

## **Called to be the one Church: what it looks like from the situation in Cuba and the Caribbean Region.**

Revd Dr Marianela de la Paz Cot

*Provisional translation from the Spanish*

I bring you all greetings from the Caribbean Region and particularly the island of Cuba. I am grateful to the Faith and Order Commission in the persons of its executive staff for having invited me to be present and also for the opportunity to be one of the spokespersons from my region. I must admit that this has been a complicated year for me. I defended my doctoral thesis in March this year. I returned to my country at the end of April, and then moved house in August to live and work in a different province. And in the midst of all the upheaval of moving I faced the challenge of preparing classes in practical theology for the beginning of the course in September at the Evangelical Theological Seminary, where I teach. At the end of August I was appointed and inducted by the bishop as rector of the church of St Philip the Deacon in the small town of Limonar, thirty minutes from Matanzas, the town where I live. Among all those changes, it was complicated to keep up contact by e-mail with the director, Revd Canon John Gibaut, with Dr Valburga Streck, with Dr Odair Pedroso and with the secretary, Mr Alexander Freeman – a difficult thing anyway in my country where we do not have direct access to the internet. I thank them, and all those who helped to keep the lines of communication open and to make it possible for me to be here with you.

Our thinking on the theme “Called to be the one Church” will be divided into three parts. We shall first reflect on what it is that identifies us as a Christian community. Secondly, we shall do some work on the concept of the people of God, the challenge that we have as Christians to be a pilgrim people engaged in constant interchange and dialogue. Finally, I intend to relate that concept to our experiences in the Episcopal Church of Cuba.

### **1. Being a Christian Community**

From the Christian perspective, the word “community” points to our sharing in common, especially when humans are able to share their experiences of faith as a group of believers who wish to live in the world as Church, witnessing to their faith in Jesus Christ. By means of those brotherly and sisterly bonds, the community is built up, with the experience of faith celebrated by all as an important element in that unity.

For the theologian Jürgen Moltmann<sup>1</sup> Christian communities are not based on the principle of being an association of the like-minded. Based on Romans 15: 7 “Accept one another, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God”, it is possible to state that a Christian community is a community of people who are not like-minded, where there are differences, but they are not experienced as threats but as mutual enrichment. The Christian community is thus a community of people who are not like-minded, where the sense of belonging arises out of their encounter with Jesus Christ – proclaimed in his saving Word and celebrated in the sacraments that are the foundation of the koinonia of the Church, and where everybody can be made welcome through the grace of God experienced through the Spirit, which becomes a reality in the *universal diakonia of all believers*.

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<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Diakonia en el Horizonte del Reino de Dios*, Sal Terrae, 1987, p.44

The churches of the New Testament experienced times of polarization and opposing positions, not only outwardly but also internally. Such polarizations and opposing views, however, do not have to be viewed negatively. Rather, we can see them as an opportunity to develop a deeper unity. We should regard differences not as conflicts, but as opportunities that lead to unity but without loss of identity.<sup>2</sup>

Being a Christian community means much more than living an honest life and experiencing salvation, because they can exist outside the Church, since God is much greater than the Church. According to Tony Brun, what can be called a Christian community is that human community for which Christ is decisive, Christ who challenges us and eludes our human categorizations, since, for Jesus, the standard by which salvation is judged is not attendance at worship, but love of one's neighbour. One's neighbour is not considered to be a person of the same race, nor of the same faith, nor of the same party, nor of the same family, but everyone whom we approach in a redemptive way, without their political ideology or religious confession being of importance to us (Luke 10:30-37).<sup>3</sup>

## **2. The Church as the People of God**

In his message Jesus made no mention of founding a church. He proclaimed the kingdom of God. The gospel narratives are a product of the post-Easter Christian community. When those churches or communities took upon themselves to select and preserve these narratives and words on the life and ministry of Jesus, it was because they saw in them a pattern or example of what the Church, the new people of God, should be.

The Church is the people of God by being people of the covenant. The concept of the people of God should be understood as something that releases us from our rigid positions as the institutional church to send us out on a journey. The Church as the people of God experiences that it depends on divine grace. Based on Hebrews 11:13, it is the challenge facing any ecclesiastical organization to feel that they are pilgrims and strangers on earth.

