

Acts of the
Study Days
on
Salesian Presence
Among Muslims

July 30-August 4, 2012
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edited by
Alfred MARAVILLA

SDB Missions Department & FMA Sector for Mission ad/inter Gentes
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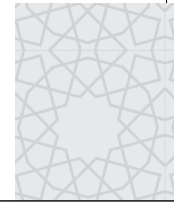


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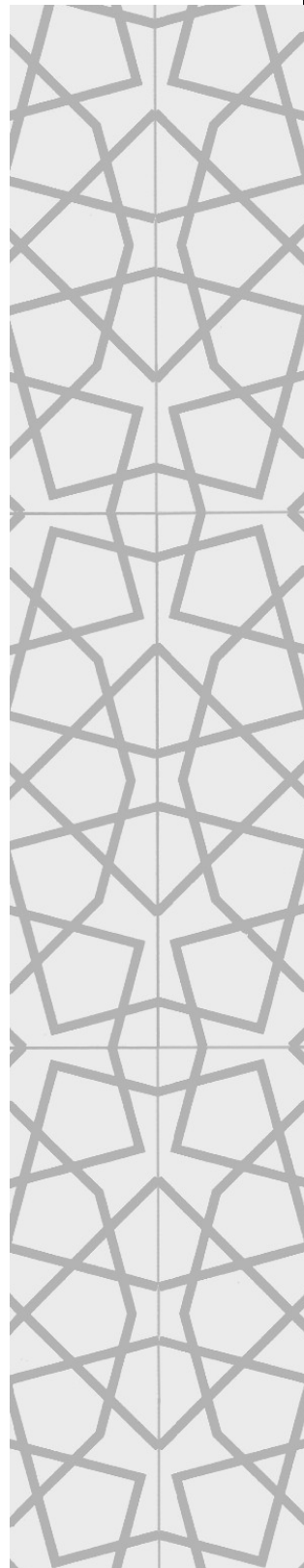
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Introduction







The Study Days

The Study Days are a development of the *Seminar for Missionary Animation and Formation* organised by the SDB and FMA Missions Departments for many years now. However, unlike the Seminar, the Study Days are not intended as occasion for the animation and formation of missionaries. These Study Days are meant, rather, to foster reflective discussions and a deeper contextualised reflection on our **Salesian presence among Muslims** in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of the challenges and discover new insights and perspectives in view of a rediscovering its relevance today. Hence, the Study Days are directed primarily to Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians as well as other members of the Salesian Family with a certain level of either theological, missiological, anthropological or academic formation.

For this six-year period *initial proclamation*, as the start of the rich, dynamic, and complex process of evangelisation, was chosen as the overriding theme of the SDB-FMA Study Days in all continents. These Study Days build on the *Missionary Animation Seminar on **Salesian Pastoral Ministry in Islamic Context*** (1989) and the *Missionary Animation and Formation Seminar **SDB-FMA in Islamic Context*** (2001). Yet, today SDBs and FMAs are present not only in Islamic contexts but also in traditionally Christian areas where there is a growing number of Muslims. Similarly, Muslims are present also in many Salesian works in all continents. In these situations the first form of proclamation of the Gospel is the witness of life of the Christian, of the consecrated person, of the religious community, and of the whole Christian community because where explicit proclamation is either prohibited or not possible it is witness of life that leads to credibility¹. An authentic Christian life engenders a clear witness of love and service². This, in turn, is always an invitation and a

¹ BENEDICT XVI, Motu Proprio *Porta Fidei* for the Indiction of the Year of Faith, 9.

² JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, 23.



challenge to the interlocutor to ask existential questions and search for answers in a more conscious, in a more personalised and in a more profound manner.

This booklet reflects the three moments of the Study Days: **I. Analysis of the Situation** **II. Study & Reflection** **III. Formulation of Conclusions**. It also contains the prayerful reading of the Word of God through the *lectio divina* at the start of each day.

Most speakers were chosen purposely outside the Salesian Family circle in order to hear a 'different voice' regarding the topic and help the participants to 'think out of the box' and provoke a deeper reflection and analysis of the situation and help participants discover new insights and perspectives.

After the presentation of the speaker, one of the participants (who had read and studied the presentation well in advance) presented a prepared response in a form of a critical reaction to the talk outlining its possible challenges and opportunities from the Salesian perspective so as to stimulate further discussion and deeper reflection among the participants.

Besides Sr. Maike Loes FMA and Fr. Alfred Maravilla SDB as moderators of the Study Days, Sr. Runita Borja FMA and Fr. Piergiorgio Gianazza SDB, as facilitators, had the crucial task 1) of collating the situation reports of participants and present their synthesis at the start of the Study Days, 2) of synthesizing the discussions each day and point out emerging insights and perspectives expressed by the different perspectives of the participants 3) and of formulating a final synthesis of the whole Study Days outlining the challenges as well as new missiological and theological insights and perspectives regarding our Salesian presence among Muslims.

These Acts of the Study Days are published with various activity sheets which would enable the local communities (even those in other contexts) to use the materials for the on-going formation of the members and, hence, foster a deeper and wider reception among Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians of the new perspectives and insights emerging from these Study Days.



Mother General's Message

Sr. Yvonne Reungoat FMA

I heartily address my greetings to all those attending these meetings, Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, coming from Africa, Asia, Europe and Middle East, together with my gratitude for your meaningful presence, representing a plurality of realities where a variety of different expressions of Christians and Muslim faith are living together.

I would like to address a special thanks to the Mission Department of the Salesians and to the Sector for Missions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

A special thanks to Fr. Václav Klement Councillor for the Salesian Missions and to Sr. Alaide Deretti Councillor for the Missions for their initiative and courage to address a very topical issue, that is going to be dealt in this session, and that is strongly challenging our Congregations.

I appreciate the choice to give continuity to this kind of meetings, started in 1989 and that come to us all, with great urgency and relevance, in its social, ecclesial, intercultural and interreligious dimensions.

I thank all the speakers that will work to enlighten and foster a deepening insight concerning the Salesian presence in realities and activities in Islamic contexts.

Our Institute appreciates, promotes and supports these invitations as interesting opportunities to understand events increasingly widespread and which deeply affect our mission meant to form, through education, the person in all its integrity in the respect of the different traditions, cultures and religious belonging.

Our Founders gave us a Charism open to wide horizons, clear in its identity, open to dialogue to the extent that it is for the good of the young people who are in situations of need.

It is important to take this charismatic heritage with fidelity and creativity, searching together as Salesian Family for new ways of meeting the new challenges we are involved in.



I hope that these days might bring new knowledge: may they foster the sharing of experiences, to identify attainable and verifiable paths; may they be full of new insights and prospects for the future.

