VI, last meeting with interreligious visitors, from Japan, including Buddhists (1978)**

“We are glad to note the priority that you give to the questions of the purification of the heart, which is the key solution to every problem... We are therefore convinced that there is no solution to the problems of freedom, social justice, integral development, and above all peace, unless the heart and the intentions of individuals are pure. May God the Most High assist you in this search for a pure, noble and generous heart.”

Then after a closing wish, he adds, “We thank you again for your visit and pray to the Lord that we may always be worthy to love you and to serve you.”

*The last message given to interreligious partners by Paul VI before his death.*

**John Paul II in Manila (1981)**

“**Buddhism** teaches that by devout confidence man ascends to freedom and enlightenment.”

**John Paul II in Korea (1984)**

“Your ancestors embraced such overwhelming spiritual worlds as Confucianism and **Buddhism**, yet made them truly their own, enhanced them, lived them and even transmitted them to others.” He gives examples that “eloquently express this feat.”

Later refers to “great ethical and religious visions of **Buddhism** and Confucianism” and how the Korean people through them “have sought the path to the renewal of self and to the consolidation of the whole people in virtue and in nobility of purpose. The profound reverence for life and nature, the quest for truth and harmony, self-abnegation and compassion, the ceaseless striving to transcend-these are among noble hallmarks of your spiritual tradition that have led and will continue to lead, the nation and the people through turbulent times to the haven of peace.”

“Our diversity in religious and ethical beliefs call upon all of us to foster genuine fraternal dialogue and to give special consideration to what human beings have in common and to what promotes fellowship among them. (c.f. NA1) Such concerted effort will certainly create a climate of peace in which justice and compassion can flourish.”

“May I address a particular greeting to the members of the **Buddhist** tradition as they prepare to celebrate the festivity of the **Coming of the Lord Buddha**? May your rejoicing be

complete and your joy fulfilled.”

**John Paul II in Thailand (1984)**

Arrives and expresses his desire to greet the Supreme Patriarch of all Buddhists: “My presence on Thai soil has also enabled me to greet His Holiness the Supreme Patriarch of all Buddhists in this country. It was a privilege for me to meet his venerable and revered religious leader. I am sure that our encounter augurs well for the future of Buddhist-Catholic relations, both here and throughout the world.”

**John Paul II reflecting on the World Day of Peace in Assisi (1986)**

“In every authentic religious experience, the most characteristic expression is prayer. Because of the human spirit’s constitutive openness to God’s action of urging it to self-transcendence, we can hold that ‘every authentic prayer is called forth by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in the heart of every person’” (John Paul II’s address to the Members of the Roman Curia, December 22, 1986; *L’Osservatore Romano* English edition, Jan. 5, 1987.”

**John Paul II to the United States of America (1987)**

“To the **Buddhist** community, which reflects numerous Asian traditions as well as Americas, I wish respectfully to acknowledge your way of life, basked upon compassion and loving kindness and upon a yearning for peace, prosperity and harmony for all beings. May all of us give witness to compassion and loving kindness in promoting the true good of humanity.”

**John Paul II to the Plenary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (1992)**

“Contact with the religious of Asia, especially Hinduism and **Buddhism**, which are noted for their contemplative spirit, their methods of meditation and asceticism, can contribute greatly to the inculturation of the Gospel on that continent.”

**John Paul II in Sri Lanka (1995)**

“I come *as a friend from Rome*, where two thousand years ago the venerable civilization which flourished in this country was known and esteemed. I come *as a pilgrim of goodwill*, with nothing but peace in my heart. I am keenly aware of your country’s *rich spiritual heritage*, shown not only the by strength of your religious traditions but also by the *remarkable harmony and natural respect which has flourished among the followers of various religions*.”

