

THE 2004 PARLIAMENT OF THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS (BARCELONA , JULY 7 –13)

Fernando Beltrán Llavador

THE PARLIAMENT OF THE World's Religions held its inaugural event in Chicago in 1983 as part of the Columbian Exposition. The second gathering took place 10 years later once again in Chicago. In 1999 the Parliament convened for the third time in Cape Town, South Africa. The fourth gathering took place this year in Barcelona within the context of a Universal Forum of Cultures. The President of the Autonomous Government of Catalonia saw that “deep down (the Parliament) is the essence of the Forum”, a view shared by Rev. Dr William Leshner in his welcoming address, in which he confirmed that “the three core themes of the Forum – creating conditions for peace, protecting and promoting respect for cultural diversity, and sustainable development – could not fit more perfectly with the vision and mission of this 2004 Parliament event”.

Organizers from the Council of the World's Religions and UNESCO shared their struggle to build a better world and to find pathways to peace by first acknowledging the wisdom of listening and then discovering that changing the world is possible. However, change requires a commitment. This is why all attendees were invited to commit to “simple and profound acts” to take home and use to improve their communities.

The gathering made it possible for the 8,000 members of diverse religious communities to address urgent issues of common concern such as the fate of refugees worldwide, access to water, the elimination of developing countries' debts and religious violence. Activities included plenary sessions, intra-religious-, inter-religious-engagement and film-focused programs, performances, exhibits, morning observances, and off-site programs held in churches, mosques and temples of the town.

The whole event had been preceded by a meeting of the advisory board in the abbey of Montserrat, which provided the right monastic climate for the joint celebration of unity and diversity sought and successfully achieved in the Parliament. Concurrent events resulted in having as many individual voices and choices as participants. However, respites of togetherness could also be found. Events were not just attended, witnessed, listened to or passively “consumed” but lived, experienced, shared and celebrated. In this feast of the Spirit recognition, joy, communication but also deep suffering, longing and protest were embraced and brought together in a prayerful arena.

Since Hindu, Islamic, Christian, Jewish, Native American, Humanist, Buddhist, Aboriginal, old and young, masculine and feminine, lay and

professed, intuitive and rational voices could be heard, the possibility of a real understanding was tested and the result was deeply humane and fulfilling. It is not possible to sum up the countless blessings that made the event so promising in the midst of our troubled world. Some statements were prophetic, like Raimon Panikkar's, acting as the Co-Chair of the Barcelona Program Committee, when he affirmed: "none of the religions holds the monopoly of Religion."

The causes of today's numerous tragic conflicts were sought as well as specific courses of action to counter selfish political and perverse economic agendas behind them. Islam could be perceived as a plural, complex, and essentially peaceful religion and it was really humbling to see how ignorant we tend to be about realities often "sold" to us in too simplistic fashions for evil purposes.

The concluding remarks by Fr. Pierre-François de Béthune about a document by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue called "A Christian Spirituality of Interreligious Dialogue" may help Christians appreciate the truly religious impact of this historical event: "The prophets of doom predict an exacerbation of cultural and religious differences, which will lead to a 'clash of civilizations.' In this light, the Christian world, which has in previous times brought many advantages to other nations, especially the knowledge of Jesus Christ, but which has also contributed by its arrogance to exacerbating cultural and religious attitudes, has an important task to perform. The great missionary movement, which has led so many

Christians to draw close to others over past centuries, cannot be abandoned. Its conversion, which has now begun, must lead to a concrete commitment to the steady development of a 'culture of dialogue'. It will be, I think, the best way to make all people come to love the Lord Jesus."

Before these words he had asked: "Does a firm adhesion to the person of Jesus demand (an) arrogant self-sufficiency? No! There is no shame in needing others. Even God needs human beings."¹ In a similar vein, Fr. José María Arnaiz, sm, assessing the meaning of the Parliament for the Consecrated Life today, maintains: "The religious person of the twenty-first century will be inter-religious."²

Thomas Merton greatly contributed to pave the way to this new religious consciousness. His message was also received with great interest, and the lecture about him, with lengthy quotations from his own works, can be read in Spanish and in English in the website of The Thomas Merton Foundation (<http://www.mertonfoundation.org/>), the institution which kindly sponsored it. Suffice it now to offer a summary of it, which will serve to conclude this brief report: Thomas Merton's unique witness shows that the way of the monk (whether charismatic or institutional) implies a rootedness in the ground of the Spirit. Today, the monk's, and any human being's, maturity and peace depend upon their chosen radicality. For Merton, our present responsibility, much more demanding than in the past, requires a new creativity and openness, and a sincere solidarity with people of other religions, cultures and traditions that, beyond the gains of dialogue itself,

may reach the level of true communion. His living example was a fertile seed for global peace, a genuine togetherness fully respectful of a rich differentiation. This, far from being conducive to a clash of civilizations, is intrinsic to the unity of the human family.

Notes

¹ "Christian Attitudes in this Period of Religious Pluralism", *Monastic Interreligious Dialogue Bulletin*, American Edition, MID Issue 69, September 2002, pp. 17-18.

² "Diálogo interreligioso, tarea prioritaria de la Vida Consagrada hoy", *Folleto Con Él*, nº 247, Septiembre 2004, *Vida nueva*, Suplemento al nº 2439.

Fernando Beltrán Llavador is currently serving his fourth term as an ITMS International Advisor. He is author of an introductory book on Merton, La contemplación en la acción: Thomas Merton and a translator of various Merton books into Spanish. He teaches Education at Salamanca University in Spain. As a Catholic he has worked alongside Cistercian monks in Spain and has been involved in a number of Merton retreats, particularly aimed at young people. He has also undertaken formal

CONTEMPLATION IN A WORLD OF VIOLENCE - ROOTS & RESPONSES

**Dickon Bevington
Sebastian Moore**

**Downside Abbey,
Stratton-on-the-Fosse,
nr. Bath
11th December 2004**

The shape of the day reflects an intention to uncover some of the roots of violence in our world today, to explore the concept of 'terror' and our response as people of faith. This promises to be an opportunity for refreshing and thoughtful exploration together.

The cost of the day—including lunch—is £18 for members and £20 for non-members. A small number of bursaries are available at £9 for people on low incomes.

For bookings please write to:

Audrey Chamberlain
40 Alexandra Road
Chandlers Ford
Eastleigh
Hampshire SO53 2BN

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The Thomas Merton Society