In this journey the most needed attitude is undoubtedly dialogue as a privileged space to compare different identities united by a single goal: search for what unifies, never for what divides, as prophetically anticipated the Good Pope, John XXIII.

Research and dialogue are possible insofar clear identities encounter, are able to look at their own ethnical, cultural and religious richness with intellectual humility, deep human sensitivity and renewed passion for the *Da mihi animas cetera tolle* enlightened by the Word of the Gospel of Jesus that brings to everybody life and life in its fullness.

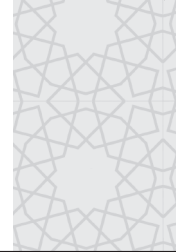
I wish that after this meeting you might go back to your realities with new hope, with a look of sympathy for the young generation waiting for prophetic presences that open perspectives of justice, acceptance, respect and evangelical love.

May the Lord bless your works and make us increasingly be a Family that bears witness and proclaims the richness of a charism which is always new because supported by the strength of the Holy Spirit that makes all things new.

May Mary our Help accompany you in these days and be for you Mother, Teacher and Guide as she was for St. John Bosco and St. Mary Domenica Mazzarello.

I assure you of my constant prayer.

Thank you!



We are Here to Reflect on Our Way of Being Present among Muslims

Fr. Václav Klement SDB
General Councillor for the Missions

My Dear Salesian Brothers and Sisters,

First of all a heartfelt welcome to the Rector Major's house! 11 years after the last SDB - FMA Seminar on Islam we are meeting again in this same place to reflect together on our Salesian presence among the Muslims. Our globalised world has changed a great deal these past 11 years: starting from September 11, 2001. Scarcely six months after the previous Seminar in 2001, relation between Christians and Muslims throughout the whole world was subjected to great tensions and challenges. And again after September 12, 2006 – the date of the lecture Benedict XVI gave at the University of Regensburg. It is clear, however, that for the disciples of Jesus Christ the growth of Islam signifies one of the ten '**megatrends**' which exert a great influence on the future of the Catholic Church.

Statistics (PEW Institute, 2010) indicate that there are 1.6 billion Muslims in the world, with an annual growth of 1.5%. In 2030 it is predicted that 60% of Muslims will be living in the Asia-Pacific region and that Pakistan will surpass Indonesia which presently has the largest Muslim population.

Since the 26th General Chapter in 2008 I have asked myself many times: 'What is the significance of Islam for our faith and for our Salesian charism?' I began my own reading on the topic of our Study Days as well as started gathering materials. During my visits to places where we are in daily contact with Muslims, I collected accounts of the varied experiences: catechumenate classes composed almost exclusively of young Muslims (AFW), Muslim director of a Salesian Oratory (FRB), an experience with Muslim leaders in a Youth Centre (ICP), the enthusiasm of the confreres about their experience in the Gulf States (INB), an educative pastoral community made up mostly of Muslims committed to living the preventive system (ITM). It is not easy



to find any reflection at the Province level (ICP 2011 - YM Delegate; MOR - Province SEPP 1992) concerning our pastoral praxis which involves those we are working with from other religions, especially Muslims.

1. A short account of the Salesian presence among Muslims (Annuario 2012)

From the time of Don Rua in various missions we have been present among our Muslim brothers and sisters. A glance at the Annuario of the Salesians of Don Bosco 2012 (vol. II) shows that starting from 1891 we are present in **about 50 countries** in which a significant percentage of the population are Muslims:

1891 Algeria	1951 Philippines (Mindanao 1989)	1985 Indonesia
1891 Holy Land / Israel	1952 Lebanon	1986 Sierra Leone
1894 Tunisia	1965 Serbia-Jugoslavia	1987 Yemen
1896 Egypt	1966 Montenegro	1988 Uganda
1903 Turkey	1971 Gabon	1993 Burkina Faso
1906 India	1976 Ethiopia	1994 Bulgaria
1907 Mozambique	1979 Liberia	1995 Bosnia-Herzegovina,
1927 Thailand	1979 Liberia	Chad, Eritrea
1929 Morocco	1980 Kenya	1998 Pakistan
1936 Iran	1980 Senegal, Tanzania	2000 Azerbaijan, Kuwait,
1939 (1976) Libya	1981 Angola, Ivory Coast, Mali	Kosovo
1940 (1992) Albania	1982 Nigeria, Sudan, Southern	2008 United Arab Emirates
1948 Syria	Sudan	2009 Bangladesh

On the other hand there are various Salesian presences in the Muslim world which we have closed for various socio-political reasons or lack of personnel:

Libya (*Vicariate Apostolic* of Derna, 1939-1950: Apollonia, Battisti, Beda-Littoria, Berta, Cirene, Derna, Luigi di Savoia, Mameli, Razza, Tobruk)
Morocco (Casablanca 1979-1992, Port Lyautey (=Kenitra) 1937-1958, Rabat 1992-1999, Sidi Yahia Du Rharb 1955-1958)
Tunisia (La Marsa 1894-1960)
Turkey (Smirne 1903-1943, Adalia 1913-1927)
Egypt (Port Said 1924-1963, Ismailia 1925-1940, Suez 1923-1940)
Lebanon (Beirut 1952-1977)
Iran (Teheran - School 1939-1980, Abadan 1954-1981)

In addition, in countries of our present European Provinces, the Muslim population has recently increased. Today we are present among the Muslims also in the following countries:

France, Spain, Austria, Germany, Belgium, Great Britain and various Salesian works in **Italy** have a large percentage of Muslims.

A glance at the world map tells us that that **more than 30 Provinces** in the different regions of our Congregation cannot ignore the presence of young Muslims in our works on a daily basis. Approximately according to the Regions: South Asia - 8 Provinces; East Asia - 3 Provinces; Africa - 6 Provinces; West Europe - 5 Provinces; North Europe - 7 Provinces; Italy & MOR - 5 Provinces.

There are the Provinces present in territories with a Muslim majority, which already include a good number of local confreres, who are in daily contact with Muslims:

MOR (Middle East, 1902, 7 countries) Israel, Palestine, Turkey, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt

AFO (French-speaking West Africa, 1998, 7 countries) Mali, Senegal, Guinea Conakry, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Togo, Benin)

AFW (English-speaking West Africa, 1998) Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia

AFE (East Africa, 1982, 4 countries) Sudan, Southern Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania.

ITM (Timor Leste - Indonesia, 1998)

FIS (South Philippines - Pakistan: present since 1998).

