

DIALOGUE IN MISSION

*Dialogue as an
Orientation to Living*

by
Jim and Therese D'Orsa

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To Therese D'Orsa
(1944–2023)

Dedicated founder of the
Mission and Education Series
Leader
Collaborator
Inspiration

SAMPLE

I had the privilege of being taught Physics by Jim D'Orsa decades ago when I was in high school. He was easily the most intelligent teacher I had come across and his capacity to explain difficult concepts in pellucidly clear terms was unrivalled. Nothing has changed. Dialogue, as Jim points out in this timely and comprehensive text, is much needed in this change of era time as the Church struggles to keep up with the rapidly changing lived experience of its people. Whilst some people in the Church see dialogue as a threat to the integrity of the faith, others see it as being more like a feel-good chat. Jim presents a much more rigorous and considered view in this text that he began with his beloved Therese. His skilful location of dialogue within a wide variety of theoretical frameworks is testament to his scholarship and takes the reader on a very fruitful and worthwhile intellectual journey.

– Dr Paul Sharkey
*Postgraduate Coordinator,
Catholic Theological College and University of Divinity*

This book by the D'Orsas provides an engaging discourse on the concept of dialogue and its meaning today. It provides the reader with a multi-dimensional understanding of the interface of mission with contemporary society. The reader is taken on a journey from the pragmatic understanding of communicating to engage with another to the importance of dialogue in building community and contributing to a world envisaged by Christ. The authors propose that the context in which the dialogue occurs is an essential skill for meaning-making and enables an appreciation of the links between faith, life and culture.

In journeying to a deeper understanding of what dialogue is about, we arrive at a more complete understanding of what the term means as it is an integral part in the synodal way as an orientation to living as proposed by the Holy Father.

The authors capture the Holy Father's desire to build bridges and create an atmosphere of mutual respect through dialogue. The authors proffer the view that synodality is a key strategy of Pope Francis enabling cultural change, and that dialogue is one of the many important skills required to embed in mission.

The theological, historical and contemporary aspects of dialogue as presented in *Dialogue in Mission* are a much-needed reference point for those who work in the area of mission.

– Dr Debra Sayce
*Head of Mission Enhancement and Outreach,
Catholic Archdiocese of Perth*

In characteristically clear, balanced and practical style, the D'Orsas' new work investigates the pedagogical, ethical and religious dimensions of dialogue. Gleaning rich insights from sociology, hermeneutics and psychology, the authors argue for the concept of dialogue, not just as a set of interpersonal skills but as an orientation to living. Highlighting the praxis of dialogue in a synodal church for the third millennium, this book is a handbook for pastoral and educational leaders.

– Very Rev Dr Kevin Lenehan
Master, Catholic Theological College and University of Divinity

Dialogue in Mission offers a profound and timely exploration of the pivotal role dialogue plays in connecting faith, culture, and mission in a rapidly changing world. Jim and Therese D'Orsa present a compelling framework for fostering identity, building authentic community, and engaging young people in meaningful and transformative ways through genuine dialogue. This book is a valuable resource for leaders and educators seeking to bring faith to life through the power of dialogue.

– Pam Betts
*Executive Director, Catholic Archdiocese
of Canberra and Goulburn Education*



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Therese D'Orsa and I began work on this book in 2022. This was partly as a response to the need for a wider discussion of the meaning and practice of dialogue within the Catholic Church, and partly in frustration at what had passed for dialogue in the *Plenary 2020* process organised by the Australian Catholic Church.

To missiologists, dialogue is a process by which it is possible to help people unfamiliar with the Gospel understand its message within their own meaning system. It takes their lived reality and way of making sense of life as starting points and offers the Gospel as a resource in this process. Dialogue becomes a process of mutually learning and mutual challenge in which our understanding of God's offer of salvation is improved and better received.

A need for this dialogue now confronts both the local and the global Church. The church also needs to address a growing gap between the lived experience of people that results from living in a change of era, and the modes of making sense of that experience offered by Church leaders. The Church now faces a hermeneutical crisis in helping people make sense of their lives. The situation is complex and seems to escape solutions offered in a simpler era. Pope Francis proposed that "dialogue and encounter"¹ are the way forward and that these are embodied in the notion of 'synodality'.