He then continues and expresses his highest regard for the followers of **Buddhism**, refers to certain teachings in particular on compassion, equanimity, loving kindness, and empathetic joy. He refers to other aspects of **Buddhism** and reassures everyone of the desire of the Catholic Church for dialogue and cooperation. He then concludes with a quotation from “the splendid words of the *Dhammapada*”: “Better than a thousand useless words, is one single word that gives peace....” [chapter 8, verse 1]

**John Paul II, address at the General Audience, (1998)**

“It must first be kept in mind that every quest of the human spirit for truth and goodness, and in the last analysis for God, is inspired by the Holy Spirit. The various religions arose precisely from this primordial openness to God. At their origins we often find founders who, with the help of God’s Spirit, achieved a deeper religious experience. Handed on to others, this

experience took form in the doctrines, rites and precepts of the various religions.

**Pope Francis, Visit to Sri Lanka (2015)**

“These praiseworthy initiatives have provided opportunities for dialogue, which is essential if we are to know, understand and respect one another. But, as experience has shown, for such dialogue and encounter to be effective, it must be grounded in a full and forthright presentation of our respective convictions. Certainly, such dialogue will accentuate how varied our beliefs, traditions and practices are. But if we are honest in presenting our convictions, we will be able to see more clearly what we hold in common. New avenues will be opened for mutual esteem, cooperation and indeed friendship.” (January 13, 2015, speaking to a group of religious leaders about their ongoing initiatives of cooperation)

“Yesterday at Madhu I saw something which I would never have expected: not everyone there was Catholic, not even the majority! There were **Buddhists**, Muslims, Hindus, and each one came to pray; they go and they say they receive graces there. There is in the people – and the people are never wrong – they sense that there is something there that unites them. And if they are so naturally united in going together to pray at that shrine – which is Christian but not only Christian, because all want [to go there], then why shouldn’t I go to a Buddhist temple to greet them? What happened yesterday at Madhu is very important. It helps us to understand the meaning of the interreligious experience in Sri Lanka: there is respect for one another. There are small fundamentalist groups, but these are not with the people: they are ideological elites, but they are not with the people.”

[Regarding salvation and what some Christians still teach about non-Christians going to hell, “. . . But I believe that the Church has become much more respectful – as I said during the interreligious meeting in Colombo – and appreciative. When we read what the Second Vatican Council said about the values to be found in other religions, the Church has grown greatly in this regard. And yes, there are dark periods in the history of the Church, we must admit, without being ashamed, because we too are on a path of constant conversion: always moving from sin to grace. And this interreligious experience of fraternity, each always respecting the other, is a grace.” (January 14, q and a with press aboard flight from Sri Lanka, reflecting on an impromptu visit to a Buddhist temple to which the pope was invited to visit from head of the temple during welcoming ceremonies)

**Pope Francis, greetings to a delegation of Buddhists and Christians from the USA (2015)**

“I thank you for this visit is so dear to me, a visit of fraternity, dialogue, and also friendship. And this is good, this is healthy. At this moment in history much injured by war and hatred, these small gestures are seeds of peace and brotherhood. Thank you so much, may the Lord bless you.” (June 22, 2015)

**Pope Francis, Visit with the Supreme Buddhist Patriarch, Wat Ratchabophit Sathit Maha Simaram Temple (Bangkok). Nov. 21, 2019**

“Our meeting takes place as part of the journey of esteem and mutual recognition initiated by our predecessors. I would like this visit to follow in their footsteps, in order to

increase respect but also friendship between our communities. Almost fifty years have passed since the seventeenth **Supreme Patriarch**, Somdej Phra Wanarat (Pun Punnasiri), together with a group of distinguished Buddhist monks, visited Pope Paul VI in the Vatican. This represented a very significant turning point in the development of the dialogue between our religious traditions, which subsequently enabled Pope John Paul II to visit this Temple and the **Supreme Patriarch**, His Holiness Somdej Phra Ariyavongsagatanana (Vasana Vasano).

