

Bridge Over Troubled Water

---The Story about Fr. Albert Poulet-Mathis and the Development of Religious Dialogue in Taiwan

Author: Sense Chen (CEO of Taitung St. Mary's Hospital,
Executive Director of Taiwan Conference on Religion and Peace)



I am a Buddhist. But I had many Catholic friends and acquaintances, especially Fr. Albert. Fr. Albert Poulet-Mathis, S.J. (1927~2010) is very famous in Taiwan, not as a Catholic Father, but for his contribution to “Religious Dialogue and Cooperation”. Many people, (including me), and many groups were able to open up the door to “Religious Dialogue” because of Fr. Albert! He always said, “Religious dialogue is carried on not for preaching your own faith but for learning from other religions by way of religious dialogue.”

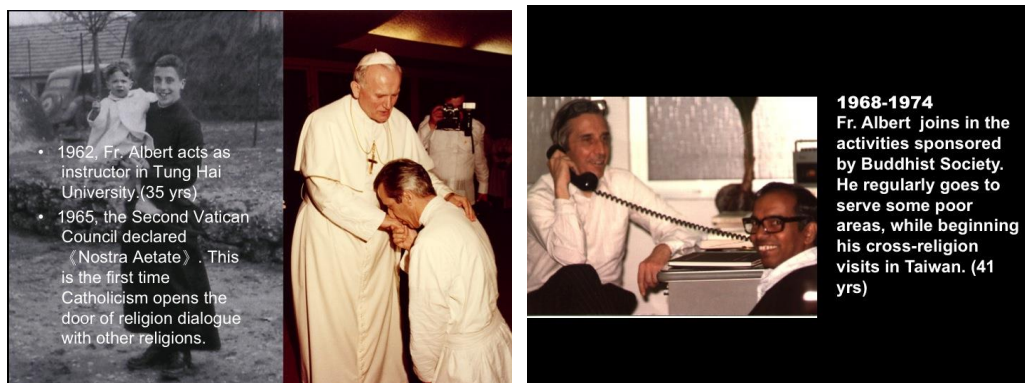
Fr. Albert was born in France. At the age of 13, he heard the sound of God inviting he to be a Father and God tell him to preach the Gospels in China and to learn from St. Francis Xavier. He joined the Society of Jesus at 18. After completing fifteen years of training to become a Priest, Fr. Albert was assigned to Taiwan in 1959.

On October 11, 1962, the Roman Catholic Church summoned leaders to the Second Vatican Council. On August 6, 1964, Pope Paul VI announced an important general call known as

“Ecclesiam Suam.” In this general call, religious dialogue was mentioned. Pope Paul pointed out that, “Before you speak, you must listen not only to people’s voices but for their thoughts. The spirit of dialogue is much more effective if one provides service and friendship, as well.” This speech had a profound effect on Fr. Albert. For the first time, he felt an awareness regarding the urgency of implementing the Pope’s speech, in order to summon up meaningful religious dialogue. On October 28, 1965 the Second Vatican Council announced a declaration known as ‘In Our Times’-‘Nostra Aetate’. It was the first time that the Roman Catholic Church had opened a friendly door to other religions for the purpose of furthering religious dialogue. A brand-new idea, “Those who do not believe in religions can be saved.” formally appeared in human history. The next year, Mao Zedong started his “Cultural Revolution” on Mainland China. In the same year, Fr. Albert was forced by a serious illness to leave his beloved Taiwan. He had 3rd-stage lung cancer.

Fr. Albert recalled, “I knew that I was dying! The President told my family by telegraph that he was sending me back to France for my final days. Before I left Taiwan, he had a western suit jacket made for me, in case my parents should be sad to see me so thin. Many of my schoolmates came to see me off at the airport. I sat in a wheelchair as we embraced one another. We all broke out crying! Sadly, I thought, "This will probably be the last time we will see one another!”