Among those in the list of members in the Salesian Family whose cause for beatification has been introduced, there are two so far who are coming from Christian communities in Islamic contexts: the Venerable Salesian Brother **Simon Srugi** (Palestine, 1877-1943) and the Servant of God, Salesian-Cooperator **Matilde Salem** (Syria, 1905-1961).

During the 120 years of our presence in the Middle East there have been 3-4 cases of confreres who suffered **a violent death** even though not for strictly religious reasons. At the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011 a young Polish missionary Fr. Marek Rybinski, suffered a violent death at the Salesian School in Manouba (Tunisia), where 100% of the students are Muslims.

The most important fact is that we can count **hundreds of Salesians born in countries with a Muslim majority**, who grew up in Christian communities in the midst of an Islamic cultures, hence they had the opportunity to be in a dialogue of life with our Muslim brothers and sisters: Indonesia, Pakistan, Philippines, Bangladesh, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Liberia, Eritrea, Sudan, Southern Sudan, Tanzania, Kenya, Mozambique, Burkina Faso, Mali, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Guinea Conakry, Chad, Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Iran, Albania etc. Now among **Salesian Superiors** we have the first Provincial of Arab origin Fr. Munir El Rai (MOR, originally from Syria) as well as Fr. Boedi Yohannes Soerjonoto (ITM, Provincial Delegate for Indonesia, originally from Jakarta).

2. A short account of Salesian reflection on our commitment among Muslims

The first meeting at Congregation level to reflect on our presence among Muslims was held in **Cairo (Egypt, December 30, 1988 - January 3, 1989)** attended by 26 SDB, 14 FMA. Most of them came from the Province of the Middle East and North Africa, with only 1 SDB from Sub Saharan Africa. The Acts also contain contributions by Fr. Bashir Souccar, SDB and Sr. Ibtissam Kassis, FMA. In workshops various important topics were examined regarding culture and evangelisation, relationships between the Islamic and Christian religions, education in the Islamic context and the position of women in the Middle East. Some conclusions appeared in the SEPP of the Province (MOR, 1992).

A second opportunity for reflection at Congregation level was organised 12 years later in **Rome (Italy, February 25 - March 2, 2001)**. There were 18 SDB and 7 FMA, 1 Layman from Azerbaijan present who represented an even wider geographical diversity (Middle East, Sub Saharan Africa, South Asia, East Europe – the Balkans). The Acts containing the talks by Fr. Vittorio Pozzo, SDB and Sr. Kassis, FMA, focused on Salesian presence in Muslim contexts (education in intercultural contexts, dialogue). We consider the conclusions of the two Seminars to be valid, but we do not have an assessment of their application.

In the previous six-year period, the, then, Councillor for the Missions,

Fr. Francis Alencherry conducted a world-wide survey (from 2005-2007) regarding our **Salesian commitment in the Islamic world**. As a result a multilingual Dossier (in Italian, English, Spanish, French) of 164 pages was published in 2008 and distributed during the GC26. Chapters 1-3 contain the responses from 11 Provinces (AFO, AFW, ATE, FIS, FRA, INB, INK, MOR, SLK, SLO). Chapter 4 deals with Salesian praxis up to today; chapter 5 deals with the challenges of Islam to the Salesian charism and Chapter 6 contains some practical points: The need to be present in Islamic countries, the importance of witnessing, the need to strengthen our presences (MOR), the formation of Salesians, the quality of the education and of the preventive system, a commitment to peace, justice and human rights.

In West Africa, thanks to the initiative of the AFO Province, a short **Seminar at Bamako (Mali, 2010.10.11-14)** was organised. 25 Salesians from the 13 countries of Sub Saharan Africa (AFW, AFO, AFE) were present with Fr. Jean Bevand M. Afr. as the invited expert. In re-reading the Acts one is struck by the lack of a serious reflection on the application of the Preventive System in these countries involved.

Some Provinces do offer a **reflection on our educative-pastoral praxis with young Muslims**. As an example: the draft of a reflection on the form of our pastoral action on behalf of those of other religions, especially Muslims (ICP, YM Team (2011) and the Salesian Educative Pastoral Plan of - MOR, Provincial Chapter 1992, pp. 35-48).

Unfortunately, in the whole Congregation, we have few confreres with a good academic and practical preparation. Few Provinces (MOR 4, IRL 1, FIS 1...) have taken advantage of the possibility to send confreres to study in the Pontifical Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies (PISAI) in Rome where courses leading to diploma, licentiate or doctorate in Islamic studies are offered (www.pisai.it).

3. The process of preparation for the Study Days up to the present

An official impetus was provided by the **26th General Chapter**, when various delegates at the GC26 requested that there be some careful reflection for a well thought through educative pastoral approach:

‘Many of our works find themselves operating in a multireligious, multiethnic and multicultural context which poses new challenges to and offers new opportunities for evangelisation. Among these, our relationship with Islam is of particular note, since it demands that we set out adequate strategies for dialogue and proclamation. Where an explicit or immediate proclamation of Jesus Christ is not possible, our presence as Christian educators is a prophetic sign and plants a precious seed of evangelisation’ (GC26,30).

In the first meeting of the World Consultative Assembly of the Department of Missions after the GC 26 (September 2008), Fr. Pozzo (former Provincial of MOR) was given the task of undertaking a preparatory study for the Study Days in 2012. In the last three years Fr. Pozzo has shared some of the fruits of his reflection that are useful for the proper organisation of the Study Days (2009: Re-examination of the process of Salesian reflection 1988-2008; 2010: Islam and Youth Culture; 2011: Re-examination of the Seminar at Bamako, Mali 2010; 2011: Analysis of the replies to the first questionnaire for the Study Days 2012). In his absence I sincerely thank Fr. Pozzo for his precious help!

In 2011 a **first questionnaire** was sent out to possible participants to the Study Days coming from the **four main zones**. The three questions (1) The challenges facing us in these situations, (2) Subjects for clarification or reflection – expectations (3) Subjects to be suggested. Replies came from Europe (4), from the Middle East and North Africa, Gulf (10), from Sub Saharan Africa (8) and from South and East Asia (9 replies). Finally all the participants (as well as those who are interested but unable to take part in the Study Days 2012) received three questions as an immediate preparation (June-July 2012).

4. Why are we here and what do we expect from the Study Days?

We are gathered here after 11 years to reflect on **our way of being present** through our daily contact with our Muslim brothers and sisters in our works, or in countries with a Muslim majority, as Christians who bear witness to and proclaim Jesus Christ. As Salesians we want to examine more deeply the practical meaning of art. 22 of our Regulations:

In non-Christian countries Salesians by the application of their educational and pastoral method should create conditions favouring a free process of conversion to the Christian faith, with respect shown for the cultural and religious values of the neighbourhood.