This leads to two questions: Why dialogue? And, 'Why dialogue now?' These raise an even more fundamental question: What does dialogue entail? These are the questions we seek to address in this book.

Dialogue is important, but it is not without its pitfalls. The simple fact is that not all Catholics, and not Catholic leaders, are open to dialogue in the sense that we use the word in this book.

Sadly, Therese died suddenly in 2023 when these chapters were still at the draft stage. I would like to thank Paul Sharkey who read

¹ Pope Francis has never fully clarified what he means by 'encounter' or a 'culture of encounter' the best rendition seems to be a combination of 'dialogue' and 'action'.

the manuscript and offered helpful advice in bringing this project to completion. As well, I thank Karen Tayleur from Garratt Publishing for seeing the book through the production process.

Jim D'Orsa

SAMPLE



CONTENTS

Introduction.....1

PART 1

PRAGMATIC ORIENTATION TO DIALOGUE

Chapter 1 Dialogue: The Basics11
Chapter 2 Dialogue and Community19

PART 2

ETHICAL ORIENTATION TO DIALOGUE

Chapter 3 The Ethics of Dialogue31
Chapter 4 Hughes' 'Putting Life Together' model 43
Chapter 5 The Lifeworld Model 49

PART 3

INTERMISSION: DIALOGUE IN HERMENEUTICS

Chapter 6 Dialogue in Meaning-Making 59

PART 4.

RELIGIOUS ORIENTATION TO DIALOGUE

Chapter 7 Dialogue and Stages of Faith Development77
Chapter 8 Stages of Faith: Ecclesial Interpretation 89
Chapter 9 The Church and Dialogue 99
Chapter 10 Dialogue: Learning from Lived Experiences 109
Chapter 11 Dialogue: Learning from the Poor115
Chapter 12 Pope Francis: 'Dialogue within the Church'..... 123

Select Bibliography..... 133

Index137

INTRODUCTION

The word 'dialogue' appears in multiple contexts. We addressed this topic briefly in *Pedagogy & the Catholic Educator* from an educational perspective.² Here we develop the treatment further.

Dialogue it is not a modern term. The concept is quite ancient. For instance, Plato (427–346BC) chose dialogue as the literary genre to outline his philosophy. Plato was not the first to use this literary form, but he was certainly the most famous. Plato wrote over thirty 'dialogues' in which his teacher, Socrates, is the main character discussing aspects of what it means to be human and to live in society with various interlocutors. Socrates was condemned to death for corrupting the young people of ancient Athens through his incessant questioning of what people then took for granted. By using the dialogue form Plato masked his own philosophical positions, thus possibly avoiding a similar fate for his tutor!

We also understand 'dialogue' as the name given to the text of a play. This is another literary form created in ancient Greece by playwrights such as Sophocles (497–406BC) and Euripides (480–406BC).

The modern understanding of 'dialogue' takes us well beyond literary forms and now functions at several levels.

Dialogue: A Concept with Multiple Dimensions

At the *pragmatic level*, dialogue is a strategy in communication between people or groups. In the classroom it is a pedagogical device used to explore what students know or to extend their understanding; in conflict resolution it is a communication device used to enable individuals or parties at odds to talk to each other; in intercultural learning it is used to help people from different cultures to understand each other and learn from each other's experience; something similar can be said of intergenerational dialogue and inter-religious dialogue. These approaches share a common emphasis: dialogue as a *technique in communication*.

Dialogue is also understood at an ethical level. In this interpretation, dialogue is seen as critical to interpersonal relations and to intersubjective learning. The focus here is on understanding the

² J and T D'Orsa, *Pedagogy and the Catholic educator: nurturing hearts, transforming possibilities*, Garratt Publishing, Mulgrave, 2020.

person or group who is 'other', as well as the moral parameters within which such understanding needs to occur. Two outstanding Jewish philosophers, Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, are important here. Both lived through World War II, had family members die in the Holocaust. They sought to make sense of why Jews were viewed as 'other' and treated so badly by a 'civilised' country! Their work provides a new form of discourse for exploring the experience of 'alterity' – of being seen, or seeing oneself, as 'other' within a society. The experience of alterity extends far beyond that of the Jewish people.