“The plane was flying high in the sky. This was the nearest that we could get to God without dying, I thought, so I asked the stewardess to give me a cup of wine. Maybe this would be the last cup in my life! I was both excited and pleased, and I held up the cup to pray to God. I saw the cup of wine as the blood of Jesus, atoning for human sins. I also thanked God for allowing me to make so many good friends. As I drank, I prayed for their peace. When the plane arrived at Roissy Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris and the gate was opened, I decided not to use a wheelchair. I got out of plane on foot, all by myself. I saw that my surprised family members who had been pre-notified of my return, all came to meet me, and an ambulance was standing by. I shrugged and the ambulance took me on what seemed to be a long trip to Paris Hospital for further examinations. The next day, they X-rayed my lungs and the doctor incredulously announced that he had never seen healthier lungs! It was a miracle! My future again looked bright. Now I knew only that I had for some purpose, again, received God's mercy.”



In 1968, France experienced a violent student movement. In those days, Communism, Existentialism and other different thoughts were flourishing and challenged original mindsets. Most of them considered the schools to be too closed-minded and too Europe- centered. They felt that educational policies had failed to keep step with changing trends. The students demanded that the schools be opened up to dialogue! At that time, some within the Roman Catholic Church and indeed throughout Christianity in general, began to cooperate in support of the student movement. The student movement had a great and profound effect on the whole of Europe.

Because of Fr. Albert's various experiences in conducting with Religious Dialogue, he was assigned to lead a group of French students to Tokyo for the study of Japanese culture. He was invited to make a speech at Tokyo University on "The Effects of the French Student Movement on the World". However, the University administration objected to this proposal so the Japanese students proceeded to occupy the presidential office and they locked the administration out. Fr. Albert was invited to sit in the presidential seat and deliver an address on "How I Joined in the Student Movement as a Father. Not long after, he received a telegraph that he should immediately return to Taiwan.



Master Cheng Yen (mother Teresa in Asia) oft said, "if there were no Catholic Sisters, then there would be no Buddhist Tzu-Chi foundation."



Fr. Albert 's most beautiful experiences were sitting together with Master Sheng Yen for several hours without saying anything. He said, "We found ourselves lost in dialogue with each other in silence, and we were "heart to heart" in spirit. We realized the mysterious miracle: "He is in me and I am in him."

In the 1960s, "Religious Dialogue" was too new to be accepted in Taiwan. In fact, there were conflicts and debates between Buddhism and Christianity. Missionaries and monks argued with one another. Both sides often reacted or verbally attacked each other. The relationship was very tense.

Fr. Albert came back to Taiwan to serve at Fu Jen Catholic University and acted as the director of the Student Counseling Services---a brand-new job. There was a big portrait of Buddha in Fr. Albert's office-- even bigger than the "Cross". Many Catholic students could not accept his actions, but Fr. Albert told them: "The world must be open to all religions!" This was his consistent attitude. Later, he was invited to be the instructor of the Buddhist Society. He began to have more interactions with Muslims and other Christians.

But Fr. Albert's actions were very different from what was traditionally done, and some conservatives regarded his actions as disloyalty and betrayal. Even some of his Father colleagues found it difficult to tolerate his actions, and some people suggested that the

university should discharge him. One day, several people in black clothes and hats came onto the university campus and went straight to Fr. Albert's room. They were officers of "National Security Bureau". The students hurriedly informed the University President, Bishop Yu Bing to save Fr. Albert. After that incident, Fr. Albert moved from the university dormitory of the Jesus Society to the simple student dormitory. Catholics in the dormitory asked Fr. Albert if he could perform Mass, so he offered it daily in the kitchen. To Fr. Albert, it was a new experience of getting closer to civil society.

