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Respect, tolerance the path to unity

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WHY is it some people are insensitive and say things to hurt the feelings of others? One way of looking at it is that these people, like everything else, serve a purpose - that of activating the voice of reason within others.

In matters of faith the root cause of insensitivity is lack of understanding and respect and, in multi-racial, multi-religious Malaysia, this provides both danger and opportunity.

Danger in that insensitivity can lead to tinder dry superficiality that requires only a spark to ignite.

Opportunity in that we are moved to promote dialogue and a coming together of people of different faiths to give concrete meaning to unity in diversity.

Society will always have people for whom it is not a matter of live and let live, but bending others to their will.

They see themselves as self-appointed guardians of their faith and seek to rally support for their cause with "heroic" words and actions.

Recently an elected State representative was reported as saying he would deal with places of worship, other than his own, in a certain way should he gain power.

It set some alarm bells ringing. How do we cope? Is an equally shrill response the answer?

Fighting fire with fire only makes the fire bigger. We need water to douse the flames.

The water comes in the form of voices of reason within the vast majority who only wish to live in peace and harmony. Nevertheless, the voice of negativity must be accepted as part of reality and countered by regarding it as wake-up calls.

There is always a tendency to be complacent and to take things for granted until reality gives us a black eye or worse.

Invariably, there are warning signals along the way. History has already provided lessons aplenty. Are we learning from them?

We have the opportunity to erect a shield to keep extremism at bay but it calls for a concerted effort from politicians to the man-in-the-street to bring people together in a spirit of understanding from which respect, which goes beyond tolerance, emerges victorious.

It is an individual effort that collectively amounts to a counter force that will not only protect but nurture the kind of society that will guarantee the future.

We have organisations such as the Malaysian Council of Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs and Inter Faith Spiritual Fellowship which deal with issues and promote understanding through courses, talks and dialogue.

Persatuan Darul Fitrah, an Islamic association of converts, has held talks on other faiths and encouraged dialogue as part of the cementing process.

The local Catholic church is fighting fire with FIRE (Fostering Inter-Religious Exchange), an initiative of a group within

A recent three-hour a week, eight-week programme saw some 70 people of different faiths come together for a basic understanding of different religions.

The Council of Churches on June 11 held a talk at St. Francis Xavier

Church in Petaling Jaya. The speakers: Bishop Murphy Pakiam, Datuk J. Jegathesan and Dr. John R. Gurusamy. Topic: "The voice of religion for inter-faith harmony and national unity".

Bishop Pakiam highlighted the Pope's recent visit to a mosque in Syria, where he was warmly welcomed by the Chief Mufti, as "a great impetus for such encounters and goodwill gestures around the globe".

In the great perspective plan for the Church, the Pope had declared that "we should consider the great challenge of inter-religious dialogue in which we shall be committed to in the new millennium".

This was being expressed through a series of highly symbolic meetings for a relationship of openness and dialogue with followers of other faiths.

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference had organised encounters for bishops and leaders of other faiths through the Bishops Institute of Religious Affairs (BIRA).

Arising from them were the BIRA IV and BIRA V documents entitled "Theology of harmony" and "Working together for harmony in our contemporary world" and based on Christian-Muslim, Christian-Buddhist and Christian-Hindu dialogue.

Jegathesan, referring to the recent State politician's religious intentions, drew attention, via the English translation of the Holy Quran by Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, to Surah 6, verse 109 which states:

"Reville not those unto whom they pray beside Allah lest they wrongfully revile Allah through ignorance. Thus unto every nation have we made their deed seem fair. Thus unto their Lord is their return and He will tell them what they used to do."

Verse 113 of the same Surah: "Thus have we appointed unto every prophet an adversary - devils of humankind and jinn who inspire in one another plausible discourse through guile. If thy Lord willed they would not do so. So leave them alone within their own devising."

In the same vein Jegathesan turned to the rock edict of Emperor Asoka with words to the effect: "Let not anyone by mistaken belief think that by condemning another religion you exalt your own. On the contrary you demean your own."

In the Hindu context, he said it was stated in the Vedas that "Truth or God is one but wise men call Him by many names."

No external force could destroy a nation of God. Only its citizens could do so by their prejudices, ignorance and ego.

Dr Gurusamy touched on common values of love, compassion, justice, honesty and fidelity found in all religions. As such some sages have said: "There is only one religion, the religion of love. There is only one language, the language of the heart and only one race, the human race."

For inspiration he turned to:

Lao Tzu, the Chinese philosopher, who said: "There is nothing in the world as soft as water. Nothing is superior to it in overcoming the hard. The gentle overcomes the powerful. Everybody knows it but few can put it into practice."

Gurusamy also picked some salient points from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's book A new deal for Asia where it states:

"Why must we merely tolerate differences, why not relish them? Why not enjoy and celebrate a feast of civilisation - traditions and cultures of all countries are of equal importance and worthy of being respected by all.

"There is only one world civilisation although individual traditions, standards and perceptions must be allowed to differ a world goaded by prosper-thy-neighbour attitude and policies."

Dr Gurusamy called for active support for celebrating September 16 as

"Racial harmony day" from this year so that the voice of reason is heard  
loud and clear.

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