“I myself recently had the honour of welcoming a delegation of monks from the Wat Pho temple, who presented me with a translation of an ancient **Buddhist** manuscript in the Pali language kept in the Vatican Library. These are small steps which help testify that the culture of encounter is possible, not only within our communities but also in our world, so prone to creating and spreading conflict and exclusion. When we have the opportunity to appreciate and esteem one another in spite of our differences (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 250), we offer a word of hope to the world, which can encourage and support those who increasingly suffer the harmful effects of conflict. Occasions like this remind us how important it is for religions to become more and more beacons of hope, as promoters and guarantors of fraternity.”

**Pope Francis, Meeting with Religious Leaders, Chulalongkorn University (Bangkok), Nov. 22, 2019**

“One hundred and twenty-two years ago, in 1897, King Chulalongkorn, for whom this university is named, visited Rome and met Pope Leo XIII in audience, the first time that a non-Christian Head of State was received in the Vatican. May the memory of that significant encounter, as well as that of his reign, whose virtues included the abolition of slavery, challenge us, in our own time, to pursue the path of dialogue and mutual understanding. And to do so in a spirit of fraternal solidarity that can help end the many present-day forms of slavery, especially the scourge of human trafficking.

“The need for mutual respect, esteem and cooperation between religions is all the more pressing for humanity today. Our world faces complex challenges such as economic and financial globalization and its grave consequences for the development of local communities; rapid advances in technology – which seemingly promote a better world – and the tragic persistence of civil conflicts, whether these involve movements of migration, refugees, famine or outright war. Then, too, there is the degradation and destruction of our common home. These challenges remind us that no region or sector of the human family can look to itself or its future in isolation from or immune to others. All these situations require us to be bold in devising new ways of shaping the history of our time without denigrating or insulting anyone. Long gone are the days when an insular mode of thought could determine an approach to time and space and appear to offer a valid way of resolving conflicts. Now is the time to be bold and envision the logic of encounter and mutual dialogue as the path, common cooperation as the code of conduct, and reciprocal knowledge as a method and standard. In this way, we can provide a new paradigm for resolving conflicts and help foster greater understanding and the protection of creation. In this regard, religions, like universities, have much to offer, without having to renounce their specific character and special gifts. Everything we do in this regard will be a significant step towards guaranteeing younger generations their right to the future, while serving the cause of justice and peace. Only in this way will we provide the young with the tools they need to be in

the forefront of efforts to create sustainable and inclusive lifestyles.

“The times in which we live summon us to build solid foundations, anchored on respect for, and recognition of, the dignity of persons, the promotion of an integral humanism alert to and concerned for the protection of our common home, and a responsible stewardship that preserves the beauty and richness of nature as a right fundamental for existence. The great religious traditions of our world bear witness to a transcendent and widely shared spiritual patrimony that can make a solid contribution in this area, if only we are able to encounter one another without fear.”

\*\*\*\*\*

**Catholic Bishops of Asia, Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, the Synod for Asia, Message to the People of God (1998)**

“We respectfully greet all our sisters and brother in Asia who have put their confidence in other religious traditions. We gladly acknowledge the spiritual values of the great religions of Asia such as Hinduism, **Buddhism**, Judaism, Islam... We esteem the ethical values in the customs and practices found in the teachings of the great philosophers of Asia, which promote natural virtues and pious devotion to ancestors... Together with all Asian peoples, we wish to grow in sharing our richness and in having mutual respect for our differences. We resolve to work together to improve the quality of life of our people. We consider our faith as our greatest treasure and would like to share it with all, fully respecting their religious beliefs and their freedom...

“The church in Asia is called upon to enter a triple dialogue: a dialogue with the cultures of Asia, a dialogue with the religions of Asia and a dialogue with the peoples of Asia, especially the poor. To carry on such a dialogue, formation for dialogue is all-important, especially in our formation centers.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Statements by U. S. Bishops

**Bishop Alexander J. Brunett (Helena), Chairman, Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, greeting to Buddhists for their feast of *Vesakh* (1997)**

“Nowadays the names of three faith communities in the United States often appear together: Jews, Christians and Muslims. Today, I am taking this occasion to send greetings to a fourth religious population among us--our **Buddhists** neighbors. Along our coasts and in many cities throughout our country, there are cultural centers, places of worship, and monastic and retreat houses, many of which were established by American **Buddhists**. With some of these, representatives of Catholic dioceses, parishes, schools, and monastic communities have formed relationships of cordiality and cooperation. I am taking the occasion at the beginning of this Spring, when two important feasts occur--Easter and Vesakh-- to lift up these relationships and to send greetings to our **Buddhist** friends and neighbors.

