

Dialogue between Religions¹



*Meeting at the Sacro Convento in December 2005
with members of the Japanese Buddhist Movement,
Rissho-Kosei kai*

By Bente Wolf

***“It is the dialogue of the mind and of the heart that unites in a spiritual bond those who come together in prayer to God”
Fr. Maximillian Mizzi, OFM Conv.***

In the last issue of the *Nordens Stjerne* there was an article about Assisi and the Franciscan Family under the title “Assisi – You city of peace”. In this article one of the very bright and inspiring examples of Franciscan work in Assisi is described, namely Father Maximillian Mizzi’s many years’ pioneer work establishing dialogue between religions. The descriptions below partly come from my conversations with Father Mizzi and partly from articles written by him. When I quote him directly from these articles, the quotations are emphasized in Italics.

History

Father Mizzi was born and grew up in Malta. At the age of 16 years he joined the Franciscan Order of the Friars Minor Conventual (OFM Conv.), in which Order he qualified as a priest. In 1959 the Father General of the Order asked him to move to Assisi, and here he acted as a Franciscan friar, priest and as a novice master. Along with these activities he started ecumenical work with the other Christian Churches, i.e. work for Christian unity, dialogue, understanding and respect within the many Chris-

¹ Translation of a re-edited article in “*Nordens Stjerne*” No. 2, April 2002

tian Churches, which were separated from the Mother Church, The Roman Catholic Church, following the Reformation, and which were still far apart in the middle of the last century. Such ecumenical work was a new concept and endeavour in the relationship between the Churches at that time, and gradually the religious leaders of the Christian Churches began to approach each other in dialogue. Father Mizzi's deep involvement was extended to include not only efforts to establish dialogue within the Christian Churches, but also to establish dialogue between the Christian religion and the other religions of the world, especially the Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu religions. As a member of the Catholic Church and the Franciscan Order, OFM. Conv., he has – in his endeavours to promote inter-religious dialogue – travelled a great deal every year all over the world and has participated at numerous meetings and congresses with both religious as well as political leaders, also meetings and congresses organized by the United Nations, UNESCO and UNICEF.

In Assisi together with the Assisi Chapter of the Order Father Mizzi established in 1972 “Centro Francescano di Apostolato Ecumenico” and in 1989 the international centre for dialogue. Throughout the years close ties of collaboration have been established with numerous centres, associations, institutions and councils, including the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

The Spirit of Assisi

As a result of this work for global inter-religious dialogue during many years he sees as a change of the course of history the World Day Prayer for Peace, which was held in Assisi on October 27, 1986. In an article Father Mizzi states that *“for the first time in history, leading representatives of all the Christian Churches and of all the major religions of the world came together to pray under the leadership of Pope John Paul II. For the first time in history all these representatives of all religions in the world came together in peace and in harmony. For the first time the barriers between them fell down. For the first time the representatives of the world's religions came together as brothers and sisters united in the bond of prayer. They did not come together in conflict or to argue with one another. They didn't even come together to discuss peace. They came to pray for peace in the spirit of God, in the spirit of love and reconciliation, in the footsteps of Saint Francis. That meeting of the world's religions in Assisi had a tremendous impact on the whole world. After that historic event, the religions of the world came very much closer together. They started to collaborate with each other with greater enthusiasm and mutual respect”*.

Father Mizzi further affirms that *“this meeting promoted an attitude of respect for each other's religion and for open dialogue. It is what today is commonly known as “the Spirit of Assisi”*. In a Danish television interview made a couple of years ago as an element in the understanding of the severe earthquake, which hit Umbria and Assisi in 1997, Father Mizzi spoke about the importance of Assisi to the world by virtue of “the Spirit of Assisi” that here is a link between the East and the West, here dialogue is promoted and here we can learn from each other and thus enrich each other.

Inter-religious Dialogue

A universal understanding is gaining ground within the religions which have previously had the understanding of being so far apart, and the understanding of representing the only “true” religion - the only “true” relationship with God. Father Mizzi states that *“during these last decades we (the religious leaders) are acknowledging more*

and more the fact that there is only one community and it consists of all people. That they have only one origin, since God inhabited the entire world with the whole human family.” Father Mizzi further sees that *“dialogue between religious leaders is a great means to unity, and a great richness on both a spiritual and human level. It is a means to overcome the centuries-old prejudices, to enrich each other with the spirituality and richness of your own faith, and ultimately to reach that full truth that unites.”*

