

## 50 years of interreligious dialogue in the Archdiocese of Cologne

### Keynote Address

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Fr. Paulin Batairwa Kubuya, sx  
Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue  
Undersecretary

Your Excellency, Bishop Meier,  
your Excellency, Bishop Steinhäuser,  
dear distinguished guests,

I would first like to thank the Archdiocese of Cologne for inviting me to join you today in celebrating 50 years of interreligious dialogue in this city. Cardinal Miguel Ayuso, Prefect of the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue in Rome, asked me just a few days ago to convey his warmest greetings, as well as his deep appreciation, to His Eminence Cardinal Rainer M. Woelki and to all of you who have committed yourselves to this important work.

As Pope Francis recently said to the civil authorities of Indonesia (September 4, 2024): “The Church wishes to strengthen interreligious dialogue, which is essential in facing common challenges, including countering extremism and intolerance, which—by distorting religion—seek to impose themselves through deceit and violence. On the contrary, proximity and listening to others create the fraternity of a nation.” Just last Friday, during his encounter with young people in Singapore, he encouraged them to step out of their comfort zones—especially the comfort zones of the mind. “Take risks,” he said. “Go out!” And most importantly: “Don’t be afraid!” He reminded the youth of Singapore that “Fear is a dictatorial attitude that paralyzes, it causes paralysis.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>INCONTRO INTERRELIGIOSO CON I GIOVANI, *DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE* “Catholic Junior College” (Singapore) Venerdì, 13 settembre 2024

I think this speaks not only to the young in far away Singapore but to the young – and the not so young – who have gathered here today. Interreligious dialogue requires us to stay young at heart. The older we get, the more we can probably relate to Pope Francis’ warning about the paralyzing effect of fear. We all know that it is paramount to keep an open mind and an open heart, to get rid of bigotry, to embrace diversity and not be afraid of it. But no matter how carefully we try to shield this spark, this flame, at some time or other we will find ourselves in the cold grip of fear.

This may come in many forms. It can take the form of doubts and insecurities within us. “Am I doing the right thing? Am I betraying my own community by spending so much time and energy in dealing with the others? Is it worth it? Will it amount to anything?”

It can take the form of obstacles from within our own communities: “We have other issues to deal with that should take precedence”, we might hear. Or we simply might hear nothing. We may lack the support of our community leaders. In the worst case we might even hear others in our very own communities expressing their disapproval of what we do. Who among us has never been called a dreamer? And who has never been called a fool for extending a hand towards people of others faiths?

It can also in recent times come in the form of threats raised by extremists. Regrettably as societies increasingly undergo polarization we see a surge in hatred and sometimes even physical attacks against those who speak out in favour of what Nicolas of Cusa about 600 years ago admired as unity in diversity. The idea that no one knows his own self without knowing others at the same time has no place in the black-

and-white conception of the world of extremists. That indefinite diversity exists in indefinite combinations is anathema to extremists.

Many people feel that the world around them has become less predictable than it has been for former generations. This may be an illusion but nevertheless, the feeling exists. In a world that is seen as more volatile, that is full of new complexities and ambiguities for many people a loss of certainties follows. Pope Francis hits the nail on the head when he calls us not to be afraid. Or to put it the other way around: Dialogue takes courage.

I congratulate all of you here for the courage you bring to the table! But I am sure – and I can see it in so many faces here today – that you bring a lot more than that. You bring joy, you bring perseverance, you bring your personal expertise and the time-honoured wisdom of your communities and you bring the generosity to share this with all of us.

You bring these qualities and virtues into a world that needs them. And in doing so you shine a beacon of hope for a peaceful future. What better way to demonstrate that conflicts can be overcome, that peace is achievable, than all of us building a common house of dialogue? This edifice is visible and invisible at once. It is visible in our dialogue activities, in the many actions and organizations we pursue. We could consider us as bricklayers in the task of building a house of dialogue. But it is invisible in the fine threads it spins that bind us together as brothers and sisters. It forms a mycelium network that invisibly spreads through our communities, providing them with nourishment, with means of communication and with many more benefits we rarely think about in our daily lives.

One of the greatest pleasures my service in the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue gives me, is that I get to travel and see first-hand the great creativity, the joy and courage, the expertise and perseverance

so many men and women, so many people, young and old, from so many religious traditions and backgrounds share with each other – each one committing themselves like a living brick or a mycelium thread to interreligious dialogue.

