

The Lullian Spirit of *Ecclesiam Suam*

Introduction: Dialogue According to *Ecclesiam Suam*

Blessed Paul VI's first encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam* (hereafter *ES*), which was promulgated towards the end of the Second Vatican Council in 1964, has been somewhat overshadowed by the Conciliar documents themselves, and in terms of dialogue, by the ground-breaking Declaration *Nostra Aetate* (hereafter *NA*) which was issued by the same pope in 1965. The recent celebration of the fiftieth anniversaries of both documents has given cause to re-evaluate the nature and scope of interfaith as presented in both. Of the two, Paul VI's encyclical presents a clear path for dialogue and is worthy of the epithet "epoch-making" in the changes that it advocates. Yet, the argument of this article will be that some at least of Pope Paul's ideas were anticipated by the thirteenth-century Catalan Franciscan mystic, Ramon Llull. Although Llull is not mentioned by name in *Ecclesiam Suam* my contention will be that the spirit of Llull's approach to dialogue pervades this encyclical letter and even today, fifty years after the event, offers a tangible path forward for interfaith dialogue in a world crying out for peaceful solutions to seemingly intractable problems.

Ecclesiam Suam offers three aims for dialogue. The first is to achieve greater self-knowledge not only for all of those engaged in dialogue but indeed to help the Church learn in greater depth about the nature of the mystery of revelation: "We are convinced that the Church must look with penetrating eyes within itself, ponder the mystery of its own being, and draw enlightenment and inspiration from a deeper scrutiny of the doctrine of its own origin, nature, mission, and destiny."²

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² *ES*, no.9.

Hiding behind this goal is the necessary separation the document makes between the full revelation as given by Christ to the Church (“the holy and spotless Bride”) and our current understanding or interpretation of this revelation which will necessarily be fostered by engagement with the perspectives of our non-Christian colleagues:

A vivid and lively self-awareness on the part of the Church inevitably leads to a comparison between the ideal image of the Church as Christ envisaged it, His holy and spotless bride, and the actual image which the Church presents to the world today. But the actual image of the Church will never attain to such a degree of perfection, beauty, holiness and splendour that it can be said to correspond perfectly with the original conception in the mind of Him who fashioned it.³

Or as Levy puts it:

One does not need to deny the fullness of God’s revelation in Christ in order to acknowledge the existence of a saving wisdom in non-Christian religions - a wisdom which, on many points, has something to teach our present understanding of God as derived from the revelation of Jesus Christ. The key to the solution does not lie in the distance between the pre-existent Logos and the historical Christ, but in the distance between Christ, in whom dwells the fullness of the Logos, and the content of wisdom which the Church, through her meditation on Christ’s Gospel, has till now been able to draw from this fullness.⁴

And he continues: “What is revealed is one thing - quite another thing is what we are able to grasp of this revelation, even with the help of the Holy Spirit.”⁵ Thus, with our co-religionists, we work on the nature of revelation given by Christ, inspired by the Holy Spirit. *Ecclesiam Suam* therefore suggests that the process of dialogue will inevitably lead us all to greater self-understanding of the original revelation of Christ. This process of “defamiliarization,” as Levy calls it, leads, according to *Ecclesiam Suam*, to the necessary renewal and reinvigoration of the Church (a reinvigoration, I would argue, embodied in the person of Pope Francis): “Hence the Church’s heroic and impatient struggle for renewal: the struggle to correct those flaws introduced by its members which its own self-examination, mirroring its exemplar, Christ, points out to it and condemns.”⁶

³ Ibid. no.2.

⁴ Antoine Levy, “Between Charybdis and Scylla: Catholic Theology and Interreligious Dialogue,” *New Blackfriars* 89, no.1020 (2008): 248.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *ES*, no.11.