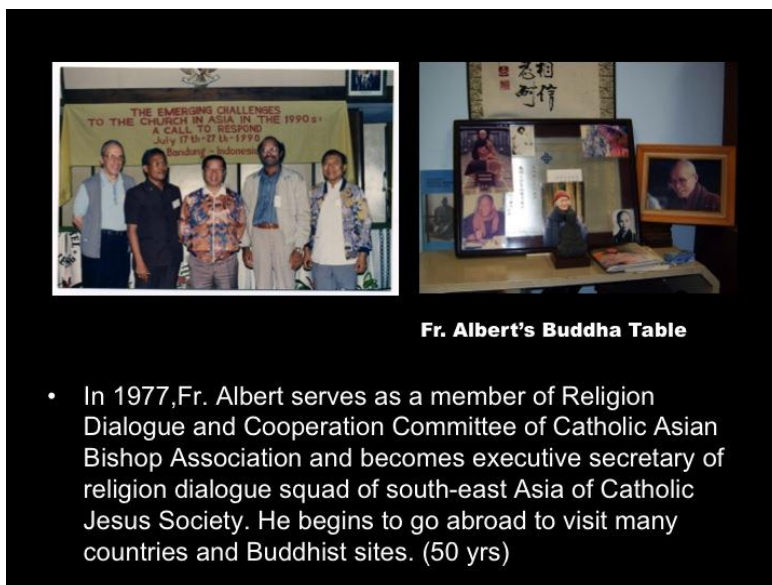
The year that he turned 55, Fr. Albert joined in the "Winter Camp" sponsored by the Catholic college student societies. Once a time, it rained for three consecutive days, and the students could do nothing but stay inside to pray. So, the suggestion was made to set up a "Service Society" not only for the Catholic students but also for all the students.

Fr. Albert said, "In those days, many people in Taiwan were poor. There was a place called the beggar refuge---"Ai Ai Refuge". It was the most pitiable place in the suburbs of Taipei City. Ambulances went to and from the beggar refuge every day. Almost every day some of the beggars died. There was no place for the dead bodies so the warehouse became the mortuary. I led the students in bathing the old people, but there was no water available so we tried our best to wipe them with pieces of wet cloth. In the beginning, I myself was scared. But I believed this was the work that we had been called to do."

"Later on, Fr. Luis Gutheinz began helping the leprosy patients in Losheng Sanatorium. Many students dared not get close to the patients because their parents were very worried that they might contract Leprosy. We spent a lot of time explaining to the students that leprosy was not contagious. I put my hands on the sick spots without being infected. This was meaningful work. Every week I went there to attend Mass. Once when I was holding Mass, someone hurried in to tell me one of my good friends had died. He was a leprosy patient who suffered from the skin disease as well as from a mental disorder. I hurried to him and he looked very pitiful. Nobody dared to look at his dead body. He was covered with a piece of cloth. The doctor had not yet come, so I took the cloth off his dead body. I was not afraid to massage his body, his legs and hands. I gradually got his body straightened up and I put his head on the pillow. He looked beautiful on the bed. His body seemed to give off light. The church members gradually moved closer to his body. They prayed for him together. We were all affected and some people shed tears."

"One leprosy patient had no hands. He had one remaining leg. When he came out from the operation room where lacked medical equipment and was not air-conditioned, there were many flies on his body and he was suffering from much pain. He kept shouting that he wanted to commit suicide, and he continued to hit the bed with his head. I put both of my hands on his shoulders and said, "I will not let go of my hands until you decide not to commit suicide." I still remember the feeling in my hands and that his body was covered in sweat. After a long while, he promised not to take his own life. So I said, "OK, OK! I wish you hope that you will be peaceful!" Later, we helped him get additional limbs and we gave him a wheelchair. He

had no hands or legs, but he happily went around in that wheelchair. He was not a Catholic but there was a Catholic, church and a Buddhist hall there. This was an example of truly good cooperation between the Catholic Church and Buddhism.”