It's a joy to reach out to so many people and communities and to see what they make of the idea of interreligious dialogue. To get to know them and to find out what matters most to them when religions meet, never ceases to amaze me. Speaking for my own religious tradition I find it fascinating how the local Church brings to life the ideas and ideals of interreligious dialogue in its many forms. Each local initiative is a facet of the gem that is interreligious dialogue, and each one is truly beautiful and irreplaceable.

To help this gem to shine is the foremost call of the Department of Dialogue of the Archdiocese of Cologne. While the delicate flame of interreligious encounters and initiatives lie in the hands of so many of us, we are all grateful for some institutional support. The Department of Dialogue plays a crucial role in helping us to achieve our common goal – to carry the ideas and ideals of interreligious dialogue through time, to further explicate and develop what dialogue is good for and to support the people who actively engage in it.

For 50 years the Department of Dialogue has been keeping and nourishing the flame of interreligious dialogue in the Archdioceses of Cologne. Its objectives have changed over time as have the needs and objectives of those in dialogue. From the first tentative encounters with people of others faiths to establishing firm and reliable bonds with many present day religious communities and institutions, it has influenced generations of people like you and it has drawn inspiration from you in so many ways.

Half a century seems to have passed by in the blink of an eye. Events have taken place no one would have thought possible – until they were done. Cologne Cathedral opening its doors to Muslim faithful in need of a place to perform the festive prayer at the celebrations to mark the end of Ramadan in 1965 was a milestone that still has to be fully understood. The future is, of course an undiscovered country. So when the Department of Dialogue sets sail to explore it, what will it find? And what will it carry aboard into this undiscovered country?

From my vantage point I think I can glimpse two realms very worthy of further exploration. The first is the pressing matter of taking care of our common home, the care of preserving our vulnerable ecosystems which are endangered on all sides. Pope Francis urgently appealed “for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all.”<sup>2</sup> In responding to this appeal the Department of Dialogue has already put their hands to the plough and I wholeheartedly hope that many of you will join in their plight.

The second is a matter that is very close to my own heart. As you may know I taught at the Department for Religious Studies at Fu Jen Catholic University in Taipei and worked as Executive Secretary of the Episcopal Commissions for Interreligious and Ecumenical Dialogue of the Regional Episcopal Conference of Taiwan before I was called to the Vatican. My Asian encounters raised my awareness of how important it is for us as human beings to pay heed to the spiritual dimension of our interreligious encounters. Each and every one of us needs something that sustains our inner journey. And each and every one of us has something to share about the watering holes along the way through this world. Wouldn't it be an amazing step forward if more people found

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<sup>2</sup> ENCYCLICAL LETTER *LAUDATO SI'* OF THE HOLY FATHER FRANCIS ON CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME, 14  
[https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

ways to meet as fellow travelers in their spiritual quests? While we follow different paths we still can point out oasis to each other, and learn how to nourish our spiritual needs in new and undiscovered ways.

“At fifteen, my heart was set on learning; at thirty, I stood firm; at forty, I had no more doubts; at fifty, I knew the will of Heaven; at sixty, my ear was obedient; at seventy, I could follow my heart’s desire without overstepping the boundaries of what is right.” These famous words, spoken by Confucius, the greatest sage in Chinese culture, describe the stages of his personal growth. As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Department of Dialogue today, I would like to invite you to apply them to the progress of the Department: What was its initial concern, what was its shape at 15, its realization at 30, the doubts overcome at 40... and most, the realization I find especially meaningful: "At fifty, I knew the will of Heaven." Indeed, is there any higher form of knowledge the Department might aspire to, at this point, than grasping the will of Heaven?

So for the next 50 years I wish upon the Department of Dialogue and its employees but also to each and every one of you that you consider carefully what you take with you onward as the journey continues. Don’t let yourself be weighed down by storage bags full of past glory and set opinions. Keep an open mind and an open heart. Bring to today’s world the healing potential of interreligious dialogue and let others join in what you have achieved: to see what connects us regardless of our differences and to let roses grow from the common ground we share. And most of all, as the Holy Father tells us: “Don’t be afraid!”