

PENTECOST –May 23, 2010
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Our Easter season of fifty days celebrating Jesus' resurrection from the dead comes to its glorious conclusion today on this feast of Pentecost as we recall the descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostles and the others gathered in the upper room. Once those apostles received the Spirit, they were empowered and driven to fulfill the great commission Jesus gave them to preach, to baptize, and (as we heard in the gospel) to continue his work in the forgiveness of sins.

It is that same Holy Spirit that is the active presence of God in the Church and in the world, calling everyone to that ultimate unity that God intends for his people, the entire human race. As Vatican II reminds us, that oneness is shown most visibly and most completely by those who accept the fullness of revealed truth and the means of salvation (especially in the sacraments) and are united with the Church's visible structure that is shepherded by the bishops in union with the Bishop of Rome. But we are also connected, even if not completely, with other Christians who do not profess the Catholic faith in its fullness. Finally, in the words of Vatican II, even those who do not know the gospel or who otherwise are not baptized "are related to the People of God in various ways." The Council reminds us that there is a basic unity in the whole human race since we all have God as our origin and our final goal. And even in the great variety of religions that exist, we all grapple with the same basic questions: what are we about? What is our purpose and goal? What is the point of suffering; where is ultimate joy and fulfillment to be found?

This past week we here in the Cedar Valley have had an opportunity to be reminded of the fact that these questions are fundamental to all religious traditions and not only Christianity. I refer, of course, to the appearance of the Dalai Lama—the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism—at UNI last Tuesday. This was a very special event for our area: to have with us one of the most well-known and highly-respected spiritual leaders in the whole world. In his presentation the Dalai Lama called for a universal ethical code of respect, trust and compassion and urged that conflicts and disagreements be resolved through dialogue instead of violence. There is obvious common ground here with our own Catholic faith; for example, Vatican II's Decree on Non-Christian Religions says: "We cannot truly call on God, the Father of all, if we refuse to treat in a brotherly way any [one], created as he is in the image of God." That Council indeed ushered in a whole new era of the Catholic Church engaging in respectful dialogue with the other great religions of the world. Pope John Paul II met with the Dalai Lama himself a number of times; they were together in Assisi in 1986 when the pope urged the leaders of all the world religions to join him in praying for peace, each in their own traditional forms of prayer.

Any authentic dialogue between different religions, of course, will also acknowledge with respect the differences in belief that exist. The Buddhist doctrine of salvation, for example, is very different from that of our Christian faith. Buddhist spirituality is based on the belief that the world is the source of suffering and evil and is therefore bad in itself. To find enlightenment, to be freed from this burdensome state, one seeks liberation from all that ties us to this world--a complete detachment from the world and the desires that come from the world. That total detachment is not a full union with God, but is instead a perfect indifference with respect to the world, a condition called *nirvana*.

The differences between Buddhism and our Christian faith are thus made clear. Instead of seeing the world as inherently evil, we believe the Book of Genesis that affirms the fact that God created the world and all that is within it, and found that all he made was very good. Evil undoubtedly exists; we see evidence of it all around us and, unfortunately, sometimes within us. But that is the result of the misuse of the freedom to choose between good and evil, a freedom that God gave us in the beginning. And while we certainly agree with the need to detach ourselves from sin and evil, the goal of this detachment is not

simply a complete indifference to the world but is instead a complete and eternal union with a God who is love, who loves us and who has redeemed us in his Son Jesus Christ.

So there are differences, to be sure. The Catholic Church's respect for other religions is genuine and profound; as the Council said in its Decree on Non-Christian Religions, "The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions." But the Church does not for a moment bargain away or minimize in any way our Catholic faith and our belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of the whole human race. After all, we cannot ignore Jesus' own words: "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." In fact, the Catechism affirms that "the Church considers all goodness and truth found in these religions as 'a preparation for the Gospel and given by him who enlightens all men that they may at length have life.'"

In his 1994 book "Crossing the Threshold of Hope", Pope John Paul II presented a well-balanced approach and summary of the Church's teaching: "Christ came into the world for all these peoples. He redeemed them all and has his own ways of reaching each of them in the present...phase of salvation history." On this feast of Pentecost we thank God for the gift of his Holy Spirit poured out in a special way at a specific time on the apostles and which gave birth to the Church of Jesus Christ, our risen Lord and Savior. We thank God also for that same Holy Spirit that manifests that divine presence of God in all people of good will. May the Holy Spirit make his presence and the fullness of God's truth and Word ever more widely known, embraced, and lived by all. We pray that all of God's people may come to know the gift of eternal life and joy offered us through the risen Christ according to his plan and his desire.