

# SUFFERING, LIBERATION, AND FRATERNITY: A BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

## A Dialogue of Fraternity as Proposed by Pope Francis

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IN JUNE 2015, Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran met with a group of US-based Catholics and Buddhists who had gathered in Castel Gandolfo, the Pope's summer residence. Tauran is the Prefect of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue (PCID), the office within the Vatican responsible for the relationship between Catholicism and those who follow other religious traditions. We had been invited to Rome as part of the Vatican's celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*, the Second Vatican Council's historic call to Catholics to open their hearts in dialogue and friendship to those who follow other religious traditions.

Tauran invited us to begin what he called a "dialogue of fraternity." Many of the dialogues among Catholics and Buddhists over the last fifty years have been focused on theological exchanges and discussions of religious practice. The Cobb-Abe group is an example of the former, and the Gethsemane meeting is a well-known example of the latter.<sup>1</sup> Such dialogues have been remarkably successful in fostering mutual understanding, respect, and esteem. Now, the cardinal asked us to enter into a "new form of dialogue" that would build on past encounters "by fostering interreligious collaboration" aimed at addressing social problems faced by people in the local communities that Buddhists and Catholics share. The theme of the meeting at Castel-Gandolfo was "suffering, liberation, and fraternity" and

<sup>1</sup> On the theological work of the Cobb-Abe group, see Ray 1987. For the Gethsemane meeting, see Mitchell and Wiseman 1997.

time was given to explore how Buddhists and Catholics might cooperate in addressing social problems in their local communities.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, it is much too soon to discern what impact a “dialogue of fraternity” might have on Buddhists and Catholics. In this essay, therefore, we will address two issues. First, we will explore the roots of Pope Francis’s understanding of “fraternity” in the social ethics of the Catholic Church. Second, we will consider how Buddhists, especially Shin Buddhists, might respond out of the depths of the Buddhist tradition to Pope Francis’s invitation.

The term “fraternity” appears regularly both in Pope Francis’s official statements and off-the-cuff remarks. For example, it and the related term “solidarity” appear a total of seven times in his address to the joint session of the United States Congress in September 2015. This is in addition to the phrase “brothers and sisters” (mentioned three times). So far, however, the most extensive treatment Francis has given to this theme is in the 2014 Message on the World Day of Peace (January 1), wherein *fraternità* and its cognates appear no less than seventy-seven times in the Italian version of this relatively short text.<sup>3</sup>

Here, we will argue that “fraternity” in the teachings of Pope Francis is his own pastoral appropriation of the more technical principle of “solidarity” as found in the social teachings of the Catholic Church. The *locus classicus* for “solidarity” is the encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), one of Pope John Paul II’s most important statements on Catholic social ethics.

In Part III of *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (sections 11–26), John Paul offers a survey of social problems afflicting the contemporary world. As a first step, he draws attention to the unequal development of the “North” and the “South” in their economic as well as political, social, and cultural aspects. Then, he introduces the concept of the “interdependence” of peoples: “However much society worldwide shows signs of fragmentation, expressed in the conventional names First, Second, Third and even Fourth World, their interdependence remains close.”<sup>4</sup> The term “interdependence” is widely interpreted to mean “globalization.” The interdependence of peoples today is quickly developing into a global system with economic, political, cultural, and social dimensions that is eclipsing the older system of nation-states, though without replacing it.

<sup>2</sup> Tauran 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Francesco 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Ioannes Paulus II 1987, section 17.

John Paul continues by reflecting first on the ethical implications of this interdependence and then on its theological implications. The brute fact of our interdependence today brings with it sizable repercussions for social ethics. Failure to recognize the “ethical requirements” that attend this interdependence brings with it “disastrous consequences for the weakest.” Increasingly, “as a result of a sort of internal dynamic and under the impulse of mechanisms which can only be called perverse, this interdependence triggers negative effects even in the rich countries.”<sup>5</sup> In addition, the interdependence of peoples today requires us to recognize that the moral failings of individuals contribute to what the liberation theology of Latin America calls “structural sin.”<sup>6</sup> The problems attending globalization are the result of a “moral evil,” in which the “fruit of many sins” leads to “structures of sin.”<sup>7</sup>

