

## Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue

The dicasteries of the Holy See as seen from the inside: history, objectives and “mission statement,” how the structures that support the Pope’s ministry function. **Interview with the president, Cardinal Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot.**

**Benedetta Capelli, Vatican City, *Vatican News*, 18 October 2021**

Cardinal Arinze’s remark – that the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue is “a small group at the service of three quarters of humanity” – a snapshot of reality, is warmly remembered by those who serve in the Dicastery. It is a diverse and multicultural group, whose “mission budget” is part of the 21 million euros allocated this year to some 30 Vatican institutions. The dicastery is tasked with establishing and preserving contacts with the various faiths throughout the world; and with promoting fraternal and friendly relations with people of differing religious traditions. It is a book opened 60 years ago by Vatican II, which now, with the magisterium of Pope Francis, has come to the chapter on human fraternity. For the past two and a half years, the dicastery has been led by Cardinal Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot, who explains how this type of dialogue needs constant commitment and care, and who insists that the expression of one’s identity should not fuel prejudice and resistance.



*Cardinal Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot*

**The “Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue”:** The very name of the dicastery encompasses, in a drastic synthesis, a vast mission that, especially with Pope Francis, is becoming one of the priorities of the Church – as evidenced by his most recent international trips, from Abu Dhabi, in February 2019; to the journey recently concluded in Iraq, in the sign of “human fraternity”. What commitment and responsibility does this entail for you?

First of all, I would like to say a few words about the history of the Dicastery that, as the Secretariat for Non-Christians, was established by Pope Paul VI, on May 19, 1964, with the Brief *Progrediente Concilio*, before the promulgation of the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra aetate* and the closing of the Second Vatican Council in 1965. Already then, the need was felt, as put Pope Francis would put it, for an outgoing Church that would dialogue with the world, and in particular with those belonging to other religious traditions. In the almost sixty years that have passed since then, the interreligious dialogue promoted by the Catholic Church, while encountering difficulties and misunderstandings, has never stopped. In 1988, as provided by the Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus*, the Secretariat became what it still is today: the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCDI). The new denomination of the Dicastery fostered an idea of dialogue with people of different religious traditions that is certainly more inclusive.

The Dicastery is at the service of the Church in its vast mission of dialogue, and this is done by collaborating with the Bishops of the local Churches, especially through the Episcopal Commissions for Interreligious Dialogue. Many members of our Dicastery are in fact the Presidents of these Commissions. Even if an activity of dialogue is promoted by the Dicastery, it is always our concern to involve both the local Church and the Pontifical Representation.



*Cardinal Ayuso during a meeting at the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue*

Since its establishment, the work of the Dicastery has expanded considerably, but it has also become more precise. There have been many occasions to meet with people of various religious traditions. These meetings have given rise to structured initiatives of dialogue and collaboration with various institutions, both multi-religious and pertaining to a single religion. I would like to recall our tradition of sending messages of good wishes such as the one to Muslims for the month of Ramadan, to Buddhists for the Feast of Vesakh or Hanamatsuri, to Hindus for the feast of Deepavali, to Jain communities on the occasion of Mahavir Jayanti, and to Sikh communities on the occasion of Prakash Diwas.

I would also like to emphasize the ecumenical dimension of interreligious dialogue. In fact, for many years the PCID has maintained constant relations with the similar Office for interreligious dialogue of the World Council of Churches and collaborates with it in initiatives of study and promotion of dialogue. To present ourselves as united for dialogue or, at least, a little less divided, is a necessary testimony.

The impulse given by the Pontiffs, with the consequence of a greater commitment on the part of the Dicastery, has certainly not been lacking. I recall only as an example the Day of Prayer for Peace in 1986 in Assisi, willed by St. John Paul II, which was a milestone in interreligious dialogue; as were subsequently the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Common Coexistence*, signed on February 4, 2019 in Abu Dhabi by Pope Francis and Imam Al-Tayyeb; and the Encyclical *Fratelli tutti* of 2020.



*Pope Francis and the Grand Imam Al-Tayyeb*

Pope Francis who, in the wake of His predecessors, has himself become a promoter of dialogue on many and varied occasions, encourages us today to continue on the path of fraternity together with all men of good will. On my own part and on behalf of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, I can say that we shall pay very close attention to defining the concrete steps to be taken so that the themes of fraternity and social friendship may become more and more a terrain for discussion and action among the members of different religious traditions.

While in no way renouncing our identity or giving into an easy irenicism, with strength and courage we must affirm the need to put aside prejudices, delays and difficulties in order to build a fraternal society.

**The dialogue with Islam in particular is crucial today, so much so that there is a specific commission within the Pontifical Council that deals with it. What is the current situation and what are the prospects for the future?**

On October 22, 1974, by the will of Pope Paul VI, the Commission for Religious Relations with Muslims was established in order to promote and stimulate religious relations between Muslims and Catholics. It is a separate body but connected with the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. It has its own Consultors whose task is to promote both the religious relations between Christians and Muslims and to study and deepen various topics related to the Islamic-Christian dialogue.