Thus, those who do not go out on this journey with the people of God, even though they remain seated on their church pews, will forfeit their direct relationship with this people of God. Being pilgrims on the road is an image that helps us realize that we are not alone on this journey. It is on this journey that encounter with others takes place. We can also use this image in the context of interreligious dialogue, since the people of God are called to live in a relationship of interchange, which implies mutual recognition, dialogue, harmony and recreation of all relationships.

Such interchange is nothing less than a manifestation of the riches of the Spirit, which is given in so many ways, including the seeds of the Wisdom that are present in other religions.

## **3. Called to be one Church: the Episcopal Church of Cuba and its relationship as people of God with Afro-Cuban Religions**

The Episcopal Church of Cuba began in 1871. It served as a chaplaincy to the expatriate Anglo-Saxon community resident on the island, later widening its scope to include Chinese and Africans. In 1883, there began a missionary work by Cubans among the people of Cuba. The

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<sup>2</sup> Tony Brun, 'Iglesia. Espacio de comunión, fraternidad y diálogo para tiempos polarizados', in *Signos*, 51-52, March-June 2009, pp.12-21

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16

Episcopal Church functioned as a mission until the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church in the USA granted it independence in 1966. Its membership comprises many Cubans and descendents of Caribbeans. It has been a church with a great patriotic tradition, since many of its missionaries were actively involved in the struggle for independence, and, despite being a small church, it has had a prophetic voice in Cuban society.

In the Episcopal Church an intercultural interreligious dialogue has come about naturally to varying degrees and at various levels throughout the diocese. I was able to confirm this, especially in the field work while researching for my doctorate.<sup>4</sup> For example, in the Episcopal Cathedral of the Most Holy Trinity I noticed the deep respect that both the priest and the community had for other people's religion and culture. On entering the cathedral on Good Friday, I met a group of twenty people who had come to hold a requiem mass and had decided to take part in the Way of the Cross. I then learned that it was a group belonging to an Afro-Cuban religious community. The cathedral priest told us that Junior had approached the church, because he was attracted to the way in which that community lived, in particular their openness to dialogue with the traditional religion of the people. He wanted to learn more about the Christian religion. He had been expelled from another church because they had noticed that he was wearing an Ité (a wristband that shows by the colour of its beads the oricha Elegguá). He is an Okbá, i.e. a leader in his religion, and he devotes himself with much love to visiting and blessing the sick, in their homes, in elderly persons' homes and in hospitals.

His religion is a mixture of Yoruba religion and Cuban spiritism, since he works under the guidance of an African spirit called Taita Julián, whom it is his habit to remember during requiem masses. He has many followers who have been initiated into his religion and live near the Episcopal Cathedral and attend the office of midday prayer and Sunday mass. Junior had requested confirmation as a member of the Episcopal Church after a period of attendance and participation.

The community and its leaders treat him with respect as a friend. The priest also tells how he has been invited by Junior to bless three chapels and a plot of land in poor areas of the city, taking part in rituals where he is also treated with respect. Junior shows great interest in learning about the Bible, especially the New Testament, and is receiving instruction from the priest, who also asks him about his Yoruba beliefs. That has resulted in a very fruitful dialogue, in which he explains his initiation rites and the importance of the laying on of hands in both religions.

In this dialogue between the pastor of the community and members of Afro-Cuban religions, we can see confirmation for what the theologian Schneider-Harpprecht has stated regarding intercultural dialogue. Intercultural communication, he says, does not happen in the culture of those who speak nor in the culture of those who listen. Rather, it is an enterprise undertaken by both in mutual interaction, in which they create a sort of common cultural ante-room, in which each is learning something of the world of the other in order to be admitted as a guest. Their communication becomes proper intercultural communication when the one speaking feels that the other is receiving the message and when the cultural rules governing communication of the one receiving it are not broken.<sup>5</sup>

In that cathedral, dialogue has achieved national and international ecumenical recognition, as is shown by its being a venue for national and international conferences of practitioners of spiritism. There have been Ifa priests invited to attend the Epiphany liturgy, when the Letter for

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<sup>4</sup> Marianela de la Paz Cot, 'The Church as healing community: challenges for the Episcopal Church of Cuba' (in Spanish), doctoral thesis, PPG-Faculdades EST, São Leopoldo, March 2009. 208pp.