In places where the religious, social or political context does not allow of forms of explicit evangelisation, the Congregation should maintain and develop a missionary presence of witness and service.

We can sum up the expectations in the fundamental question: How should we behave as Salesians educators - missionaries among young non-Christians and especially Muslims? What kind of presences, of strategies or educational-pastoral methodologies are we to make use of as Salesians?

Many are waiting for clarifications in particular regarding:

- (1) a **knowledge of the internal dynamics** of the Islamic faith and culture, which condition the thought and action of the young, and how to face the defensive attitude of the Muslims?
- (2) the significance of “**religion**” in the preventive System and how to apply R22 (SDB) to pursue evangelisation yet without proselytism, without discrimination.
- (3) **how to make our own witnessing explicit**, through our attitudes as evangelisers?
- (4) an all-round formation for everyone, but diversified with specific points for the attention of the Christians

Some suggestions that refer to the expectations - conclusions of the Study Days

- How to manage the presence and the balance between Christians and Muslims in our centres (MOR, Africa, Asia) where we find ourselves with very diverse criteria.
- Help towards breaking down the diffidence between Salesians and Christians living in the situation of being the minority among a Muslim majority.
- We are not looking so much for the principles, but rather for **examples of good practice (successful experiences in the dialogue of life)** so as to find a *modus vivendi* shared by the Salesian communities present among Muslims.
- However, we know that Salesians want ‘recipes’. Therefore, we feel the need to offer some common criteria to be personalised and

contextualised in the different settings according to the 4 geographic zones that are more homogeneous.

All the material collected during the preparatory phases in the three years between 2009 and 2012, is available in the AGORA digital area of the SDB site in the section **Islamic context 2012**: (<http://say.sdb.org/agora/index.php?board=32.0>).

5. Method and approach during the Study Days

As has already been announced, we will follow the workshop method employed in all Study Days (SDB-FMA, 2008-2014): each day will begin with *lectio divina*. The day is centred on (1) a **talk** intended to lead to a deeper reflection in analysing the situation and to help the participants discover new insights and perspectives. This is followed by (2) a **reaction** to the talk and dialogue, which continues with (3) a **further reflection** – discussion in work groups. A return to real life is ensured by (4) a **‘Road map 2020’** for the Superiors and animators at Province level.

At the end of these five days we wish to **offer to SDBs and FMAs** some modules for their on-going formation as well as some **suggestions to the Superiors of over 30 Provinces** where the theme of these Study Days is relevant, in a form of a **‘Road Map 2020’** for the next 5-10 years.

A possible scheme for the ‘Road Map 2020’

(categories corresponding to: **a common part and four sections** for the 4 more homogeneous regions)

Formation of the Salesians with a presence among Muslims (language, culture, organic plan)

Formation of Lay Collaborators (Lay Mission Partners - Muslims)

Christian faith journey in our educational settings (school, CFP, oratory, boarding school)

Inter-religious Dialogue – preparation of some confreres as experts-animators in the Province

Spirituality of the Salesian (missionary) in the presences with Muslims

Criteria for beginning new presences or developing existing ones

Constant exchange of reflection on the preventive system in the various Muslim contexts

Terminology and relationships with the Catholic and Salesian Media (ANS, Fides...)

How to continue the sharing of experiences, reflections, material after the Study Days

6. Taking full advantage of the resources available for the formation of SDB and FMA

Some web sites with essential Church documents

www.vatican.va (Council for Inter-religious dialogue) - 7 languages

www.pisai.it (PISAI - Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e di Islamologia, Roma)

Other web sites useful for our subject

<http://www.emfoundation.eu/news.php> (European Multicultural Foundation)

- Fr. Vittorio Pozzo SDB

<http://aam.s1205.t3isp.de/?L=1> (P. Christian Troll, SJ - Muslim Asks, Christian answers) **8 languages**

<http://www.pewforum.org/Mapping-the-Global-Muslim-Population.aspx> (Ricerca globale 2010)

<http://www.gfamissions.org/ministries/equipping-christians-to-evangelize-muslims.html> (USA)

Some basic publications available in the main languages

Maurice Borrmans, *ABC per capire i Musulmani*, (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 2007)

Sandra Toenies Keating, *What Catholics should know about Islam* (<http://tinyurl.com/borcnxm>)





Dialogue is Being more than Talking or Doing

Sr. Alaïde Deretti FMA
General Councillor for Mission ad/inter Gentes

Dearest brothers and sisters,

Welcome to the Study Days on the Salesian presence among Muslims.

First of all, I would like to remind you that if we are here today it is because one day, the missionary dream of Don Bosco, took us, as SDBs and FMAs, to far places, among unknown people to realities loved by God, because He is our Father. We are here today to live these beautiful and challenging Study Days about our Salesian presence among Muslims, because in 1989 and 2001, our Congregations, inspired and convened by the Holy Spirit, tried to reflect and become more aware about some realities were a challenge to us: our pastoral and the educative challenges in the Islamic context, the relationship between Islam and Christianity, the knowledge about Islam, family and promotion of women, always in an Islamic context.

Today, in any context, in an ever more pluralist society, in a world where boundaries don't exist anymore and where "new borders" appear every moment, we are challenged to live the dimensions of openness to the other, welcoming differences, of silent, generous, gratuitous service, witness to a life in dialogue with people, with the place, with religions and with culture.

Our objective during these days is to meet and dialogue among ourselves, and we hope to fulfil it! We want to promote, in this forum, discussions and debates and to deepen the reflection on our presence among Muslims. We feel urged – and the events strongly urge us – to understand more deeply the challenges presented by the society, and be able to discover new intuitions and perspectives which make our presence actual and meaningful.

At the present moment, we cannot pretend to intervene with the same instruments with which we did some years back, the world has changed!!!! The mission to educate and to evangelise demands from us new strategies,



new settings, new sensibilities, demands from us a change of mentality; it is a difficult mission.

In any context, in a particular way where our Muslim brothers and sisters are a majority, we cannot educate the young to peaceful coexistence, to dialogue, to respect differences, to defend the fundamental Human rights, if we don't educate ourselves first and if we don't learn together, in our educating communities, as people who want to promote peaceful coexistence, dialogue, respect for diversity, defence of human rights.

Dialogue, in any circumstance, can be understood only as exchange of words, ideas, secret codes. To dialogue with someone else, so different from me and at the same time so similar, starts with listening, opening the mind and heart. Dialogue is shared life. Dialogue is witness; it is **being** more than talking or doing.

There is a need today, to value more than in the past, the presence as presence, as silent proclamation through acts of kindness; where personal and community prayer is our support and gives us the capacity to discern, where the value of the sacred breaks any barrier and penetrates the essential.