For the Church to be true to itself and its mission it *must* then, according to *Ecclesiam Suam*, engage in this dialogue with those beyond the boundaries of the Church: “We believe that it is a duty of the Church at the present time to strive toward a clearer and deeper awareness of itself and its mission in the world, and of the treasury of truth of which it is heir and custodian.”⁷

To adopt Erasmus’ translation of the opening lines of John’s Gospel, in the beginning the *Logos* is the conversation and this conversation will continue until the consummation of all things:

Here, then, Venerable Brethren, is the noble origin of this dialogue: in the mind of God Himself. Religion of its very nature is a certain relationship between God and man. It finds its expression in prayer; and prayer is a dialogue. Revelation, too, that supernatural link which God has established with man, can likewise be looked upon as a dialogue. In the Incarnation and in the Gospel it is God’s Word that speaks to us. That fatherly, sacred dialogue between God and man, broken off at the time of Adam’s unhappy fall, has since, in the course of history, been restored. Indeed, the whole history of man’s salvation is one long, varied dialogue, which marvellously begins with God and which He prolongs with men in so many different ways.⁸

From this theological perspective the rest of the encyclical’s delineation of the nature of this dialogue inevitably follows. Thus, this dialogue must be:

- **Non-coercive:** “No physical pressure was brought on anyone to accept the dialogue of salvation; far from it. It was an appeal of love.”⁹
- **Universal:** “The dialogue of salvation was made accessible to all. It applied to everyone without distinction. Hence our dialogue too should be as universal as we can make it.”¹⁰
- **Its aim is not conversion:** “If, in our desire to respect a man’s freedom and dignity, his conversion to the true faith is not the immediate object of our dialogue with him, we nevertheless try to help him and to dispose him for a fuller sharing of ideas and convictions.”¹¹
- **Its aim is to produce clarity in all participants:** “Clarity before all else; the dialogue demands that what is said should be intelligible. We can think of it as a kind of thought transfusion. It is an invitation to the exercise and development of the highest spiritual and mental powers a man possesses.”¹²

⁷ Ibid., no.18.

⁸ Ibid., no.70.

⁹ Ibid., no.75.

¹⁰ Ibid., no.76.

¹¹ Ibid., no.79.

¹² Ibid., no.81.

- **Expressed through ordinary language:** “All of us who feel the spur of the apostolate should examine closely the kind of speech we use. Is it easy to understand? Can it be grasped by ordinary people? Is it current idiom?”¹³ “We must forego all privilege and the use of unintelligible language.”¹⁴
- **Centred on humility:** “It would indeed be a disgrace if our dialogue were marked by arrogance, the use of bared words or offensive bitterness.... It is peaceful, has no use for extreme methods, is patient under contradiction and inclines towards generosity.”¹⁵
- **With confidence and in fellowship:** “Dialogue promotes intimacy and friendship on both sides. It unites them in a mutual adherence to the Good, and thus excludes all self-seeking.”¹⁶
- **And adaptability:** “The person who speaks is always at pains to learn the sensitivities of his audience, and if reason demands it, he adapts himself and the manner of his presentation to the susceptibilities and the degree of intelligence of his hearers.”¹⁷

Having thus determined the model of dialogue presented by *Ecclesiam Suam* as one that is non-coercive, universal, clear, humble and adaptable, proceeding in fellowship without the aim of conversion, and expressed in ordinary language, I shall now turn to Ramon Llull, comparing and contrasting the aims of Pope Paul’s encyclical with that of the thirteenth-century Catalan mystic.

Dialogue According to Ramon Llull¹⁸

In *The Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men* (written around 1285,

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., no.87.