“Vesakh is an eminent **Buddhist** feast honoring the life of **Gautama Buddha**. **Buddhists** teach that he is the one who taught liberating insight and the attainment of nirvana in our world 2500 years ago. Though having somewhat different emphases in the **Theravada** and **Mahayana**

traditions, Vesakh is celebrated by both traditions of **Buddhists** in the United States and thus provides an occasion to send special greetings. Vesakh this year occurs on April 8 or May 21, depending on the tradition.

“Since 1995, the Holy See through the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue has issued greetings to **Buddhists** worldwide on the occasion of Vesakh, and I am forwarding the 1997 greetings with my own good wishes and encouragements to Buddhists in the United States. In his Vesakh message this year, Cardinal Francis Arinze, President of the Pontifical Council, speaks of a joint pilgrimage of peace following along the paths of forgiveness and justice in our two great traditions.

“When Pope John Paul II visited Sri Lanka in January 1995, he addressed the people of that country citing two esteemed Theravada texts:

In particular I express my highest regard for the followers of **Buddhism**, the majority religion in Sri Lanka, with its ...four great values of ...loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity; with its ten transcendental virtues and the joys of the Sangha [monastic community] expressed so beautifully in the *Theragathas*. I ardently hope that my visit will serve to strengthen the goodwill between us, and that it will reassure everyone of the Catholic Church’s desire for interreligious dialogue and cooperation in building a more just and fraternal world. To everyone I extend the hand of friendship, recalling the splendid words of the *Dhammapada*: ‘Better than a thousand useless words is one single word that gives peace...’

His visit occurred a few months after publication of *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, and in chapter 14 of that book the pope had written expressly about the **Buddha**. Seven months later, Cardinal Francis Arinze noted the comments and reactions exchanged over what the pope had written and acknowledged that misunderstandings often occur between Christians and **Buddhists**. His speech was given at a formal dialogue in Taiwan, where Catholics and **Buddhists** shared views on the human condition and the need for liberation, ultimate reality and the experience of nirvana, **Buddha** and Christ, and personal detachment and social commitment. I urge my Catholic brothers and sisters to study the final statement of that dialogue (published among other places in *Origins*, Catholic News Service Documentary Service, 25/14, September 21, 1995) and to share it with their Buddhist friends for mutual reflection and dialogue.

“We in the United States have our special relations to lift up too. For many years a formal dialogue has taken place between the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and the **Buddhist Sangha Council** of Southern California. Several other dioceses have benefited from various forms of cooperation and exchanges, especially Honolulu where **Buddhists** constitute the second largest religious community, but also Chicago, San Francisco and St. Louis, to name a few. Last summer the fruits of over two decades of spiritual exchanges between **Buddhist** and Catholic monastics were visible in the extraordinary “Gethsemani Encounter,” where, under the sponsorship of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, 25 **Buddhist** and Catholic participants and observers many times that number met at Gethsemani Abbey, Kentucky, to live together for six days, pray, and exchange views on monastic life and spirituality. I am very pleased that the Episcopal Moderator for Interreligious Relations, Bishop Joseph Gerry, participated fully in that event dialoguing with **Theravada**, **Zen**, and **Tibetan** practitioners, including the **Dalai Lama**.