In 1976, Fr. Albert functioned as the counselor of “The Alliance of the Catholic Social Young Men Associations”. In 1978, America broke off diplomatic relations with Taiwan and although Taiwan was going through a terrible political situation, religious groups were not repressed. On the contrary, they could freely seek to promote their ideals. In the same year, Fr. Albert founded the “Asian Religious Dialogue Center” in answer to Bishop Michael Rodrigo’s request. Fr. Albert acted as the Executive Secretary of the “Religious Dialogue Operation Association of Jesus Society in Southeast Asia.” With the following meaningful aims, he organized an “International Symposium on Religious Dialogue” and in 1980, he set up the “Committee of Religious Dialogue and Cooperation in the Tien Educational Center:

1. To help fellow brothers and sisters of the Jesus Society in the Taiwan district to understand more the importance and urgency of religious dialogue and cooperation
2. To cultivate fellow Catholic brothers and sisters in respecting other religions and to accept the believers of different religions.
3. To arrange for fellow brothers and sisters of the Jesus Society in the Taiwan district to visit churches, temples, Buddhist sites, cultural centers of religious groups as well as educational and social welfare institutions.
4. To receive leaders of different religions and people of different religious groups in visiting the Tien Educational Center and other activity centers of the Jesus Society.

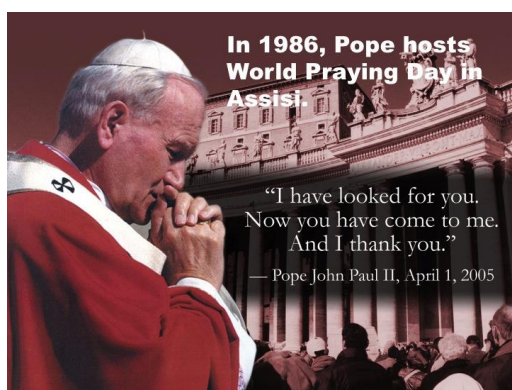
He also added the following, "Though the objects of our aims are only the fellow brothers and sisters of the Jesus Society and we do not cover lay Catholics, the depth of dialogue still remains on the stage, so as to establish friendship. In comparison to the narrow religious conceptions held for the past two thousand years, we have made great strides. However, the aims of religious dialogue are still urgent and we need to make every effort to fulfill them.

In the same year, Fr. Albert got a "letter of appointment" from the Pope to act as "Counselor of Vatican Religious Dialogue". The appointment was to be valid for five years at a time. However, Fr. Albert served for fifteen years in total. In the field of religious dialogue, there were only twenty counselors from all over the world and Fr. Albert was the only one in Taiwan. With support from the Roman Catholic Church, Fr. Albert traveled all over Asia. He got to go abroad every month and regularly got together with the bishops in Asian districts and they discussed how to accomplish the ideals embodied in "Live and Let Live / Peaceful Co-existence". Additionally, every year he joined other councils, along with the more than twenty counselors of religious dialogue. These enriching experiences widened his insights but also made him feel the importance of his mission more and more heavily. He arranged twelve religious symposiums in the Asian district and in 1992, had all of the documents published. The title, "Pioneer of Taiwan Religious Dialogue" was well deserved as he paved the way for a sound foundation in Taiwan for Catholic-led religions dialogue and he nurtured valuable cooperation between Taiwan religions and international religious groups.

Fr. Albert said, "The best benefit of religious dialogue is the establishment of true friendship. Even if I were to return to those places now, they would regard me as their best friend. Some people may think I took the wrong approach and do not act as a priest should act. In the beginning, H. E. Jozef Cardinal Tomko in charge of religious dialogue in the Vatican had a different opinion about what I was doing. At the time, I was young and not afraid to speak up, nor was I afraid of criticism. Every year, I had to travel to Rome to make reports. One year, I got a phone call from Cardinal Tomko asking that I come for a meeting, so I agreed. To go to the meeting, I had to borrow a friend's Priest's attire because I did not own a set. The appointment was at 8:00 a.m., and I nervously arrived early. The Cardinal was a very important figure in the Roman Catholic Church. At 7:50 a.m., he entered the office. I immediately stood up and said, 'Archbishop, thank you for inviting me to come here. May I introduce myself?' He said: 'Not necessary! I have already known who you are for a long time. I have heard what you think of me, but today I want to know more what you are thinking about.' We talked pleasantly for quite a long time. He said that every year from now on when I came to Rome, I should leave some time for a talk with him."