¹⁵ Ibid., no.81.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Born in 1232/3 into a family that had participated in the “reconquest” of Majorca from its Muslim rulers, Ramon Llull, was converted in his twenties by a series of visions of Christ, after an early life spent in dissolution. Most of our knowledge of the rest of his life comes from a biography he helped write towards the end of his life. In it we read that Llull received the revelation of his “Art” while on retreat on Mount Randa in Majorca. Much of this vision was vouchsafed to him by the visitation of a mysterious shepherd boy. We have over 265 works by Llull written in Latin, Catalan and Arabic, many of which are dedicated to using his “Art” as a means to “persuade” non-believers of the truths of Christianity. To this end Llull founded a school in Majorca, Miramar, in 1276 with the intention of pursuing this goal. Pope John XXI confirmed its foundation. Llull’s “life” recounts that he was stoned to death in North Africa while engaged in dialogue with Muslims; however, contemporary scholars suggest that he died in Majorca where his tomb is today located. He died in late 1315/early 1316.

hereafter *GT*),¹⁹ Llull not only sets down an ideal of how he would like to see dialogue conducted²⁰ but presents in microcosm his own “Art” for embarking upon such dialogue.²¹

The conceit of the text is that a gentile (or “pagan”) would arbitrate the dispute of a Jew, a Christian and a Muslim as to who holds the truth about the nature of God and religion. The first and most striking aspect of the dialogue is the extent to which *respect and autonomy* are extended towards the various parties of the dialogue. It would of course be erroneous to separate Llull from his thirteenth-century context to make him a latter-day religious pluralist. Yet, in the light of the background of his times and its concomitant brutalities and intolerances, the *Libre* is surprisingly tolerant in the approach it takes to the inter-religious dialogue.

The second thing to note is that the dialogue takes place in *a neutral place* outside the city where the beauty of the flowers and “the trees, the springs and riverbanks” might soothe and relax the participants. No one party has the monopoly since the dialogue is arbitrated by the neutral “pagan/gentile.” As well as a neutral physical space, the debate must also take place in a neutral atmosphere where all tenets of each religion can be assessed on an equal footing.²²

Thirdly, participants in the dialogue are advised not to contradict each other when presenting their case and to show respect and love for one another. Here of course the words of *Ecclesiam Suam* resonate deeply. The understanding, we

¹⁹ Ramon Llull, “The Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men” in *Selected Works of Ramon Llull (1232-1316)*, ed. Anthony Bonner (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 1:91-304.

²⁰ *The Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men* is one of many sets of work on dialogue which Llull wrote, presumably to help those engaged in dialogue such as the students of Miramar. As well as this imaginary debate, Llull wrote accounts of actual debates, and guidelines for debate. See Harvey J. Hames, *The Art of Conversion: Christianity and Kabbalah in the Thirteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 93.

²¹ According to his biography, the “Art” which was revealed to him on Mount Randa in Majorca, is Llull’s main contribution to Western thought. Influential from the Renaissance onwards it is credited, through the influence of Leibniz, to have been one of the forerunners of modern computational theory. See Anthony Bonner, “The Interreligious Disputation, Ramon Llull’s Ingenious Solution,” in *Ramon Llull and Islam: The Beginning of Dialogue*, ed. M.A. Rogue (Barcelona: Institut Europeu de la Mediterranea, 2008); Robert D. Pring-Mill, *The Trinitarian World Picture of Ramon Llull* (Hamburg: De Gruyter, 1956).

²² As Hames, *Art of Conversion*, 94, points out such a “level playing field” was more theoretical than real in the skewed political climate of thirteenth-century Spain/Catalonia. A Jew or Muslim would have been in a position of minority in the dominant Christian power structure with the concomitant fear and insecurity that would have attended such a position. Llull’s “level playing field” could only exist in the countries under Muslim rule which he himself visited several times.

might say, is that interfaith dialogue is a dialogue of *pastoral practice as much as an intellectual endeavour*. In this respect each participant begins his contribution with a prayer to evoke his respective religion.²³

Yet, although it is a dialogue of the heart, very much in the spirit of *Ecclesiam Suam*, Llull wants to make the *intellectual foundation* of all three religions central to the dialogue he proposes. In this respect the starting point for the dialogue will be the five symbolic trees of his Art which summarise the conditions of God, nature and humanity as understood through the medieval scholastic approach common to all three faiths and based on their shared neo-Platonic and Aristotelian heritage. Thus, this common ground sees the “wise men” (interestingly, Llull does not at this point specify whether the speaker is the Jew, Muslim or Christian) begin by enunciating arguments for the existence of God which resemble forms of what would later be called “cosmological, ontological and teleological arguments,” for example: “It is clear to the human understanding that good and greatness accord with being ...; and evil and smallness, which are contrary to good and greatness, accord with non-being”;²⁴ and “Everything that has a beginning must take its beginning from something ... which being is the God of glory.”²⁵