At a third level, dialogue is seen as having a spiritual or religious dimension. In the Christian tradition revelation is understood as God's dialogue with humankind. A phenomenon that began with Israel and continues throughout human history. An important element in God's revelation is that God's action has to be interpreted by the religious leaders of Israel. This led them to discern that God has a mission in human history that takes concrete form in the life of Jesus. The Christian churches, as successors to the community formed by Jesus, share responsibility to continue this mission among all peoples and cultures.

Jesus understood his mission as inaugurating 'the Kingdom of God' and making God's offer of salvation known to all peoples. His disciples understood their mission in similar terms. Following Pentecost, they were inspired to "announce the good news" to all peoples.

During his lifetime Jesus' message of the kingdom was validated by his actions in healing, and by engaging with people across a range of social classes, particularly with those who were regarded outcasts by their own society. By his actions Jesus set a trajectory for the Church's mission.

To engage with those regarded as 'other', or who regard themselves as 'other', it is necessary to *create the conditions in which authentic dialogue with them becomes possible*. The Church has learnt much from its missionary endeavours, particularly from when it got it right and when it got it wrong. These lessons, hard won, now shape its thinking about the important place dialogue has in its mission to different social and cultural situations.

In the chapters that follow we explore the meaning of dialogue in its pragmatic, ethical and spiritual dimensions, beginning with the pragmatic dimension since this will be of most interest to our target audience of teachers and school leaders. However, it is worth noting at

the outset that the three dimensions of dialogue explored in this book act interdependently. That is, lessons learnt in the practice of dialogue (the pragmatic level) have implications for dialogue pursued with an ethical or a spiritual motivation and vice-versa. It is by bringing the three dimensions together that we can grasp the full significance of dialogue as an *orientation to living*.

Experience, whether in the classroom or in the churches, indicates that dialogue is not an obvious orientation to living for many people, even the most intelligent people. In some cases, this is because their worldview precludes it; in other cases, their level of faith development precludes it. Some people lack the education necessary to see dialogue as a possibility in human encounters. As a consequence, when dealing with any group of people it is unwise to be overly optimistic that efforts to promote dialogue, even when these seem most necessary, will be successful. As we hope to demonstrate in what follows, to be effective in creating authentic dialogue it is necessary 'to prepare the ground' very carefully.

Scope of the Study

As we have already pointed out, 'dialogue' is a multidimensional reality that can be studied from various perspectives as the concept now has roots in sociology, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and theology. In this study we look at three facets of the concept and explore their implications for education in general, and for Catholic education in particular.

As a sociological reality dialogue is essential in community building and therefore it is important for those charged with leading a learning or faith community. At the philosophical level, dialogue plays an important role in the way people create meaning in the context of living in a multi-faith, multicultural social environment. Dialogue is also important in how we understand the experiences of difference and alterity and relate to people and groups whom we see as different, as 'other', or who see us as different or 'other'. This dimension of dialogue is particularly relevant for educators.

Within a psychological perspective dialogue is important in determining how individuals understand what it means 'to be Catholic', how they negotiate the relationships that define their lifeworld, and how they form a sense of personal identity. Identity

formation is ongoing during a student's secondary education and so is relevant to teachers and parents. From anthropology we learn that dialogue is central to the way in which a group negotiates its cultural identity. A major task of Catholic schooling is to assist students to integrate faith and culture and faith and life. This implies bringing faith and culture into critical encounter. Dialogue provides a medium by which this can happen.

Theology is a relatively latecomer to modern discussions about dialogue (at least in Catholic circles), however this should not distract us from the fact that dialogue is now an essential element in how the Church defines both its identity and its mission. All five disciplines noted above have a direct bearing on how 'dialogue' features in education and each provides some guidance in how to engage students in dialogue within the process of learning itself, as well as in conducting the process of learning.

Outline of the Book.

This book unfolds into four major sections.

Part 1 examines dialogue from a pragmatic perspective focussed on dialogue in the classroom. The section draws on ten years of experience by the *Tony Blair Institute* (TBI) in promoting global peace and understanding among students drawn from different cultural backgrounds through dialogue. This approach is complemented by insights offered by the *Congregation for Catholic Education* on intercultural learning.