Previously, Cardinal Tomko had not understood what religious dialogue was all about. I believe that through our dialogue, I helped him to understand better. He was senior to me and had more experience and a deeper knowledge of theology than I but we established a friendship. The Chairman-in-General of the Jesus Society said that in Rome there was not a single priest like me who was on good terms with Cardinal Tomko.

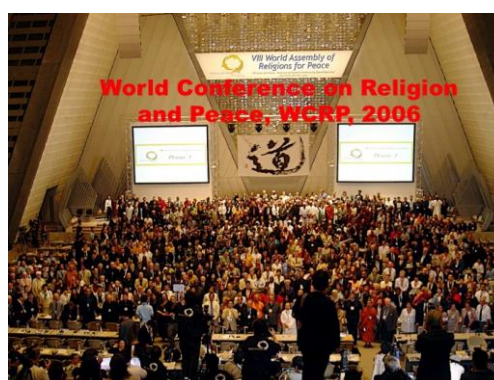
In 1982, the Jesus Society held a conference in Sri Lanka. The Archbishop, the Secretary-in-General of the Religious Dialogue Center in Rome Mgr. Rossano, and Fr. Albert spent a whole week promoting religious dialogue to every parish. The Bishops said that they were willing to listen to our ideas but wanted us to make them clear. They mentioned Fr. Albert as the speaker. Fr. Albert said: “I was admittedly a little nervous. I closed my eyes for a few minutes and prayed to God saying, ‘you know Lord, that I am not able to answer these questions. Nor, can the Archbishop or Mgr. Rossano do so. Give me strength because I am not sure that I can handle it well enough.’ Later, I asked God to talk through me because I needed to ‘Let go and let God’. After my speech, the audience gave me a big hand. That night, the Archbishop knocked on my door apologizing because it was very late. He said, ‘I would like to show my gratitude. You clearly gave us the necessary answers.’ I said: ‘It’s not me, but God!’ I did not have enough wisdom to conceive the content. I am nothing but an ordinary small-time priest. I completely put myself in the hands of God. I believe that adherents of Buddhism and Taoism can also have the same experience.’ Later, the Chairman-in-General said to me: ‘We need to cultivate young people and let them understand the mercy of Buddha, Jesus and Allah.’



On October 27, 1986, the Pope held World World Prayer Days in Assisi. In the 34th council, the Jesus Society introduced a document entitled Our Mission and Interreligious Dialogue.” The Society declared, “What is most important, is that we need to be more open under the leadership of God so that we can cooperate closely and sincerely with the brothers and sisters of other religions. We should accompany one another in a brother-like atmosphere and together, fulfill the goals God expects us to.”

In fact, Fr. Albert was not satisfied with the declaration. The purpose of religious dialogue is not simply friendship or social service. “Religious dialogue-in-depth” is beyond the declaration-makers’ understanding. Though this declaration was far from satisfactory, he believed it could be accepted as a beginning. At least under the declaration all the Fathers of Jesus Society were encourage to now start to think deeply about this. Unfortunately, many of the Fathers were not prepared in their minds. Fr. Albert’s abundant experience helped make up for this deficiency.

Fr. Albert said, “I believe that Catholicism needs is not only theory, but more time to cultivate deeper dialogue and experience. My only concern is that I have become a “monster” in my own church. It hurts me badly.” Some Catholics were afraid of something from different religions could damage their soul. So, we have to dialogue. Once I was invited to Rome to see the Pope who asked me whether it was difficult to have a dialogue with Muslims. It was a hard question to answer, but I replied, ‘To do so is hard but in order to understand, it is necessary.’ The Pope smiled. Obviously, he was satisfied with my answer.”