To dialogue, we are challenged to know our faith in depth, to have firm convictions based solely on the Gospel, to live what we believe before preaching. Always and everywhere, we preach with our being. In the dialogue it is very important to be close to the person, close to its joys, sufferings, discrete proximity, which enhances the things that unite, respecting the feelings of others.

We know that in our reality we do not always have the opportunity to make openly evangelical proposals. Where words cannot take shape, gestures are enough, just presence, Salesian presence, with those features which any person can understand especially joy, family spirit, communion, celebration, friendship, hospitality, total gift of self, welcome to everyone without preconditions: this is the way our missionaries have lived those early moments in mission lands.

In a world where many times the diversity of cultures and religions is an obstacle to peace and harmony, we want to rely on the guidance of the Spirit to find ways which permit the encounter between individuals, societies, religions. We want to make room for relationships of understanding between Christians and Muslims, spaces for dialogue between Christianity and Islam. This relationship of understanding and dialogue, in

societies where Islam is the majority, is a condition for the continued existence of the Church itself. And let us not forget that wherever we are, we are always a presence of the Church. The relationship of understanding and dialogue are urgent also in regard to Muslim communities in the context of immigration, especially in Europe. For us, it should be clear that “the Muslim neighbour.” The young, the child, the adult Muslim is also close to God. We cannot look at them with suspicion, because the love of God and love of neighbour are the basis for Muslim-Christian cooperation and condition for the peace of the world, they are also the basis of interreligious dialogue, because “the love of God and neighbour sum up the Law and the Prophets.” Therefore, replace suspicion and ‘weapons’ with dialogue and peaceful coexistence, because in us “there will be something to disarm.”

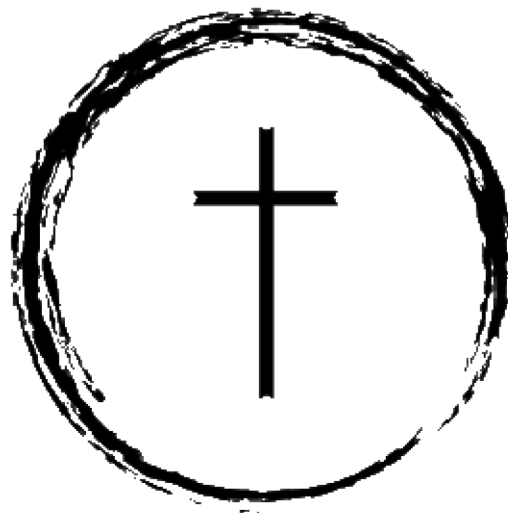
We live these days in the spirit of those who have something to share and something to learn. Let us intensify in the depths of our being Salesians, Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, members of the Salesian Family, the desire to live the Gospel values that bring us closer to every man and woman of our time. Let us listen to what justice, reconciliation, forgiveness, hospitality, harmony, patient dialogue, openness to novelty, smallness, the marginalised tell us. Often it is they who evangelise us. As one contemporary writer says: “The last are the owners of a prophecy which only they themselves can proclaim and celebrate in favour of all. The marginalised know how to make their way into the tent and host us in their humiliation being careful not to humiliate us.” Our Salesian presence among the Muslims is a presence that encourages “the construction of possible forms of listening, coexistence, dialogue and cooperation” (*The New Evangelisation for the Transmission of the Christian faith* - Lineamenta n. 6).

I conclude by referring to Mary, especially because on the Aug. 5 of this year we Daughters of Mary Help of Christians celebrate the 140th anniversary of the foundation of our Institute and as Salesian Family we are preparing to celebrate the bicentenary of the birth of Don Bosco. Mary, the Mother of Jesus, whom we invoke as Help of Christians, “is for Islam the virgin, holy (in the sense of absolutely sincere and right), and pure, chosen among all women, Mother of the Word by the breath of the Holy Spirit and is made with the Son, sign, miracle, for all creation.” To her, “the Holy Virgin, the Joy of Abraham, the Daughter of Zion, Mother of

God, Mother of Jesus in Bethlehem, the teacher of life in Nazareth,” we ask that these days of study on the Salesian presence among the Muslims may help us look our mission, in a spirit of dialogue, taking advantage of the challenges and opportunities that the different realities offer, to mature new insights and perspectives that give significance to our lives, to what we do and suggest as educators / teachers, religious / consecrated.

May these days foster our every desire of goodness, warmth and respect for the other, mutual understanding with our Muslim brothers and sisters, so that we may truly be authentic Salesian presence in the world in dialogue and so that harmony reigns among the children of Abraham.

I wish you all good days of reflection and fraternal sharing!



An Overview of the Topic of Study Days from 2010 to Today

Fr. Alfred Maravilla SDB

Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* insists that initial proclamation "is the permanent priority of mission" and that it "has a central and irreplaceable role" in the Church's mission because "all forms of missionary activity are directed to this proclamation" (n. 44). Thus, during this six year period the SDB Missions department and the FMA area of Missions *inter/ad gentes* had chosen to foster a deeper reflection regarding initial proclamation through the Study Days in the different regions of our Congregations.

This choice turned out to be providential and extremely relevant: In April 2010 the Rector Major, Fr. Pascual Chávez, invited Salesians to reflect on "the need for an initial proclamation or a renewed proclamation of the Gospel" so that our youth ministry becomes more missionary (*Salesian Youth Ministry*, 2.3. AGC 407). Cardinal Filoni, the Prefect for the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, recently explained that the *Propaganda Fide* will celebrate the coming Year of Faith from the perspective of initial proclamation (*30 Giorni*, May 2012).

The first of the series of study days was on *Salesian Mission in Frontier Situations and Initial Proclamation in Europe Today* (Prague, November 4 -10, 2010) Ubaldo Montisci's presentation was decisive in helping us to understand that from the various terms used in ecclesial documents (*first evangelisation, pre-evangelisation, missionary preaching, kerygma, renewed proclamation, initial proclamation, new evangelisation*) initial proclamation is preferred especially when referring not only to contexts which was traditionally considered to be *ad gentes*, but also to contexts where there is an abandonment of the faith or where it is lived in a routine manner.

Through various discussions a common understanding of *Initial Proclamation* was arrived at. The term refers to the activity or set of

activities intended (1) for those who do not know Jesus Christ; (2) for those who have known him and have abandoned him; (3) and for those who believe that they already know him sufficiently and live the Christian faith out of habit. Ultimately the goal of initial proclamation is to stir up among these persons their curiosity and eventually their interest to know the person of Jesus Christ that could lead to an initial adhesion or a revitalisation of faith in him. Since then this is the working definition that has been in use in the other study days which followed.