The proper moral response to this growing interdependence of peoples is what John Paul calls “solidarity.” Understood as an ethical response, the practice of solidarity elevates the fact of our interdependence to a “moral plane.” Solidarity can be seen in the fact that “perhaps more than in the past, people are realizing that they are linked together by a common destiny, which has to be constructed together, if catastrophe for all is to be avoided.” In fact, “the idea is slowly emerging that the good to which we are all called and the happiness to which we aspire cannot be obtained without an effort and commitment on the part of all, nobody excluded, and the consequent renouncing of personal selfishness.”<sup>8</sup> When interdependence is recognized as a moral demand that confronts us all, our response to this challenge cannot be limited to “a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far.” Rather, what is required is “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.”<sup>9</sup> This commitment to the common good in response to the fact of our growing interdependence is what John Paul calls “the virtue of solidarity.” Solidarity is the virtue practiced when the brute fact of our global interdependence is made to serve the common good.

“Fraternity” as Pope Francis develops it in his 2014 Message for the World Day of Peace is his pastoral appropriation of John Paul’s “virtue

<sup>5</sup> Ioannes Paulus II 1987.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of structural sin from the most recent meeting of Latin American bishops held in Aparacida, Brazil, see Pfeil 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Ioannes Paulus II 1987, section 35.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, section 26e.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, section 38f.

of solidarity.” An analysis of the text will bear out this interpretation. For example, Francis begins with language reminiscent of what we have seen in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*. He reminds us of the “ever-increasing number of interconnections and communications in today’s world” which makes us “powerfully aware of the unity and common destiny of the nations.” Compare this language with that of John Paul in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* section 26e, where he makes use of the phrase “common destiny” by way of commenting on our growing awareness of “a radical interdependence.”

In the 2014 message, Pope Francis goes on to claim that in this emergent awareness of interdependence “we see the seeds of a vocation to form a community composed of brothers and sisters who accept and care for one another.” In a manner reminiscent of John Paul’s insistence that we recognize the ethical dimension of our interdependence, Francis laments the fact that “this vocation is frequently denied and ignored” in a world marked by “the globalization of indifference.” The point to be taken from this is that Francis’s “vocation to form a community composed of brothers and sisters” (i.e., the vocation of fraternity) corresponds to John Paul’s “virtue of solidarity.” John Paul employs the language of political science (interdependence) and of Christian ethics (virtue). Francis, without completely abandoning John Paul’s language, appropriates his predecessor’s teaching using the pastoral language of Christian spirituality (vocation).

The distinction we are drawing between the pastoral language of Francis and the technical language of John Paul may seem somewhat overdrawn. For John Paul, political action in the pursuit of solidarity is intimately connected with the practice of charity, “which is the distinguishing mark of Christ’s disciples (cf. Jn 13:35).” He roots the virtue of solidarity in the practice of Christian discipleship. Francis turns to the language of “vocation.” Fraternity is therefore a pastoral appropriation of solidarity.

Now, we are in a position to ask what Pope Francis means when he invites Buddhists to a “dialogue of fraternity.” In 1991, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue produced a document entitled “Dialogue and Proclamation.”<sup>10</sup> This text remains the most authoritative statement by the Roman Catholic Church on the nature and practice of interreligious dialogue. “Dialogue and Proclamation” understands interreligious dialogue in very broad terms. Most basically, it defines dialogue as “reciprocal communication, leading to a common goal.” More radically understood, it can mean “interpersonal communion” in the deepest and most personal sense. In addition, dialogue

<sup>10</sup> Pontifical Council For Inter-Religious Dialogue 1991.

includes “all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment in obedience to truth and respect for freedom.”<sup>11</sup>

Several repercussions flow from this broad construal of interreligious dialogue. First, this means that interreligious dialogue is much more than an exchange of information. Learning about the religious values of another is only an initial step in the practice of interreligious dialogue. Dialogue, when pursued thoroughly, has the potential to lead to genuine esteem for the religious other and even to interreligious friendships which contribute to religious self-understanding and practice. Catholics who would enter into dialogue with those who follow other religious traditions must therefore adopt “an attitude of respect and friendship.”<sup>12</sup> Second, interreligious dialogue requires the cultivation of skills necessary for sharing one’s religious teachings and practices without any attempt to convert the dialogue partner or, on the other hand, to distort them in the misguided hope of making them more acceptable to her. Third, it also means that dialogues can take place in a multitude of ways by a multitude of people—the dialogue of theological exchange (usually for academics) and religious practice (usually for monks and nuns) may come readily to mind, but they are not exhaustive. There is also a “dialogue of daily life” in which those who follow different religious traditions live as neighbors, sharing their joys and sorrows with one another. This is not to be confused with mere passive co-existence.<sup>13</sup>