Father Mizzi splits the concept of dialogue into more aspects, among them the dialogue of life, the dialogue of action, the dialogue of theological exchange and the dialogue with God. The latter he sees as the most important and effective of all dialogue, as *“it is the dialogue of the mind and of the heart that unites in a spiritual bond those who come together in prayer to God. The human family has its origin from God and will be fully united in God through prayer”*. And moreover also through meditation. Father Mizzi describes how Christians can learn for instance from the Buddhists’ meditative practices and share deep, spiritual moments through meditation. Through these experiences of inter-religious prayer and meditation he has learned that they can be very deep and committing, both to God and for the participants towards each other and the whole world. It is thus Father Mizzi’s experience that the dialogue with God at the spiritual level – the joint human meeting in the surrender of the hearts to God through prayer and/or meditation – is what leads to the brother/sisterhood of humanity, to peace and reconciliation in the whole world, to love, joy and inner life.

Father Mizzi further describes how he has experienced prominent speakers at congresses and individuals at private meetings say that there is only one God, and that the followers of the religions become more and more aware of this fact. He has met people – especially Hindus - saying that they had a special devotion to this “god” or “goddess”. When Father Mizzi asked how many gods there were in their religious tradition, they raised a hand towards heaven and answered, *“There is only one God. Your God is my God. My God is your God”*.

The dialogue of theological exchange performed by theological experts is only at its first stages according to Father Mizzi, and at present *“we are only partly dealing with dialogue about the important theological items such as God, prayer, the Communion of Saints, the revealed Word, life after life, and so on”*. But he is very confident and hopeful *“that it won’t be too long before this sort of deeply committing dialogue starts. Today everything is moving so very fast!”*

Dialogue at all Levels

Most of the people with whom Father Mizzi shares his experience as to inter-religious dialogue, are today very enthusiastic about this form of co-operation – more for ethical than for religious reasons – as they believe that *“it will lead to peace, understanding, justice, respect and co-operation between the followers of the world’s religions”*.



*Dr. Singh and Father Mizzi,
October 2002*

In an article in the Japanese magazine, *Dharma World For Living Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue*, Father Mizzi states that he *“has no doubt that dialogue among the followers of the World’s religions is part of God’s plan, and as such it must be undertaken with a sense of great responsibility, faithfulness, and respect for one’s own religion and for the religions of those with whom one is called to carry on the dialogue”*. As this form of dialogue is, however, undertaken by relatively very few people, he requests everybody to carry on dialogue. *“No one needs to be an expert in order to be a “bridge that unites” rather than a “ditch that divides”. Everyone can share in inter-religious dialogue for social action, such as peace, justice, mutual respect, the safeguard of Creation, etc., also at a level, which could be called “grass-roots inter-religious dialogue”*. He has thus started a campaign proposing that the schools dedicate a day each year to inter-religious dialogue and understanding (In Italy such a day was introduced in 2004 to be held on the 4th of October, the feast of St. Francis. Postscript by Bente). In this way the children will get to learn about the different religions and cultures and appreciate them. Furthermore, he has started a campaign so that courses on inter-religious dialogue and mutual understanding be included in the curriculum of the world’s universities.



Ecumenical prayers in Assisi

Today after September 11, 2001, at which date we were all reminded about the serious situation on Earth, I experience that Father Mizzi’s request to all of us to work for dialogue at all levels is of extreme current interest and importance. Indeed, we all have the opportunity to make a contribution.

Vision about the New Era

In the article in *Dharma World* Father Mizzi shares with the readers a vision, which has been in his mind and heart for some time: *“Until a few years ago I used to look on the different religions of the world as if they were many different rivers flowing in parallel directions. Now I can see them as changing their course in order to flow in the one direction that leads into one big river. And this one big river will flow into the great ocean”*.

I must add that it has been and still is a great joy and encouragement for me to learn that in spite of the many serious conflicts and wars, which are going on in our days,

and which among other things originate in centuries-old religious obstinacy and separatism, initiatives and deeply committed work such as Father Mizzi's efforts are now very much alive. It is with a sense of deep gratitude and joy that in my mission in Assisi I have been allowed to learn about and connect to the Franciscan Movement and one of the universal and bright initiatives in the spirit of the New Era, which originates from this movement.

Sources and references:

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Thanks to Father Maximilian Mizzi, OFM Conv. The quotations mainly come from Father Mizzi's articles in Dharma World for Living Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue Nov./Dec. 1996 and Pradbuddha Bharata, a Monthly Journal of the Ramakrishna Order. Jan. 2001.



Ecumenical Prayer meeting in Basilica di San Francesco

This article is published on the homepage of

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May, 2006