Initial Proclamation is the start of the complex process of evangelisation described in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (n. 24) and in the *General Directory for Catechesis* (n. 47-49). I would like to underline that it should not be understood in a strictly chronological term. It is the action of the Holy Spirit which touches the minds and hearts which, in turn, stirs up interest in the person of Jesus Christ. I reckon that initial proclamation could be like that igniting spark which finally ignites the fire and opens the door to the knowledge of the person of Jesus Christ. Our task is to strike the flint, while it is the Spirit who makes that decisive spark which ignites the fire. Montisci pointed out that as a moment in the evangelisation process, initial proclamation plays a decisive role because it spurs on interest in knowing the person of Jesus Christ. As such it is the beginning and the foundation of a Christian experience.

In this light, initial proclamation is more than a method. It takes various forms depending on the culture, context and rhythm of life of those to whom it is directed. It is primarily a style of life of individual Christians in the context of daily life and of the whole Christian community. Hence, the witness of life of individual Christians as well as the institutional and collective image of the Church in all its public events are all forms of initial proclamation or, unfortunately, a hindrance to it.

In short, initial proclamation is primarily a way of life of every Christian. It takes place at every opportunity, in season and out of season (2Tm 4, 2), especially in cultural expressions of the fundamental dimensions of human life. It is attentive to the complexity and diversity of socio-historical situations so as to discern the right moment and the most appropriate method of making it.

In this light Montisci stressed that particular attention must be given to what could be termed as “traditional” pastoral activity (celebration of the

sacraments especially of baptism and matrimony, pilgrimages, popular religiosity), to the possibilities and challenges offered by new frontiers (e.g. migration, multicultural and multi-religious settings), as well as to new situations brought about by cultural changes (e.g. individualism, fluidity, secularism).

Initial proclamation is a gradual and dialogical pedagogy exemplified by the risen Christ in the journey with the two disciples to Emmaus. However, it presupposes Christians who have a deep faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and are fascinated by his person, joyfully live their faith and are able to trigger existential questions and respond to it convincingly.

Initial proclamation takes place with love and esteem for the interlocutor and respect to the freedom of conscience without any tinge of a relationship of force or conquest. Nevertheless, this cannot be separated from the existential positive declaration of the one who makes this proclamation which is the short, joyful and engaging story of the person of Jesus: Indeed, “being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 1). Its acceptance, underlined Montisci, has no formal visibility because it takes place in the inner recesses of the human conscience through the action of the Holy Spirit.

The discussions during the European study days brought to light the challenge of secularism which implies that there is now a vast number of people, unbaptised as well as the baptised, who do not personally know Jesus Christ or have abandoned him. In this context the weight of European religious history, like the relation of Church and State, the religious wars and the Protestant Reformation, could not be discounted on the popular image of the Church in European society today. Thus, initial proclamation in Europe goes hand in hand with ecumenical collaboration and cultural dialogue so that the Church may be able to proclaim in a credible way today.

During the Study Days on *The Salesian Mission and the Initial Proclamation of Christ in the Three-fold Context of South Asia* (Kolkata, August 7-11, 2011) and on *The Salesian Mission and the Initial Proclamation of Christ in the Three-fold Context of East Asia* (Sampran, August 14-18, 2011) discussions led to deeper reflection on the need to see initial proclamation in the light of Asia’s three-fold context: rich cultures,

ancient religions and oppressive poverty (FABC 1, *Evangelisation in Asia Today*). In a context where the majority of young people in our educative settings are followers of other religions and are poorer, dialogue life, human promotion and development through outreach programs and work for youth at risk become important opportunities of initial proclamation. This is seen as the beginning of the process of integral evangelisation. In East Asia the need to better understand traditional religions, major East Asia religions like Buddhism and Confucianism as well as a variety of cultures was discussed. In this context storytelling was considered as a way of introducing people step-by step to the mystery of Christ (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 20) which is at the same time respectful of their freedom of conscience.

In Oceania the Study Days on *The Salesian Mission and the Initial Proclamation of Christ in Oceania in the Context of Traditional Religions and Cultures and Cultures in the Process of Secularisation* (Port Moresby, August 21-25, 2011) reflected on the challenge of new evangelisation in the context of traditional religions and cultures, as well as the modern process of secularisation taking place in Australia and New Zealand which is also transmitted to other countries by the media. These certainly pose great challenges, but they also open new horizons (*Ecclesia in Oceania*, 17, 20). Discussions initially centred on whether the topic on initial proclamation is relevant in Oceania where a great majority are baptised Christians. The presentation of speakers and deeper reflection brought to light that at baptism the child received the *habitus* of the faith (the capacity to believe), but not the personal act of faith (the firm commitment to orient one's own life according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ). Yet, in the context of Oceania's traditional societies and secularised cultures today, the initial proclamation a child receives in the family is often not adequate to become the foundation of a robust faith. Without this initial conversion and initial personal faith, catechesis risks becoming sterile. In this light, even Oceania's Catholics who frequent our parishes and Religious Education classes in our schools as well as other Christians who frequent our youth centres all need initial proclamation of the Gospel in view of developing their faith and personal adhesion to Christ. It is crucial, then, to rediscover the importance of initial proclamation as the first and necessary step towards a new evangelisation in Oceania (*Ecclesia in Oceania*, 18). This initial proclamation, however, cannot be seen in isolation but is necessarily linked and oriented to the next

stage in the process of evangelisation which is the catechumenate and the Rites of Christian Initiation for Adults (*RCIA*).