“Dialogue and Proclamation” also speaks of a “dialogue of action” in which Christians and their dialogue partners “collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.”<sup>14</sup> “Integral development” is a technical term taken from Catholic social teachings. It requires the flourishing of human beings in keeping with their social nature and their innate dignity. As such it implies far more than economic prosperity. Both integral development and liberation require working cooperatively to achieve the “common good,” which is also a technical term taken from Catholic social teachings. It asserts that the *ultimate* good of each person is not at odds with the *ultimate* good of the community. Integral development and liberation,

<sup>11</sup> Pontifical Council For Inter-Religious Dialogue 1991, section 9.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, section 9. For a collection of essays by Roman Catholic theologians documenting their friendships with those who follow other religious traditions and the salutary impact of these friendships on their understanding and practice of Christian faith, see Fredericks and Sayuki Tiemeier 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Pontifical Council For Inter-Religious Dialogue 1991, section 9.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, section 42. See also section 44.

for Catholics at least, also require the defense of human rights and the pursuit of justice. All in all therefore, Pope Francis' dialogue of fraternity is a form of the "dialogue of action."

## A Dialogue of Fraternity: Response from a Buddhist Perspective

NORIAKI ITO

I would like to respond to Rev. James Fredericks' statement "A Dialogue of Fraternity as Proposed by Pope Francis" in three steps. First, I will say a few words about my own entry into the dialogue between religions; second, I will focus specifically on the question of "engaged Buddhism"; and third, I will consider a few aspects of the future outlook for Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

I began my journey in interreligious dialogue back in the late 1980s when I was serving as the Buddhist advisor at my alma mater, Occidental College in Los Angeles. The director of what is now referred to as the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life, Michael Kerze, suggested that the advisors of the various religious campus groups engage in dialogue with each other once a month. Entering into these meetings, as a Buddhist, I thought at first that I had no prejudices regarding other religions. My understanding was that the Buddha taught us that other ways of thought are valid, that we should therefore not think that Buddhism is the only way, and that we should always have respect for other teachings. However, during these meetings, I came to realize that I did in fact have prejudicial views towards the beliefs of others. Concurrently I also came to the realization that other religions are very much engaged in society, as can be seen by the many hospitals built by Christian denominations and their involvement in social and political movements to care for the needs of the disadvantaged. I will comment on this question of "engagement" in a few moments. Consequent on these encounters, my friend Michael Kerze invited me to join the Buddhist-Catholic Dialogue Group that had been established in the meantime, and I have enjoyed meeting with other Buddhists and members of the Catholic community ever since. Most recently, I have benefited from

participating in the conference held in Rome in June 2015, where the concept of “fraternity” as advanced by Pope Francis was central to our presentations and discussions.

Second, I would like to revisit my earlier thoughts on “engaged Buddhism” that arose during my time at Occidental College. It seems to me that a genuine claim may be made about the lack of social engagement in Buddhism. But why is this, or why was this? I remember giving my own interpretation, at that time, about why Buddhism has not historically been socially engaged. In the life story of the Buddha, there is the episode of the four gates, in which Siddhartha ventures out to experience life outside of the palace. He sees, for the first time, sickness, aging, and death. Having been sheltered inside the walls of the palace and kept away from human suffering, he wonders why people must suffer as they do. On his fourth journey out, he encounters a monk who seems to be so peaceful and serene that he wishes to follow such a path for himself.

In thinking this over, I recalled that the Buddha had had the option and the capability of becoming a benevolent king, sharing the wealth of his royalty and caring for the needs of his people. But instead he came to the understanding that sharing wealth and caring for the needs of his people is, in the last analysis, only a temporary solution to their suffering. He understood the universality of suffering and discovered a path that anyone can walk to end that ongoing cycle of suffering. It was these discoveries of his that have become what is known as the Buddhadharmā. This is, in effect, a “grass roots” progression: one person becomes awakened, and he then leads another to awakening. One by one, suffering is relieved. It is a slow process, but the only one that can lead to a real end to suffering and to true liberation. While I am quite sure that such an interpretation cannot be found as such in the scriptures of Buddhism, in my mind it explained why our tradition has not been more socially engaged throughout its history.