“The respect of the Catholic Church regarding what is true, holy, and good in **Buddhist**



teachings and practice and the commitment of the Catholic Church to sincere dialogue rest upon the firm ground of the Second Vatican Council's teachings and documents and over 30 years of witness to these teachings. There have been times when this commitment of respect and these teachings may seem to have been forgotten. If, at times, comments of Catholics, including comments reported perhaps inaccurately or with exaggeration by the media, have offended American **Buddhists**, I am sorry. Such times can be occasions for forgiveness and deeper friendship and opportunities for further exploration of our teachings. As the Chairman of the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, I reiterate the commitment to good relations and dialogue for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. Once while I was in Thailand, I was blessed to have witnessed an ordination of **Buddhist** monks which was for me a spiritually moving experience. With these heartfelt greetings and good wishes, I encourage Catholics and Buddhists to maintain contact in various ways possible for the benefits of mutual understanding and respect, growth in our faiths and spiritual practices, and for the sake of all in need of justice and compassion."

**Archbishop Alexander J. Brunett (Seattle), A greeting to the 6<sup>th</sup> International Conference of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies (August 2000)**

"How wonderful it is when we share our spiritual treasures with one another and are enriched by this exchange! Your success in doing that is vitally important for the rest of us.

"A large percentage of the population in the Pacific Northwest has no religious practice whatsoever. Our sharing of spiritual resources should not only benefit us, but also all those in need of awaking to the profound questions about the human condition, transformation, ultimate reality and the relationship between spiritual practice and social commitment."

"For some of you, there remains the memory of ill will between Christian and **Buddhists**, especially in places where situations of political unrest and war complicated our relationship. For others, the need for reconciliation between Christians and **Buddhists** is something very personal, perhaps involving yourself or members of your family or another loved one. Dialogue is an important aspect of your own life as you wrestle with the past and the present. On my party, I join with all Catholics in asking forgiveness for our failures in the past and commit myself to work toward reconciliation, understanding and the development of the efforts to renew our world and foster peace and communion."

"Vietnam was difficult for both Christians and **Buddhists**, and there have been other such situations. As we ponder those situations, we come to appreciate certain experiences we have had in common. This is not the usual list of similarities and points of comparison. You would know those topics far better than I. Many of you have studied for years the points where Buddhism and Christianity approach one another. But this evening, let me call your attention to a slightly different list.

"We both have our martyrs. At different times in history and even today, to be a practicing Buddhist or a practicing Christian in certain places puts one at risk of violence or discrimination. In one society or another we both have been perceived as outsiders or practicing a foreign religion. Our traditions gather strength from the examples of those who have maintained their faith and practice under duress. Those who have suffered persecution and death inspire us also by reminding us how serious is our responsibility in this free society to promote religious freedom and respect for one another.

“Today we must take an honest look at the past and work together as friends and partners to understand it and learn from it so that we can work together where healing needs to take place between us. There are those who denounce dialogue and are suspicious of the motives of those who promote it. There are some who condemn other religions as evil, deluded or pointless. Yet deep in the hearts of all of us here this evening, I hope, is a willingness to respond to one another with good will and to join together for study, research, insight and service to one another, to those in need and to our shared world. Let your example be a beacon to other, and may your accomplishments benefit us all.

“Again, I welcome you and pray that your time here will be well-spent.”

**Bishop John C. Wester** (Auxiliary Bishop, Archdiocese of San Francisco), Co-Chairman of the Chan/Zen-Catholic Dialogue of Northern California, an address at an evening program during the first meeting of the dialogue, (March 21, 2003)

“It gives me great pleasure to be here this evening, to accept the hospitality of Abbot Heng Lyu and the **Buddhist** community of the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, and to welcome with the others at the podium those who have joined us this evening. Over the course of these days, March 20-23, 2003, the Northern California Chan/Zen Catholic Dialogue is meeting for the first of four scheduled meetings. Some of you may be curious about why Catholics and Buddhists would want to meet in dialogue. I wish to offer of few of my own reflections.