*Painting hanging at the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue featuring religious leaders of different faiths*

The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue has always sought to establish regular relations with Muslim institutions and organizations in order to foster mutual knowledge and trust, friendship, and collaboration. In fact, agreements have been reached with various institutions, both Sunni and Shiite, based in Islamic countries or with a Muslim majority, so as to ensure the possibility of periodic meetings, according to programs and modalities agreed upon by the parties. For the sake of brevity, I will not go into a list of the various talks we have had. They are indeed many.

Pope Francis has provided the example and abundant material to consolidate and expand the Islamic-Christian dialogue. I have already mentioned the Document on Human Brotherhood and the Encyclical *Fratelli tutti*. In 2019, the Pope visited, in less than sixty days two countries, the United Arab Emirates and Morocco, where Islam is strongly in the majority. Finally, from March 5 to 8 this year, [there was] the recent Apostolic Journey to Iraq. From the point of view of dialogue with Islam, there were two salient moments. The courtesy visit to Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Al-Husayni Al-Sistani, one of the most symbolic and

significant personalities of the Shiite world; and the interreligious prayer in Ur went precisely in the direction of building fraternity between Christians and Muslims.

All this is to say that there is a path already begun with our Muslim brothers and sisters that has found new life and that will certainly be reflected in the future activities of dialogue of the Dicastery.



*The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue*

Finally, I would like to recall that in August 2019 the Higher Committee of Human Fraternity, of which I am a member, was established to spread and make effective the values contained in the Document on Human Fraternity. One of the fruits was the proclamation by the UN of the International Day of Human Fraternity, to be celebrated on February 4 each year.

**From a “demographic” point of view, it is not possible to ignore Buddhism, Hinduism and other Asian religions. Why does dialogue with the former appear better structured?**

Relations with representatives of the various Buddhist schools and organizations continue to develop and be enriched through meetings and visits. Christian-Buddhist talks have been held regularly since 1995. The Dicastery regularly participates in the Summit of Religions, which, since 1987 – following the 1986 Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi – has taken place every year at Mount Hiei (Kyoto), the historic centre of Tendai Buddhism. Frequent meetings are held with representatives of the lay Buddhist movement Rissho Kosei-kai, with whom we have maintained cordial relations since the time of Vatican II.

The Dicastery has also organized two Christian-Taoist talks, while some representatives of Confucianism have been invited to participate in multi-religious events organized by the Dicastery. There is no shortage of opportunities for dialogue meetings with followers of Shintoism.

The Pontifical Council has long had numerous contacts with representatives of various Hindu organizations and continues to initiate formal relations with them. We have had several meetings in India, in the United States, in Italy. We have very good collaboration with representatives of Jainism, particularly with the Institute of Jainology based in London. Also, with the Sikh community, in recent years there has been an increase in collaboration and moments of dialogue both in India and with Sikhs in the diaspora.



On the part of all these religious traditions there is undoubtedly a good willingness to dialogue with the Catholic Church. Especially in recent years, there is a common interest in more social issues such as peace, the environment, migration, etc.



*The Council's founding document signed by Pope Paul VI*

I also remember that in 2019, on the occasion of the Apostolic Journey, Pope Francis proposed the theme of human brotherhood to countries such as Thailand and Japan.

**The mission of the Pontifical Council has almost naturally led you to travel extensively around the world to weave personal relationships and create lasting bonds. Now with the pandemic the planet is getting used to the “on-line” mode of meeting. Is the financial savings proportionate to the sacrifice, or do you risk losing something?**

Like everything else, the restrictions we have to live with because of the pandemic have both negative and positive aspects. The entire activity of the Pontifical Council is focused on witnessing and spreading the encounter both at the institutional level and through personal friendship made up of proximity, participation, and closeness. It is a Dicastery decidedly projected outwards. Therefore, we had to give up a lot. In fact, nothing can replace the direct and personal encounter and the possibility of sharing one's time with others in presence and not virtually.



*Cardinal Ayuso at work in his office*

However, the experience we have been living for more than a year has undoubtedly allowed us to save money – but I would like to say that it has also given us the possibility, through the webinar mode, to participate in many videoconferences of interreligious dialogue, probably many more than we would have been able to participate in in person. It was also possible, thanks to the videoconferences, to increase the number of participants. I repeat, however, that the “virtual” modality, while cheaper, obviously does not have the same value as a personal meeting. It is for this reason that, with due precautions and respecting all measures, we will try to gradually return to conducting the dialogue activity in the traditional manner – without

neglecting, however, where and when possible, to continue to use, for the reasons stated above, the online mode as well.