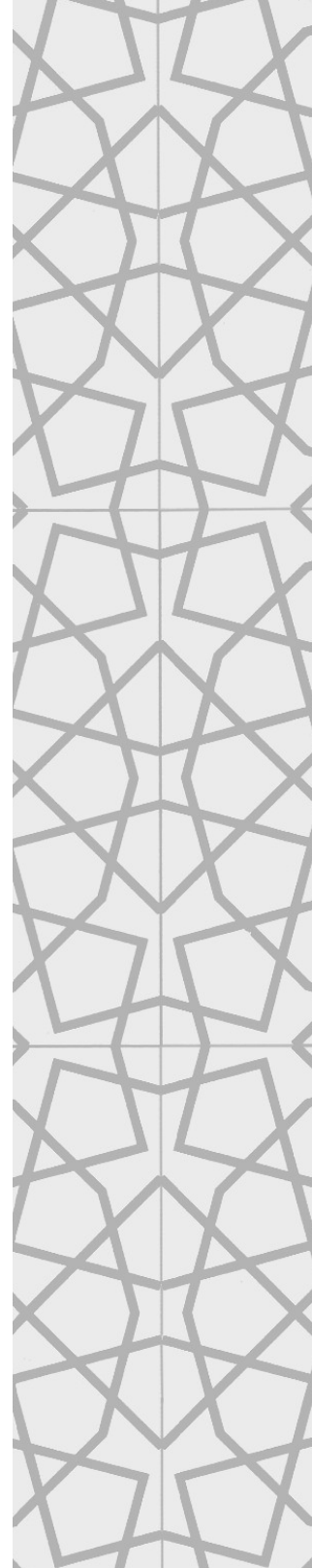
This gathering ought to be seen as a continuation and deepening of the themes discussed in the *Seminar on Salesian Pastoral Ministry in Islamic Context* in 1989 and the *Missionary Animation and Formation Seminar on SDB-FMA in Islamic Context* in 2001. During these days we shall reflect on the presence of SDBs and FMAs not only in Islamic contexts but also in traditionally Christian areas where there is a growing number of Muslims. Similarly Muslims are present in many Salesian works in all continents. In line with the topic of the Study Days, **our discussions these coming days will centre precisely on how our presence, our witness of life and our effort to foster dialogue of life and action among Muslims could become initial proclamation**, hence significant expression of the missionary dimension of our Salesian charism.





Part I

Analysis of the Situation





Situation Analysis: Synthesis of Responses to the Questionnaire

Sr. Runita G. Borja FMA

1. Total number of answers received	29
2. According to Congregation	
FMA	12
SDB	17
3. According to geographical area	
Africa	8
America	0
Asia	6
Middle East	4
Europe	11
Oceania	0

Question 1: According to you what are the challenges and opportunities that Salesians in your Province encounter working with Muslims or in an area, neighbourhood or school, youth centre, parish, etc. where a good number or majority of habitants (or students or youth) are Muslims?

Preliminary remark: Some responses affirmed that **every challenge brings with it an opportunity**

THE CHALLENGES

Attitudes to cultivate

- Welcoming what is different: person, culture, religion (10) and be in relationship with others (3)
- Finesse and respectful attention to others' feelings and (5)

- Trust and confidence (7) that overcomes suspicion and reciprocal distrust
- Respect that goes beyond tolerance (3)
- Flexibility (2)
- Openness and welcome (2)
- Humility (2)
- Collaboration
- Charity
- Trust that dialogue is possible
- Living the *kairos*, knowing how to wait

Knowledge/Understanding

- A deeper and more updated knowledge/understanding of Islam (3)
- Language of the place
- “Religion” as a dimension of the Preventive System. For example: In Islam, God is seen as a judge and this image could be contrary to our concept of a merciful God.

Competence/Skills

- Promoting the culture of life and of peace (2)
- Listening, dialogue in everyday life (2)
- Discernment on what is essential
- Ability to recognise occasions of transmitting the Christian message without forcing it
- Discussion and dialogue in order to find common elements (2) between the Christian vision and the vision of Islam
- Competence in one’s educative and professional work (2)
- Equilibrium so as not to offend while, at the same time, courage in defending the rights of Christians

Context

- Religious fundamentalism (3), prohibition of proselytism (2), brainwashing and indoctrination (2); idea that the west is the cause of all evil
- Different understanding of Islam among the Muslim themselves
- Political instability; problems in the region (2)
- Migration of Muslims in predominantly Christian places

- Fear and hatred on the part of Christians and their tendency to build their own ghettos
- Lack of freedom of expression for Christians
- Presence of small charismatic Christian churches which is often the reason of conflict with some Islamic groups
- Elements of traditional religion such as witchcraft
- Politics
 - * Corruption
 - * Confusion and an understanding that Christianity is equivalent to the west (2)
 - * Conflict between religions is seen as a minor issue compared with others
- Illiteracy (3): Education is not valued
- Violence (2)
- Poverty with its consequences on the Salesian community in line with the sustainability of our works

Witnessing

- Transparency and honesty (7)
- To be men and women of God (2), spiritual persons
- Passion for the Salesian charism (2), industriousness and apostolic zeal
- Chastity/Celibacy lived with joy
- The beauty of our faith can arouse the Muslims' curiosity
- Our style of life: discipline, good manners, good traditions, simplicity
- Christian and Salesian values lived to the full, without watering them down with the excuse that we are in a Muslim context (2)

Witnessing of the community

- As a sign of fraternity and communion (3)
- As the presence of God, of Jesus

Educative-evangelising mission

- Direct proclamation of Jesus (3) without offending or violating the other's conscience (2)
- Weakening of the Christian message in order to give in to the demands of the Muslims
- Welcome, accompaniment and support of the second and third generations

- Appreciation and inculturation of the Preventive system, with emphasis on “religion and the family spirit” (2)
- Coeducation
- Education ...
 - * To Christian values or to a lifestyle that goes against the current (2)
 - * To faith through the formation of conscience
 - * To forgiveness
 - * To tolerance
 - * To define one’s religious identity
 - * To allow the integration of one’s culture in the new country
 - * To favour a better personal and social life
- Preparation of teachers of Islam
- Attention in the administration of our centres in order to prevent any form of discrimination
- Creation of an environment (2) with a clear Christian identity where the community is united, open to all, welcoming and respectful
- Frequent contact and good rapport with parents (2)

Common themes

- Vision and situation of women (6) and other related themes (dignity, girl-brides, girl-mothers, right to education)
- Mixed marriages, the education of children and their insertion in society (3)
- Human rights (2)
- Family (2) and related topics, such as the disintegration of the family, differences in family values (for example, polygamy is acceptable to them)
- God’s will

Other challenges

- Interculturality ... the Preventive System in an intercultural or multicultural context
- Integration (2)
- Living together based on a clear, mutual and daily manifestation of one’s identity

THE OPPORTUNITIES

- Our charism and educative mission offer opportunities
 - * to approach “the other”,
 - * to correct prejudices and overcome forms of extremism
 - * to facilitate encounters of young people and families around the same civil and spiritual values
 - * to sustain peace
 - * to promote the dignity of the human person
 - * to build the Christian community and the nation
 - * to bring Jesus to the young, whether they be Christians or Muslims
- (2)
- Migration (5): The migrants are mostly young people or the poor. It is a chance to live the charism of Don Bosco.
- Inter-cultural relations in a strongly multicultural context (8) offer us possibilities to strengthen our own identity.
- Muslim and Christian coexistence (5) could provide possibilities for mutual knowledge and strengthen tolerance and openness
- Interreligious dialogue (2) that offers occasions to grow in some dimensions of our life as we see their life and listen to their points of view
- Openness to dialogue and sharing (4)
- Many common values and aspirations: human, religious, moral, political, social (4)
- Personal witnessing and witnessing of the community (5) of the existence of God, of fidelity to God and of praying together in some moments. Through these means we can communicate an alternative way of living.
- The new technologies that enables us to know the events that are happening around us
- Freedom (3) of expression, of choosing one’s faith
- Mixed marriages can be an occasion of openness to and reciprocal respect of our different faiths
- Christian women who marry Muslims can influence the education of their children
- Muslims’, especially our students, respect and openness (3)
- Esteem and gratitude of the Muslim parents and of the alumni

- Our credibility in front of the government, the Church, the people and the international community (2) and the government's support of our works
- The people's preference for a "mixed" government with people coming from different religious affiliations

Question 2: According to you in what way can Salesian presence among Muslims become a more credible form of Christian witnessing and interreligious dialogue?