Third, and finally, a few words on the future outlook for Buddhist-Christian dialogue. I now find that things are moving forward. Our conference in Rome in 2015 pushed me in a new direction. The Buddhist-Christian conversation was no longer only a dialogue on theological and spiritual issues. It was also a call for fraternity with an emphasis on collaboration for the solving of the critical issues the world faces today. I share in Pope Francis’s view that no one religion or denomination can do it alone. The critical issues are such things as climate change and the gap between rich and poor that results in so much poverty, homelessness, war, and terrorism. The recent presidential election in the United States poses the possibility that it could

become an isolated country with no regard for those who live in the rest of the world.

It is for these reasons that, as a Shin Buddhist, I have encouraged our headquarters in Japan to begin serious dialogue with other religions and I have recommended taking up relations with the Catholic community on the basis of its established work in interreligious dialogue. Our denomination (Shinshū Ōtani-ha 真宗大谷派) has been issuing statements on a regular basis regarding such matters as the revisions in the Japanese national constitution regarding military involvement, the issue of terrorism and retaliation following the Paris attacks, and most recently, a statement which pushes for the repeal of the death sentence. These are indications that we in this denomination are prepared to state publicly our concerns about social and even political issues. I believe that the next step in this process is to engage in dialogue with other religions in order to work in unison to help to improve the world we are living in.

As Rev. Fredericks points out, there are difficulties and barriers to true dialogue. We are essentially two different religions with fundamental differences of opinions. We must embrace such differences in order to arrive at any kind of consensus. However, there are also very different attitudes among the various communities of Buddhism. I remember one topic that came out towards the end of our conference in Rome, namely the subject of same-sex marriage. When asked what the Buddhist view of this is, one of the monks came out with the simple statement, “Oh, Buddhism is very clear on that subject. We do not allow it.” However, many of our temples in American Sanghas have been inclusive and have officiated in same-sex marriages. So it is necessary to carry out dialogue with fellow Buddhists, while at the same time engaging with the Catholic community as well as with people of other religions.

Rev. Fredericks pointed out several examples of social engagement to help the disadvantaged. Important models for me are the work of India’s B. R. Ambedkar and of Vietnam’s Thich Nhat Hanh. In our own denomination, we have the story of Takagi Kenmyō 高木顕明 (1864–1914), a priest at a small temple caring for people who were referred to as *burakumin* 部落民, the lowest stratum of Japanese society. While working to lift these people out of the suffering of everyday life, he was charged with treason and was sentenced to death. While his sentence was reduced to life imprisonment, he ended up taking his own life. Our denomination did not support him at the time. Many years later, however, his story became an inspiration for



younger priests who wished to engage more actively in social issues. Our head temple, Higashi Honganji in Kyoto, has had a department for many years called the Kaihō Undō Suishin Honbu 解放運動推進本部 (Department for the Advancement of the Liberation Movement). It was originally established to support the *burakumin*, but now it includes support for work against all types of discrimination. There are also many priests and temples today who are advocating for social reform in areas of gender equality and support for the disadvantaged.

In the United States, our denomination has joined in solidarity on numerous occasions to support the Islamic community, first after September 11, 2001, and more recently after the terrorist attacks in Paris and here in San Bernardino. Our work to support the challenges that the Muslim community is facing is ongoing.

Rev. Fredericks also introduces Pope John Paul's use of the word interdependence. Although fraternity and solidarity are not to be found as terms in Buddhism as far as I know, "interdependence" is a word that appears regularly. It is used to describe the teaching of *engi* 縁起, dependent co-arising. In the teaching of *anātman* or no-self, we learn that there is no separate "I" in relation to others. We are all interconnected regardless of our nationality, culture, or religion. Although the word "Sangha" originally referred to the community of priests and nuns, my understanding is that current usage among Mahayana groups in America includes all human beings. In our denomination, we often use the word *dōbō* 同朋, which originally meant fellow followers or fellow travelers on the Shin Buddhist path. But in this case too, we now use the word to be inclusive of all people. One of our denominations' stated goals is *dōbō shakai no jitsugen* 同朋社会の実現, the creation of a world of equals who live together in harmony.

We still have much to do in our efforts to engage in social matters. However the intent, I believe, is there. I also believe that we can advance our efforts by joining with the Catholic community and building relationships with other faith-based communities as well.

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