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*Towards ICCS 2022*

## **Inter-Religious Dialogue: Catholic Social Teachings and Cohesion**

*By Barry Desker*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The Catholic Church has been at the leading edge of interreligious dialogue since the 1960s. Combined with its focus on social teachings, it is important to reflect on what this – the largest Christian denomination – has contributed to cohesion and welfare both in Singapore and globally.*

### **COMMENTARY**

CATHOLIC APPROACHES to inter-faith dialogue shifted dramatically under Pope John XXIII at the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) in 1964. The Vatican II's reforms aimed to renew the Catholic Church for the 20th century. Instead of confrontation with other religions, the emphasis was on dialogue.

The Secretariat for Non-Christians was established in 1964 and re-named the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) by Pope John Paul II in 1988. The Pontifical Council aimed to promote mutual understanding, respect and collaboration between Catholics and the followers of other religious traditions, encourage the study of other religions, and to promote the formation of persons dedicated to dialogue.

### **Inter-Faith Dialogue in Singapore**

Relations with other Christian churches came under the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, which is also responsible for the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. At the local level, this distinction does not exist, and

the Catholic Church is part of Singapore's Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) established in 1949.

The PCID is not responsible for social, political, and economic issues, which are handled by various Vatican departments. In global inter-religious dialogues, Catholic representatives would consult with such departments if they are presenting the views of the Church.

Dialogues are mainly carried out at the local level and the approach is one of sharing their views and learning from the perspectives of other religions. In Singapore, regular interactions increase inter-religious understanding, fostering awareness of other religions among Catholics, and familiarising those of other faiths to Catholic doctrine and traditions.

These efforts by the IRO over 70 years have strengthened social cohesion in Singapore and led to growing mutual confidence among the participants in dialogues.

### **My Personal Experience**

When I was the chairman of Singapore Technologies Marine, we always had leaders of the religious faiths represented in the IRO at the ceremony for the launch of new naval vessels. The religious leaders recited prayers from their respective faiths while they stood shoulder to shoulder.

Such ceremonies have also taken place at other national events such as the inauguration of the MRT system in 1983 and the memorial service for victims of the SilkAir crash in 1998. Because of frequent interactions with their counterparts, I observed that the religious leaders interacted easily with one another.

In a multi-religious, multi-ethnic society like Singapore, such relationships have resulted in mutual confidence among the leaders. The long-standing relationships have helped the religious leaders to bridge differences and create a sense of solidarity and community, especially during periods of tension and rising suspicions, such as the 1964 race riots.

### **Catholic Social Teachings**

Catholic teachings strengthen Singapore's efforts to develop social cohesion today. Under Pope Francis, who articulated his views in the encyclical *Laudato Si*, with the theme 'on care for our common home', the Church has become a leading voice on such issues as sustainable development, and the risks of environmental degradation and climate change.

Many religious leaders have now voiced similar views. The Vatican's spokespeople in global forums such as the United Nations have also drawn attention to the strains caused by unabashed global capitalism, emphasising rising global inequality.

Catholic social thinkers have shaped their arguments with attention to the common good, the social dimensions of policy making, and the issue of private property rights versus the interests of society at large.

The local Catholic community reinforces this message through its role in supporting disadvantaged sectors of society, including the poor, migrant workers, women and children at risk, and aged persons lacking family support. It also runs medical services and well established schools.

### **Ethical Perspective**

This perspective is not new. Catholic social teachings emphasise the necessity of social cohesion, using a moral framework to guide social and economic policy choices. The approach is based on developing an ethical way of looking at the world, in times of continuity and change.

It builds from the Gospels, early church teachings, which overcame adversity and hardship from humble beginnings in the Middle East, medieval philosophers such as St Thomas Aquinas, and papal social encyclicals such as Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and Pope Francis' *Laudato Si* (2015).

For instance, Pope John Paul II called on wealthy countries to forgive the debts of poor nations in 2000, while Pope John XXIII in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963), issued shortly after the Cuban Missile Crisis, encouraged American and Soviet leaders, John Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev, to reduce the threat of nuclear war with the signing of the nuclear test ban treaty.

These teachings underlay the moral viewpoint and doctrinal perspective of the Catholic Church, even if church leaders were sometimes seduced by the trappings of power and the material world.

### **Capitalism and Cohesion**

*Rerum Novarum* ('of revolutionary change') is seen as the foundational text of Catholic social teaching. It dealt with the rights of capital and labour in the light of the rise of liberal capitalism, rapid industrialisation, and the growth of socialist and communist movements.

Pope Leo XIII opposed unrestrained capitalism and vividly depicted the urban poor, arguing for collective bargaining and the right to form trade unions. The encyclical also opposed socialism and communism, which it perceived as replacing rights and Catholic moral teaching with an ideology of state power.

For students of social science exposed to Max Weber's seminal study, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which highlighted the Protestant ethic of hard work and worldly success, this encyclical is interesting as it presents an alternative vision.

It recognised wealth creation by private property and a market economy, while valuing restraints to ensure that the poor, social peace, and the environment are not neglected. These doctrines provided the intellectual foundations for the Christian Democratic parties which rose to power in Europe in the 20th century.

### **Social Cohesion in Singapore**

Being a diverse society since colonial times, in which parallel networks existed, the people of Singapore were divided by ethnicity, language, and religion. Post-independence, the task of forging a national identity required the creation of a sense of participation and shared identity within a wider community.

One aspect has been the recognition that despite diverse ethnic affiliations, languages, and religions, there are shared values and common commitments. The Catholic Church has played a role in promoting greater understanding and social cohesion in the evolving Singapore story.

This image is well conveyed by the practice of Catholic churches in Singapore extending their greetings to Muslims on Hari Raya Aidilfitri and Hindus on Deepavali, and distributing oranges to those who attend church services during Chinese New Year.

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