In Chapter 3 we explore the role of dialogue plays in the formation of community. 'Building community' is a practical challenge for leaders in any faith community. At a pragmatic level the questions are: How do you do it? How do you sustain it? In responding to these two questions, we call on the insights of pastoral theologians Jim and Evelyn Whitehead who highlight six questions that groups must *negotiate* in becoming a community. This happens through internal dialogue.

Leaders do not 'build community' in a vacuum, they build it in a particular context, so understanding the context in which they work is important. Context, as we shall see, has both an historical, a cultural, and a faith dimension.

Part 2 examines dialogue from an *ethical perspective*. In Chapter 4 we examine the work of two noted Jewish philosophers, Martin Buber and

Emmanuel Levinas, who address the ethics of ‘alterity’ or ‘otherness’ in the process of exploring the nature of human relationships. They highlight the ethical challenges this ‘otherness’ creates, and suggest how dialogue can be used to address them.

Chapters 5 and 6 explore how young people make sense of their lives. Here we refer to Australian researcher Phillip Hughes’ work. Hughes’ ‘putting life together’ model suggests that there are ethical limits to whether young people see dialogue as important in their lives. These arise when young people are unable to escape the limits of subjectivity. Chapter 6 explores how young people construct their ‘lifeworld’ – the matrix of relationships that defines their identity. This matrix can be construed within an immanent framework or a transcendental framework. The choice of a framework opens up or closes down life’s possibilities.

Part 3 provides a bridge to Part 4, *the religious or faith dimension of dialogue*. In Chapter 7, we review some basic hermeneutical concepts needed in Part 4. To make sense of revelation, or contemporary theological thought, a reader needs to understand what it means to ‘interpret scripture’ and to ‘read the signs of the times’. In particular, we focus on the notion of ‘worldview’ and the role worldviews play in how we understand the context in which we live (and in which we educate).

Part 4 deals specifically with the *religious dimension* of dialogue. The worldview of faith is a public worldview, like those of the culture and the age in which we live. Faith is a gift from God that needs to be received. People ‘come to faith’ rather than receive it in a once-for-all experience. The process by which we come to faith unfolds in stages, and the stage a person has reached determines how he or she understand faith, and the value is placed on dialogue in understanding faith or in engaging with others on matters of faith. This is the topic for Chapters 8 and 9.

Chapter 10 examines the place of ‘dialogue’ in Catholic teaching which came to the fore only at Vatican II (1965). The chapter endeavours to place Vatican II in its historical context, particularly in regard to its call for ‘dialogue’ as a way of re-engaging with the modern world and its peoples. At the Council, Pope Paul VI called for a dialogue with cultures, with other Christian denominations, with other religions, and within the Church itself.

Chapters 11 and 12 explore how this call was taken up after the Council and the tensions that resulted. Much was learned from the Church’s missionary experience about the importance of dialogue.

This also raised unsettling questions for theologians to consider, particularly for those in Asia. Similarly, much was learned from the Church's decision to exercise 'a preferential option for the poor' in Latin America which resulted in 'liberation theology'. Again, this development raised new questions for theologians to address. The resultant tensions between thinking at the 'centre' (in Rome) and at the Periphery, where people experience life, helped consolidate new theological positions. As a result, the 'worldview of faith' is now in a process of transition. It is being 'recontextualised' to help people living in a change of era make better sense of their experiences. This development is in its early stages.

Finally, Chapter 13 addresses Pope Francis' use of dialogue as a mechanism to affect change in the clericalised culture of the Church which has been 'called out' by civil authorities in many countries as dysfunctional and in need of major change. The 'Synod on Synodality' is Pope Francis' major response. At the time of writing, the Synod on Synodality is still in process. However, its methodology is clear, as is the pope's determination to make 'dialogue within the Church' a permanent feature of its organisational culture at both the global and local levels. His project is ambitious, and not without its detractors!

What will become obvious as we move through these chapters is that dialogue is best thought of as *an orientation to living*, rather than a set of skills to be mastered. Willingness to engage in dialogue with those who are 'other', whether in society or within the Church, represents a threshold in human development.

Dialogue is becoming integral to Church life even if it takes different forms in different parts of the Church. Commitment to dialogue creates the need to find 'dialogue partners'. This realisation is slowly changing how Catholics relate to the world, to other religions, to the poor, and to its members.