In 1994, he united with Tian Di Teaching, Buddhism, Christianity and Roman Catholic Church to found the “Taiwan Conference on Religion and Peace” (TCRP). From then until now, TCRP remains the highest profile inter-religious organization. There are thirteen important religious groups have representatives in the TCRP. Fr. Albert was the first and second President. The voices of religious groups in Taiwan are heard internationally under his leadership. Since 1995, the association has sponsored a yearly “Religion and Peace Living Camp” to provide opportunities for young people to understand different religions and to make friends with people of different religions. In 1999, the 921 Earthquake aroused the love of the Taiwanese and also stimulated great energy in religious cooperation. The different religious groups quickly went to the disaster areas to help rescue victims and provide assistance. TCRP helped facilitate material cooperation among the religious groups and broadcast information on the conditions inside the disaster areas by means of network programs and the monthly magazine “Company”. This “Special Information Sharing Network”

could be said to represent the first and most significant cooperation among Taiwan's different religions. Fr. Albert acted in a key role.



Fr. Albert said, “I am nothing but a small-time French priest. I do not have any high status in the Roman Catholic Church so how can I be a good friend of a Pope and an Archbishop? It is because true friendship does exist and is able to transcend everything.”

He told me more than once that at the present time there were still no ideal or even satisfactory books on religious dialogue. Religious dialogue should not be only about theory, superficial dialogue, social activities or get together. Religious dialogue should offer a creative opportunity to get acquainted, in depth, so that both sides understand and come to have greater love for others. In order to help me better understand this concept, Fr. Albert sent me two articles.

In one of the two articles, Fr. Albert began with the very touching paragraph, “In the past twenty years, I have been devoted to religious dialogue and cooperation. I have been deeply influenced by Dom Henri Le Saux, Swami Abhishiktananda (1910-1973), who lived and served in India for a period of twenty-six years. In 1969, shortly after the Second Vatican Council he wrote a long article which twelve years later, in 1981, I was lucky enough to read when I visited India. The article had profound influence on me and greatly encouraged me. The following is a passage of the book”:

“Each partner in dialogue must try to make as far as possible, the intuition and experience of the other, his own. One must personalize it in one's own depth. One must look beyond one's own ideas and even beyond those through which others attempt to express and communicate to them with the help of signs available in their traditions. For fruitful dialogue to be meaningful, it is necessary that I reach as it were, into the very depth of myself, to absorb, feel and understand the entire experience from my brother's perspective. I can only do this by

freeing my own experience from all actions, so that my brother can then recognize in me, his own experience, from his depth.”

(Dom Henri Le Saux, Swami Abhisiktananda (1910-1973), “The Depth-Dimension or Religious Dialogue” 1969, In “Vidyajyoti” Journal of Theological Recollection, Delhi, india, Vol. XLV, N5, May 1981, p. 214)

The other article is a passage from a speech Pedro Arrupe, S.J. (former General Chairman of the Jesus Society) made in Rome at the Ignatian Ciurses of the Center of Ignatian Spirituality from 1980 to 1981 in Rome.

“Feeling myself in the other, feeling the other in myself, accepting him and being accepted, is an ideal of supreme perfection, especially since I know that he is God’s dwelling, that every human being is god’s dwelling, that Christ is in him, suffers and loves in him and is waiting for me in him.”

(1980, The Trinitarian Inspiration of Ignatian Charism, n.88)

“God is in every man, waiting for me with his love, and this is a call that I cannot neglect...God receives in others, the love we have for him... The presence of each human being in my life becomes, transcendently, a form of the presence of God, and my acceptance of my brother, becomes my implicit acceptance of God...”

(1981, Rooted and grounded in Love, n. 49)

Fr. Albert said, “What is religious dialogue? What good news does it bring? Its purpose is to help one understand the meaning in one’s life and know that life is related to that of everyone else around. It is to help them know how blessed they are. The dream can come true in just two or three generations, if people will listen and try to live it. However, it takes love to more the process along. We need to convince everyone to share the love and to join in religious dialogue in order to change or grow. Religious dialogue, too, may need to change and grow this concept is so simple. In the beginning, I also felt it was too difficult but later I myself learned from experience. I need to not only understand others' faith, I need theirs, in order to steady my own faith. Don’t try to be a believer of all religions. It is impossible. You are supposed to act your role well in your own religious tradition by demonstrating the mercy that God gives us.”