“Almost twenty-five years ago, Pope Paul VI received a delegation from Japan at his residence in Rome. The delegation was composed of religious representatives of Japan, and we can presume that there were **Buddhists** in that delegation. As it turned out, this was the last interreligious group which Paul VI received and to whom he offered a few formal words of greeting. Pope Paul VI died on August 6, 1978, and this meeting occurred on July 26<sup>th</sup>.

Paul VI’s remarks were brief, and I want to quote only a few of those lines for you this evening:

We know that during these days you have had discussions with our secretariat for non-Christians and other departments of the Holy See on subjects of vital importance for humanity: peace and the promotion of a religious spirit among people. We are grateful to you and invoke upon your efforts the blessing of god, who is the father of us all.

. . . We are glad to note the priority that you give to the questions of the purification of heart.

The editor of the collection of papal materials adds this note. ‘Spontaneously the Pope added the following sentence: we thank you again for your visit and pray to the Lord that we may always be worthy to love you and to serve you.’

“These spontaneous and genuinely heart-felt words of Paul VI, spoken a few days before his death, are why I have brought this passage to your attention this evening. Yes, his remarks on purity of heart speak to us tonight, men and women, Christians and **Buddhists**, religious companions, living now in the United States with the clouds and clamor of war on our minds and many other grave concerns. That message from Paul VI’s words would fit this occasion for Buddhist-Christian dialogue well for we can discuss these topics of mutual concern together. This is reason enough for Catholic-**Buddhist** dialogue. But, I wanted to highlight his spontaneous words—“we pray to the Lord that we may always be worthy to love you and to serve you.” A dying pope, who pioneered interreligious dialogue in the Catholic Church, sums up

succinctly why we Catholics are here this evening and why we want to join our new Buddhist friends in this dialogue project. Our understanding of the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, brings us here this week in friendship and service to you.

“Pope John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council soon after his election in 1958. He wanted the Catholic Church to begin a dialogue with the modern world, to open the windows of the church, to greet other Christians as brothers and sisters in faith, and to greet peoples of all religions as companions on the journey. John XXIII lived to see only the first of the council’s four sessions completed. The work of the council and the struggle within the Catholic Church to agree on a direction was only beginning. Pope Paul VI was elected to succeed John, and he immediately devoted himself to the work of the council.

“In his first address to the bishops of the Catholic Church who had gathered at the Vatican for the second session, he identified the need for Catholics to address all peoples of faith. Here is what he said:

The Catholic Church looks into the distance, beyond the confines of the Christian horizon; how could she place limits on her love, if this very love is that of God the Father who showers his favors upon everyone, and who so loved the world that for it he gave his only Son? Look therefore beyond your own sphere and observe those other religions that uphold the meaning and the concept of God as one creator, provident, most high and transcendent, that worship God with acts of sincere piety and upon whose beliefs and practices the principles of moral and social life are found.

Paul VI was offering the first public reflections of a modern pope on interreligious relations. The words draw attention to monotheism but they also include a reference to practices and the upright life which apply to all religious peoples. A year later in his encyclical on the church (*Ecclesiam Suam*), in which he provided a vision of the church as a communion of people in dialogue, Paul VI expanded his outreach to peoples of other religions:

But we do, nevertheless, recognize and respect the moral and spiritual values of the various non-Christian religions, and we desire to join with them in promoting common ideals of religious liberty, human brotherhood, good culture, social welfare and civil order. For our part, we are ready to enter into discussion on these common ideals, and will not fail to take the initiative where our offer of discussion in genuine, mutual respect, would be well received. (108)

In hindsight, these are cumbersome words for we have experienced decades of dialogue and interaction between Christians and Buddhists since they were written. Paul VI’s suggestions were incorporated into the documents of the second Vatican council, principally for our interest, in the ‘Constitution on the Church’ (*Lumen Gentium*) and the ‘Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions’ (*Nostra Aetate*).

