The Dominicans last week invited a controversial theologian to their conference on interreligious dialogue in Rome. They hoped that Fr Peter Phan would “challenge their thinking” – and they weren’t disappointed. His and other talks explored different approaches to faith-to-faith discussions.
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n the final day there was a general discussion among all those who attended the meetings and this generated moving testimonies and keen observations from a number of people in the so-called hot spots where Christians are a minority amidst large Muslim populations. Two sisters from Iraq were especially memorable. Sr Nazik Matti, a young woman who is completing a licentiate at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, said she was frustrated that Catholics usually approach interreligious dialogue from a heavily Western context in which Christians are in the majority. She said it was different in Iraq and other places in the East where Christians were a tiny minority. She said that while she was enriched by the JRD discussions, she felt like the conversation was too slanted towards a Western point of view.

Sr Sherine Maroun, told of the respect that the Iraqi Muslims have for the some 140 Dominican sisters who are in the country, especially because of their work in schools and hospitals. Most of the people they serve are Muslims. "When the Muslim women give birth they want the Mother [sister] to accompany them to the delivery room and to bless them with the Rosary we pray. And they want their children to be taught by us," she said. But both sisters said the general violence of fundamentalist Muslims against Christians was at times an unbearable burden and obstacle to even beginning interfaith dialogue and relations. At one point there were more than 1,000 lay Dominicans in Iraq, but now the number has dwindled to a mere 50 youngsters and 50 older adults. Sr Sherine said that when she was working in Mosul her superiors advised her to move to a safer part of the country. "But I thought, where should I practise my Dominican charism if I don't practise it with people?" She said such meetings as the Journées Romaines Domonicaines were useful opportunities to help the West understand the East. "We need interreligious dialogue, but first we must have inter-Christian dialogue," she said.

MICHAEL McCARTHY

‘What am I sensing beyond the butterfly, where once was the Creator?’

Whence comes the elation? I mean the elation sparked by the beauty of the natural world. I have felt this a great deal during the summer, pursuing what may seem an unusual quest: to see all of Britain’s butterfly species in a single year.

It’s possible: there are 58 of them. It would be much harder in France, where there are more than 250. But it still requires a lot of travelling: the chequered skipper is only to be found in the Highlands of Scotland, the mountain ringlet is only up mountains, the swallowtail is only in the Norfolk Broads and the Glanville fritillary only occurs on the Isle of Wight.

It also requires a lot of planning, for each species has a distinct and limited period when it is on the wing; and a lot of luck, for when you get there, the sun has to be shining. In general, no sunshine, no butterflies. It’s 500 miles to Argyllshire to see that wee, small chequered skipper, not much bigger than your thumbnail, and up there, there’s an awful lot of rain.

But it’s worth it. The determined pursuit of the full total means that you somehow find your way into the heart of understanding what butterflies have to offer, which is a quite remarkable amount of natural beauty.

This summer I have stood in a woodland glade as 1,000 heath fritillaries, orange and black, fluttered a foot from the ground in a silent dance; I have stood on a downy headland and watched Adonis blues outshine the sunlit sea below them, so brilliant was the electric blue of their wings; I have seen marbled whites that look like flying pocket chessboards, and orange tips which look like silky flower petals, and on the last day of the summer, the brown hairstreak, seldom encountered, but when seen, quite breathtaking, chocolate brown with glowing golden bands across its forewings.

All of these have triggered deep feelings in me, beginning with the very first butterfly sighting of the year.

It was Sunday 5 April and I was on Merseyside with my wife and two children, my daughter aged 17 and my son aged 12; we had gone to the grave of my parents whom my children had never known, and I wanted to effect an introduction, as it were. It was a chilly, windy morning but a watery sun was shining and as we stood at the grave of a dead leaf, dark and ragged, came bowling through the air towards us and dropped at our feet. Then the “leaf” opened its wings, displaying four brilliant “eyes” of red and blue and yellow: it was a peacock.

Why on earth should I feel it? Why on earth, when my whole being was concentrating on the loved ones of the past and trying to convey what they had meant, to the loved ones of the present, why should this entirely extraneous emotion elbow its way into my soul?

As the peacock opened its wings at the grave, a tiny thump of elation. There was no suppressing it. And since then, as I have pursued species after species and felt it time and again, I have wondered at its origin.

Once, in pre-Darwinian days, it was explicable, to Christian minds at least: the beauty of the natural world was a reflection of the Creator who made it, and to rejoice in it was to be at one with him. But now we know there are mundane reasons for our loveliness: colours are in flowers to attract the insects that pollinate them (grasses need no colours, being pollinated by the wind).

Similarly with butterflies, the brilliant colours of the wings have evolved for a reason: to mimic another creature, a camouflage, or to break up their outline, or to serve as a warning, or to mimic another creature. We can explain it.

But what about the elation? How do we explain that? What is it that I am sensing beyond the butterfly, where once was the Creator? The colours that make beauty in the insect may be merely functional, but what is this response of mine?

In the course of five months seeking out every butterfly species in Britain I have learned the answers to many questions. Now I can tell you their food plants, and their flight periods, and how they pass the winter – as an egg, a caterpillar, a chrysalis or an adult insect. But about the elation on seeing them, I can tell you nothing, other than that I feel it.

What is this happiness? Where does it come from?

Michael McCarthy is environment editor of The Independent.