

Workshop Introduction
The Place and the Work of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue
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The Place of DIMMID

There are a number of different ways to speak of the place of *Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique*/Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (DIMMID).

First of all, one can speak of the place of DIMMID within the Benedictine Confederation. In the organizational structure of the confederation, DIMMID is one of two secretariats—in other words, a permanent administrative office of the confederation; the other is A.I.M., the Alliance for International Monasticism (*Alliance Inter-Monastères*), which was created in 1961.

Very shortly after its creation, A.I.M. recognized that new monastic foundations in areas where Christianity was a minority religion needed help in understanding and relating to their non-Christian environment. It sponsored some workshops for this purpose, and then, in 1978, the confederation created Monastic Interreligious Dialogue as a sub-commission of A.I.M. to carry on this work. Establishing DIMMID as a sub-commission of A.I.M. was also a response to the request of what is now called the Pontifical Council of Interreligious Dialogue. In 1974 its president, Cardinal Sergio Pignedoli, wrote to the Abbot Primate asking that monks be in the vanguard of interreligious dialogue. In 1994 this sub-commission for interreligious dialogue was made into an independent secretariat, with Father Pierre-François de Béthune of Clerlande (Belgium) as the first Secretary General. I succeeded Father Pierre in 2007, and in November of this year I will complete my third three-year term. The secretariat is now legally incorporated in the State of Minnesota (USA) and is governed by a Board of Directors composed of the coordinators of regional commissions and elected members.

Structurally, DIMMID also has a place at the United Nations. Three years ago, on the advice of a friend of DIMMID and with the approval of the DIMMID Board of Directors, I applied for special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. The application was approved last year. In July of this year I spent a week in New York consulting with other religious, especially Catholic, NGOs at the UN, and also with Archbishop Bernardito C. Auza, the Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, but it is still not clear to me how DIMMID, with its limited finances and personnel, can be actively involved in the work of the UN at the present time.

We can also speak of the place of DIMMID in terms of geography. At the present time, DIMMID consists of four commissions, each with a coordinator. Oblates and members of other religious orders are members of some commissions; their number will very likely increase in the future. The four DIMMID commissions are

- 1) India/Sri Lanka
- 2) Australia
- 3) North America
- 4) Europe, with sub-commissions in
 - a) England (currently inactive)
 - b) France
 - c) French-speaking Belgium
 - d) French-speaking Switzerland
 - e) Germany

- f) Hungary
- g) Italy
- h) Scandinavia
- i) The Iberian peninsula
- j) The Netherlands and Flemish-speaking Belgium

At the present time, two monks are completing doctorates in areas directly related to interreligious dialogue. One is from East Africa and is a student of the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies; the other is from Korea and is working in the area of Christian/Buddhist dialogue at Regis College, the Jesuit School of Theology at the University of Toronto. Both have expressed great interest in helping to promote and organize dialogue between monks and followers of other religious traditions in Africa and Korea.

I should note that while DIMMID is a secretariat of the Benedictine Confederation, it also serves the two Cistercian Orders. Moreover, members of other monastic and religious communities (e.g., the Poor Clares, the Monks of Bose . . .) are actively involved in DIMMID commissions and sub-commissions.

Finally, we can also speak of the place of monastic interreligious dialogue in Benedictine life. Although interreligious dialogue is relatively new in the long history of the Catholic Church, the emphasis of the Rule of Benedict on the continuing search for God and on showing hospitality to “all who present themselves”—*Omnes supervenientes hospites tamquam Christus suscipiantur . . . et omnibus congruus honor exhibeatur, maxime domesticis fidei et peregrinis*—suggests that openness to people of other religious traditions is not foreign to our monastic way of life. Who has not, at one time or other, experienced finding God in the least expected situations and persons? Indeed, some Christian monks and nuns have even been “provoked” to greater faith and devotion by the religious fervor exhibited by the followers of other religious traditions (see Romans 11:11: εἰς τὸ παραζηλῶσαι αὐτοῦς—to provoke them [to jealousy]).

The Work of DIMMID

DIMMID encourages and promotes spiritual exchange between Christian monastics and the followers of other religious traditions who are genuinely searching for God—even though some may not use “god language” to describe the object of their search. Understandably, DIMMID initially promoted such spiritual contacts with monastic men and women of the Buddhist and Hindu traditions, in which the monastic way of life is much older than ours and very highly esteemed. These contacts are ongoing. In recent years, as Islam becomes an ever greater and more visible presence throughout the world, DIMMID is directing increased attention to dialogue with Muslims. Here too, following the example of Christian de Chergé and his brothers at Tibhirine, our emphasis is on the dialogue of spiritual practice and experience.

In May of this year DIMMID was involved in a fourth dialogue with Shi’a Muslims that took place in the Iranian cities of Qom and Mashhad. The first such encounter was held in Rome at Sant’Anselmo in 2011, the second in Qom and Esfahan in 2012, and the third in Assisi and Rome in 2014. The topic of this year’s dialogue was “The Dignity of Being Human in the Benedictine and Shi’ite Traditions.” Plans are being made for a fifth gathering to take place in Nairobi, Kenya, in May 2017.

Thank you for participating in this workshop. I greatly look forward to hearing your views on how DIMMID can better serve the Benedictine Confederation and your individual communities.