“Fifteen years ago, the office in Rome that handles the work of interreligious relations dropped the word “non-Christians” from its vocabulary. Deciding not to identify others with negative language is a simple enough insight. Speaking of Buddhism as another religion and Buddhists as other believers is a public act of growth in our thinking as a church. The office in Rome is now called the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

“The vision of the papacy of our current pope, John Paul II, includes leadership in interreligious relations. Thus, whenever he has traveled to a country, he has asked to meet with religious leaders, and Buddhists have figured prominently in these meetings. John Paul II might

be best remembered in interreligious relations for his days of prayer in Assisi, the first one on October 27, 1986. There on his left side are several Buddhist leaders gathered with the rest of the religious representatives listening in silence as various religious groups offered prayers for peace. Buddhists also came to the last Assisi day of prayer which took place on January 24, 2002.

“Pope John Paul II has also referred to **Buddhists** texts. One example is during his trip to Sri Lanka in January 1995: He said:

*I come as a friend from Rome, where two thousand years ago the venerable civilization which flourished in this country was known and esteemed. I come as a pilgrim of goodwill, with nothing but peace in my heart. I am keenly aware of your country's rich spiritual heritage, shown not only the by strength of your religious traditions but also by the remarkable harmony and natural respect which has flourished among the followers of various religions.*

He then continued and expressed his highest regard for the followers of Buddhism, referring to certain teachings on compassion, equanimity, loving kindness, and empathetic joy. He also referred to other aspects of **Buddhism** and reassures everyone of the desire of the Catholic Church for dialogue and cooperation. This is where he concludes with a quotation from ‘the splendid words of the *Dhammapada*.’ He said: ‘Better than a thousand useless words, is one single word that gives peace....’

“I have referred to a few actions of the popes of the twentieth century. The Catholic Church is a communion of people in all walks of life serving in countless ministries—monastics, teachers, scholars, social workers, peace workers, priests, lay ministers, and on and on. Among us tonight are experienced and devoted participants in dialogue with **Buddhists** each of whom could offer a lengthy discourse on how **Buddhists** and Catholics have touched one another through ideas, spiritual practices, social ministry, and so forth. The record does not begin in the mid-twentieth century but goes back centuries when Christian missionaries entered **Buddhist** lands and back to the beginnings of Christianity when **Buddhism** was over five centuries old. It continues today in the United States to where Buddhist teachings and practices have been brought by **Buddhist** teachers and various lineages are passed along in the context of this society and its complex mix of cultures.

“Let me close by citing Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk who was one of the most popular authors for Catholics in the twentieth century. He died an untimely death, as many of you know, on a trip to Asia. He was in Thailand attending a conference of Catholic monastics in 1968 discussing how they as monastics could best serve the new ministry of interreligious relations. This, of course, did not come easily for them. This was something new for them in those days. They needed convincing.

“Merton spoke to them about monasticism and the contemporary world, then, in 1968, in the throes of the cold war and the standoff between Marxism and the West. He concluded his talk with a reference to **Buddhist** iconography and the representation of the **Buddha** in which with one hand he points to the earth and in the other hand he is holding a begging bowl. In his final moments of teaching, just hours before his death, Thomas Merton was teaching Catholic monastics about **Buddhism**. I quote the text of his remarks as carried in his ‘Asian Journal’ and only what he said about the begging bowl: ‘it represents the ultimate theological root of the belief not just in the right to beg, but in openness to the gifts of all beings as an expression of the

interdependence of all beings.' Thomas Merton was teaching Catholic monastics, deeply rooted in their faith, about a **Buddhist** teaching that was also a familiar theme in Christianity and Christian monastic life, namely the gifts of all beings and our interdependence. We enter interreligious dialogue to share gifts with one another. Monastics can do that with one another in a special way, but all of us here tonight, in our several different walks of life, can share the riches of our traditions with one another.

“We are here this evening and over this long weekend sharing the gifts of our spiritual paths and living in spiritual interdependence. We are not giving up who are and what we do as a consequence of our faith and beliefs; yet, we are participating in something much larger than the events this weekend. We might define that larger context or reality differently, but our relationship to that greater and transcendent reality draws us to one another.

“Thank You”