<sup>5</sup> Christoph Schneider-Harpprecht, *Interkulturelle Seelsorge* (Intercultural Pastoral Care), 2001, p.144

the Year has been read, according to their religion, reminiscent of how wise men of other cultures and religions of the East came to visit the baby Jesus. The cathedral has also been the setting for study days on popular religiosity and also for meetings with various Eastern spirituality and healing movements.

There are many other Episcopal communities on the island where such dialogues and encounters are taking place. The pastor of one of them told me that some of his community leaders belong to those religions. He has spoken with them, and told them that he just does not understand how they can combine the two - but he hopes that God does understand them! The pastor of the community St Francis of Assisi in Cárdenas tells us that the church there provides a service of support and comfort to mourners in the form of requiem masses that include elements beyond denominational guidelines. People from other churches request these, either because their church does not offer such a service or because they find it impersonal. Requiem masses are also arranged for persons from other religions.

The community of St Philip the Deacon in the town of Limonar is a community mostly of women very faithful in their faith in Jesus Christ, despite the fact that their church building has collapsed through dilapidation or damage from cyclones and hurricanes. For many years they have been meeting each Sunday in the sacristy, a small room with poor ventilation. They also mostly come from Afro-Cuban religions and succeed in maintaining that dialogue between their practice of Christianity and their traditional religion. This community was cared for over many years by the lay minister Dr Clara Luz Ajo, who has been able to understand, study and encourage this dialogue between Christianity and the Yoruba religion. She states that the Cuban people, without any sense of doctrinal inconsistency, leave mass and go on to the *wemilere* (a ceremony provided to orishas in the place of worship of Afro-Cuban religion), or leave that and go on to mass. These people have engaged in interreligious dialogue, have broken down barriers and crossed boundaries between the church and the place of worship of their religion.<sup>6</sup> A community leader told me that she believes that that was the way in which God spoke to her ancestors there in Africa, but for her that is the same God as the God she now worships in the Episcopal Church.

As the theologian Silvia Regina states,<sup>7</sup> *negritude* can be identified as a place where God is revealed and encountered. This is a different God, a God with our face, who was present in our history of suffering and pain, of resistance and hope. This sense of God being involved has not reached Afro-Cubans through the channel of official religion, of Christianity. This involved divinity was latent in customs and popular traditions and in black religions. An attentive examination of history, of daily life, enables us to find glimmers of the divine in those traditions, which, although diffused, contain the deep significance of a primal and distinctive experience of God. This is an experience of encounter that we discover on the journey as we discover our roots, revive memories and recover our history.

The Church is called to be one, but cannot understand that call from an exclusive or excluding perspective. We are the people of God, called to journey together, not to demonize and leave behind others because we consider them 'not one of us.' Revelation is polyphonic. God revealed

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<sup>6</sup> Clara Luz Lázaro Ajo, *Jesús y María bailan con los Orishas. Elementos teológicos en diálogo interreligioso* (Jesus and Mary dance with the Orishas. Theological elements in Interreligious Dialogue), pp.169-188, p.174, in María Pilar Aquino and María José Rosado-Nunes (eds), *Teología feminista intercultural. Exploraciones Latinas para un mundo justo*, Dabar, Mexico, 2008

<sup>7</sup> Sílvia Regina de Lima Silva, *De segredo e sagrado: Revelação e Teologia Negra* (From secret and sacred: Revelation and Black Theology), pp.52-60; in Luiza E Tomita, Marcelo Barros and José Maria Vigil (eds), *Teologia Latino-americana Pluralista da Libertação*, São Paulo, Paulinas, 2006

God's very self to the original peoples in many ways, and it is our task in this dialogue to learn to discover it.

We cannot achieve unity only as an internal Christian matter. The call to unity has to become a reality between the various religions, where culture is the key as an access code to that dialogue, opening up spaces across the religions that, out of our religious identity and experience, open us up to interchange and dialogue. Our world, so wounded and divided, does not need religious trenches, but bridges, roads and travellers advancing along them ready for new exoduses and pilgrimages.