**Let's try to do a sketch of the dicastery community. How many people are engaged in it and where do they come from? What are the areas of work and what skills are required?**

Let me respond to this question with the words of my predecessor, Cardinal Francis Arinze, who, when asked how the dicastery works, replied: "We are a small group at the service of three quarters of humanity." That is still the case today. We are a small Dicastery, 14 people in all, including five women, of various nationalities and backgrounds, lay people, priests and religious, engaged in different areas: Islam, religions of Asia and Africa, new religious movements, because: "fosters and supervises relations with members and groups of non-Christian religions as well as with those who are in any way endowed with religious feeling." (Apostolic Constitution Pastor Bonus § 159). In any case, I would like to recall that the Dicastery has no competence for dialogue with Judaism.



*Inside the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue*

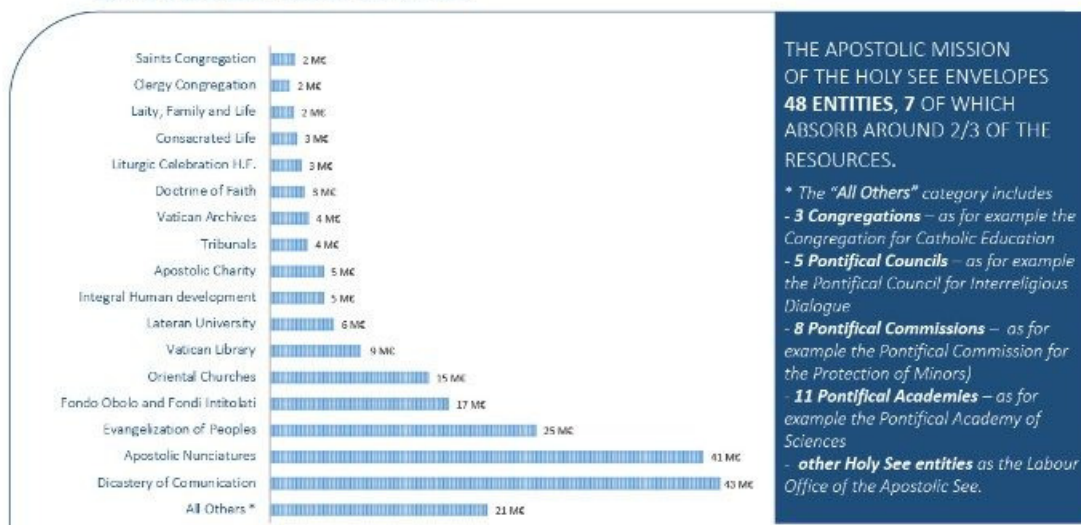
The Officials in charge of the various sectors are flanked by technical and administrative personnel. It must be said that all the staff is very willing to share the work because it is often necessary to give each other a hand due to the many commitments and requests that arrive. We are a small but diverse and hardworking family. Obviously, there are different skills depending on one's assignment: academic training in the various religious traditions, knowledge of various languages, expertise in more technical areas such as archives, administration and, given current needs, information technology. I would like to point out that the Dicastery has its own website ([www.pcinterreligious.org](http://www.pcinterreligious.org)) that offers information, documents, excerpts of speeches by the Pope and PCID Superiors, and a download of our publication, the *Pro Dialogo Bulletin*.

**What are the "items" that require the most financial resources and how does the dicastery's economic budget reflect its unique mission?**

The institutional activity of the Dicastery, entirely financed by the Administration of the Patrimony of the Apostolic See, being aimed at the promotion of inter-religious dialogue, is carried out primarily through the organization of trips, conventions, conferences and talks, both in Rome and abroad, with the participation of people from all parts of the world. The financial resources available are therefore used essentially for these purposes.

# 2021 BUDGET APOSTOLIC MISSION

## EXPENSES DETAILS BY ENTITIES



### Holy See 2021 Budget related to single dicasteries

Because of the pandemic, from March 2020 to the present, financial expenditures have obviously been greatly reduced. The economic resources of the Dicastery have been used in particular for the publication of books, collections of colloquium proceedings and enhancement of the computer resources of the Dicastery.

The Dicastery's activity of promoting inter-religious dialogue is also carried out through the *Nostra Aetate* Foundation-Scholarships, founded in 1990, with public and civil canonical juridical personality in the State of Vatican City and its headquarters in the Dicastery itself. The Foundation grants scholarships to young people of other religions, residing in foreign countries, who wish to deepen their knowledge of Christianity at Pontifical Academic Institutions in Rome. Once they have completed their studies, those who have benefited from the scholarships return to their countries to make Christianity known by engaging in activities related to interreligious dialogue. The Foundation also provides grants to support local initiatives aimed at promoting interreligious dialogue. From the economic point of view, the Foundation is autonomous and self-financed.