One of the reasons why Llull favours such philosophical proofs for the existence of God is, as he states clearly at the onset, because this will not be a dialogue based on “authorities.” Commentators have pointed out that one of the reasons for this turning from “arguments from authority” in Llull may have been the relative impasse after the famous Barcelona disputation of 1263, initiated by King Jaime I, between Fray Paul, a *converso* Dominican, and Nahmanides (Rabbi Moses b. Nahman), one of the leading Jewish thinkers of Sefarad Spain.²⁶

The ease with which rival claimants could present a picture derived from their respective hermeneutical positions was clearly one that Llull did not want to share - rather he saw his dialogue as one that leads to one where “all could be under one religion and belief so that there would be no more rancour or ill will among peoples.”²⁷ “In a way,” writes Hames, while Llull’s mendicant contemporaries “were still arguing with books rather than with real and living

²³ For the role of the invocation of the divine name in thirteenth-century Kabbalistic Judaism see Hames, *Art of Conversion*, 163.

²⁴ “The Book of the Gentile,” in Bonner, *Selected Works of Ramon Llull*, 1:119.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 120.

²⁶ See e.g. Cecil Roth, “The Disputation at Barcelona, 1263,” *Harvard Theological Review* 43, no.2 (1950): 117-144; Robert Chazan, “The Barcelona ‘Disputation’ of 1263: Christian missionizing and Jewish Response,” *Speculum* 52, no.4 (1977): 824-842.

²⁷ Prologue to “The Book of the Gentile,” in Bonner, *Selected Works of Ramon Llull*, 1:116.

people,”²⁸ Llull’s method dialogue suggests one of the first interfaith encounters between people as much as between religious ideas/ideals.²⁹

Having thus enunciated the rules of dialogue according to Llull and hopefully demonstrated their affinity to those enunciated in *Ecclesiam Suam*, I would like to return now to the question with which we began, that is, how far does dialogue mean conversion or interpretation of one another’s religious position. In doing this I will be helped by the work of Harvey Hames on the thirteenth dialogue between Llull and Cabalistic Judaism.

Llull, the Trinity and Kabbala

Pring-Mill in his *Trinitarian World Picture of Ramon Llull* was the first modern commentator to remark on the change in Llull’s works from a world vision, in accord with that of medieval precedent based on the quarternity of the four elements and four humours to a later structure that is essentially Trinitarian in nature. The former approach is found in the earlier apologetic works, such as the *Liber principorum medicinae*, *Libre de contemplació* (1272), the *Ars magna* (1274) and the *Ars demonstrativa* (1275) whilst the latter begins to make itself apparent after about 1289, not long after the “illumination” that Llull received on Mount Randa in Majorca.

From this period onwards Llull develops his notion of what he refers to as the nine “essential attributes” (*praedicata absoluta* [1308], *principia transcendentia* [1306], *vertus vertuosos essencials* [1275]) usually referred to as the “dignities.”³⁰ In God’s self they are one in essence and mutually convertible, whereas they manifest themselves in various fashions throughout creation: *bonitas*, *magnitudo*, *aeternitas* (or *duratio*), *potestas*, *sapientia*, *voluntas*, *virtus*, *veritas* and *gloria*. Each “dignity” is related to the cosmos by nine “correlatives”: *differentia*, *concordantia* and *contrarietas*, *principium*, *medium* and *finis* and finally *maioritas*, *aequalitas* and *minoritas*. Each “dignity” contains within itself an intrinsic Trinitarian formula which Llull characterized as the relationship between agent, patient (recipient) and act. Thus, from *bonitas* we derive *bonificativum*, *bonificabile*

²⁸ Harvey J. Hames, [Review Essay] “On the Polemics of Polemic: Conceptions of Medieval Jewish-Christian Disputation,” *Studia Lulliana* 37 (1997):134.

²⁹ As Hames points out in *The Art of Conversion*, Llull did not have a training in a mendicant foundation nor receive a standard curriculum of study. His Art and approach to dialogue is thus “a singular method to inter-religious disputation, one based on the observation and knowledge of present trends of thought among his religious contemporaries.” Hames, *The Art of Conversion*, 9.

³⁰ *Dignitates*, for example, in the *Ars inventiva veritatis* written in Montpellier in 1290.

and *bonificare*. (Or in Catalan, from *bonea* we derive *bonificant* [the agent], *bonificat* or *bonificable* [the recipient] and *bonificar* [the act]). As Pring-Mill states: “This fundamental triplicity is the basis of Lull’s developed Trinitarian doctrine. Imprinted on the universe by the Dignities, it gives this an ineradicably Trinitarian structure, for the correlatives turn out to be ‘*correlativa innata primitiva, vera et necessaria in omnibus subjectis*.’”³¹ As Hames points out, it is noteworthy that when Lull presented his ideas in Paris he was derided for his “Arabic mode of speech”³² and indeed what he has done is to translate into a vernacular romance language the essential idiom of semitic languages such as Arabic and Hebrew where transitive and passive verb forms can be derived from a noun so that agent and patient (recipient) can be referred.³³

This basic relationship in the Dignities between action, agent and patient is what allows Lull to make in his apologetic works, a direct link between the structure of the cosmos as perceived in this fashion with the image of the relationship between the three persons of the Trinity. Thus this internal dynamism within the persons of the Trinity (and the Dignities) allows an unchanging Deity to create a changing cosmos.³⁴

Now what is interesting from our investigation of dialogue here, is that as some commentators have pointed out³⁵ this investigation of the attributes or “dignities” of the Godhead was also being practised by contemporary Kabbalists within Spain’s Jewish community as the concept of the *Sefirot* (often in reaction to the viewpoint developed by scholars such as Maimonides). In distinction to Lull’s nine Dignities, the Kabbalists suggested there were ten *Sefirot* arising from the *Ein sof* (“the Infinite”). As with Lull, each revealed a different aspect of the Godhead in creation and

³¹ Ramon Lull, *Liber de correlativis innatorum* (1310), 110, as quoted in Pring-Mill, *Trinitarian World Picture of Ramon Lull*, 5.

³² Hames, *The Art of Conversion*, 223.

³³ Harvey J. Hames, “It Takes Three to Tango: Ramon Lull, Solomon Ibn Adret and Alfonso of Valladolid Debate the Trinity,” *Medieval Encounters* 15, no. 2/4 (2005): 201.

³⁴ “The unity of God is of itself whole, in that it has the nature of *unient* (agent), *unit* (patient) and *unir* (act of unifying) eternally and infinitely in all its essence, in itself, and for itself, without which nature of *unient*, *unit*, and *unir*, it would be unable to be whole of itself, because it would be empty and idle . . . as would be the intellect if deprived of the nature of *entenen* (agent), *entes* (patient) and *entendre* (the act of understanding).” Ramon Lull, *Llibre de l’es de Déu: Libre de coñeixaença de Déu; Libre de Déu*, ed. Guillem Alexandre Amengual Bunyola (Palma: Patronat Ramon Lull, 2010): 286; Hames, “It Takes Three to Tango,” 203.

³⁵ Moshe Idel, “Ramon Lull and Ecstatic Kabbalah: A Preliminary Observation,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 51 (1988): 170-174.

thus permitted a recognition and return to that same Godhead by humanity. Hames gives us an example of what this imaginary dialogue may sound like:

Ramon: “I have now conclusively demonstrated the necessary existence of a Trinity in the divine Dignities which are the whole essence of God, and hence, the truth of the Christian faith.”

Solomon: “Ah, but what you have shown is that God is not a simple perfect being, in that there is a plurality of persons in the Dignities (*Sefirot*). We believe that God is one simple eternal being encompassing His Dignities (*Sefirot*).”

Ramon: “Listen carefully: the Trinity is not a plurality, because it is the very essence of God’s oneness and simplicity. Without this triune relationship, God could not be one in perfect simplicity, nor could creation have taken place without admitting change in the Godhead. This necessary eternal and internal dynamic within the Godhead is what we Christians call the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one in three, three in one.”

Solomon: “Hmm, give me a moment to think about that one.”³⁶

In imaginative response, he continues with Nahminides’ response to Friar Paul from the Barcelona dispute already cited:

I admit that God is wise and not foolish, that He has will without emotion, and that He is powerful and not weak. However, the term Trinity is completely erroneous, for wisdom is not an accident in the Creator. Rather, He and His wisdom are one, He and His will are one, He and His power are one, and if so, wisdom, will and power are one. Even if God had accidental qualities, they would not be a Trinity, but they would be one substance with three accidental properties . . . If we erroneously count [three in the divine], we would have to speak necessarily about four, for the being who is the deity, with His wisdom, will and power, make four in total. Moreover, we should be speaking of five, in that He is living which is in Him equally like His wisdom, and thus He should be defined as living, wise, willing, powerful and the essence of the deity making five! And clearly, this is erroneous.³⁷

³⁶ Hames, “It Takes Three to Tango,” 205.

³⁷ Nahmanides, *Kitve Rabenu Mosheh ben Nahman: Yotsim la-or ‘al-pi kitve yad u-defusim rishonim ‘im mare mekomot, he’arot u-metvoot*, ed. Charles Ber Chavel (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kuk, 1964), 1:318-320, as cited in Hames, “It Takes Three to Tango,” 206.

Continuing the debate through Solomon ibn Adret's response to "One of the Wise Men of the Gentiles"³⁸ and thence the work of the *converso*, Abner of Burgos / Alfonso de Valladolid, Hames demonstrates how Lull's appropriation of the Dignities and their resonances with the Sefirot allows a new vein to open up in Peninsular theological exposition - both Jewish and Christian. In response to Lull, Solomon suggests that the three names of God, *El*, *Elohim* and *Yahweh* (with reference to the Midrash on Psalm 50:1) refer to

three different *Sefirot* which are important for the act of creation, and whether or not the third name is specifically mentioned, it is nonetheless inferred that it necessarily comes forth from the other two. Hence, the three names do not imply an internal and eternal Trinitarian structure within the *Sefirot*, but rather refer to three of the ten *Sefirot* that balance the act of creation. Thus, there is no Trinity, but rather a unity in the Godhead.³⁹

For Abner, on the other hand, "the plurality of the divine name *Elohim* unites the three elements - agent, patient and act - which are the inherent and necessary Trinity, without which creation could not have taken place."⁴⁰ In making this move, as Hames points out⁴¹ Abner, by combining the internal activity of the three attributes (wisdom, understanding and knowledge) with the three divine names, is actually using Lull's "dignities" to make his points about the Trinitarian structure of the world and the Godhead better than Lull himself did.

Conclusion

What we have seen in the imaginary disputation presented by Hames is, I have suggested, nothing less than the presentation of dialogue as surmised by *Ecclesiam Suam* – seven centuries before it was written! Although, as far as I am aware, Pope Paul VI was not acquainted with the literature and practices of medieval Spanish Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue we find in this very same dialogue a striking exemplar of that advocated by the Italian Pope and an example for all future dialogue as envisaged by *Ecclesiam Suam*. This is a dialogue not of conversion or correction, but rather of destabilised

reorientation towards the basic tenets of one faith, the true aim of all such encounters as envisaged by the visionary Pope Paul.

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³⁸ Hames, "It Takes Three to Tango," 207.

³⁹ Ibid., 213.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 220.

⁴¹ Ibid.