Ways that help us become more credible in Christian witnessing and interreligious dialogue:

- Living our vocation and our identity with clarity and coherence (16)
- Putting the Preventive System into practice with the oratorian heart (4) and its dimensions of "reason, religion, loving kindness"
- Witnessing through our positive attitude of being welcoming, respectful and humble (12). This goes beyond the divisions advocated by the extremists, whether Christians or Muslims.
- Accepting the law of graduality as we live and offer Christian values in our everyday life: the good day, conferences, anniversaries, personal meetings (2)
- Practicing an intelligent and gratuitous charity (5), not the dole-out system
- Putting the person at the centre (3)
- Offering experiences of praying together (3)
- Becoming persons of prayer
- Living the Gospel through the universal values of love, openness, welcoming, goodness, patience, charity, meekness, humility, service, forgiveness (3)
- Witnessing through our professional competence as educators (2)
- Getting to know their faith as it is presented in the Qur'an, their traditions and usages (6) and the Church's teaching on this theme
- Offering gestures of solidarity to those who are suffering (2) and being present in times of emergency
- Working together to face concrete day-to-day problems (2) for the development of the community

As regards the context

- * Getting to know the context where we are present (3)
- * Being respectful and kind to the people (3)

As regards the educational environment

- * Giving space to the different expressions and feasts (4)
- * Making our centres open to all regardless of ethnicity, religion and sex (5)
- * Having preferential option for the poor
- * Promoting communion, dialogue and collaboration
- * Creating and oratorian atmosphere characterised by the family spirit, welcoming, presence, accompaniment, serenity, joy, and where there is particular attention to the youth's needs through games, groups, associations, varied expressions (4) and by encouraging the young Muslims to be animators of their companions

As regards the laity

- * Clarity in collaborating with them
- * Offering opportunities of human and spiritual formation so that they may live and work according to the universal declaration of human rights in the spirit of the Preventive system (2)
- * Knowing the cultural and religious backgrounds of the members of the Educative Communities

As regards the family

- * Visiting both the Muslim and Christian families (2)

As regards education

- * To peace, to truth, to forgiveness, to dialogue, to tolerance (3)
- * Of Christians so that they may be true witnesses in an interreligious setting
- * Holistic and of quality (6) that liberates a person from different forms of slavery and conditioning and form persons capable of critical thinking

As regards dialogue

- * Favour dialogue with persons in everyday life (6)
- * To share what is good and to identify common values (5)
- * Support interreligious dialogue (4) and be open to correct our erroneous ideas

- * Make a journey together in order to agree on the fundamental human rights as well as a shared project (2)
- * With the responsible of groups on themes about social life, the family and education

Other aspects

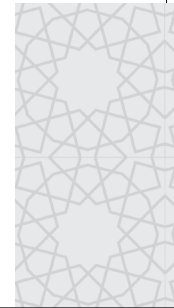
- * Concrete attention to the situation of women
- * Knowledge of human rights according to the UN's Declaration, so as to promote them
- * Support of movements working for justice and peace, without political contamination

Question 3: According to you what needs better clarification or deeper reflection to help our presences among Muslims become more significant expression of the Salesian charism?

- Islam (10)
 - * Its different groups, the vocabulary, the celebrations and feasts, the usages, the family
 - * The distinction between what is religious and what is cultural
 - * Knowledge of Islam in one's context
 - * Specific themes:
 - The mercy of God (2)
 - Equality and fraternity among human beings (2)
 - Respect and dignity of the human person (2) of the weakest
 - Freedom in the search for God
 - Fasting in view of charity
 - Jesus, the good shepherd; Mary, the shepherdess; some prophets including John the Baptist
- Our identity in the present context
 - * The significance, opportunities and challenges of Salesian presence among Muslims
 - * Clarity on our aim (3): social transformation as our aim is quite weak
 - * Specialised formation in order to work in a Muslim context
 - * Formation in current cultural dynamics
 - * Commitment to equip ourselves as mediators among cultures

- * Learning to become open and to create bridges between ethnic groups and religious
- * Being witnesses of the Risen Christ in a Muslim context: rather than a reflection, it would be better to listen to the witnessing of persons who have lived and worked among Muslims
- * Joy in speaking about Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello, their educative method and faith in God (2)
- The Preventive System (9)
 - * Re-read and inculturate it in the present context (2)
 - * Highlight the essential aspects
 - * Present it to our lay Christian and Muslim collaborators
 - * Highlight the theme of “religion” (2)
- Witnessing of the Preventive System
 - * Living the various elements of the Salesian educative method (5) knowing that “in every person there is a point that is open to what is good”: presence and assistance; feast; prayer; family spirit
 - * Creation of a positive environment
 - * Commitment to be of service to the family and to human promotion
 - * Understanding the relationship between education and evangelisation (3)
- Integral education (2)
 - * Promote the culture of dialogue in the younger generations
 - * Education of our Catholic youth (2) to see the Muslims as their brothers and sisters, and to know the content of the Qur’an in general, as well as the characteristics typical to different situations
- Socio-cultural context (4)
- Dialogue (7)
 - * Clarify the meaning of dialogue (2) for a peaceful and respectful coexistence (5)
 - * Identify its basic foundations
 - * Offer different horizons
- Witnessing
 - * Witnessing to our Christian identity with clarity, coherence and enthusiasm (7)
 - * Ask for nothing; win their respect
 - * Respect the feelings of others (2)

- * Show a true missionary spirit (not proselytism), promote positive attitudes such as openness to dialogue, encounter, service, fraternity, waiting, abandonment to God's ways and designs , coherence and rejection of any attitude of superiority (2)
- Interreligious prayer
- Women – commitment for the promotion of women and their rights (2)
- Common themes
 - * Comparative study of the two religions (2)
 - * Common values (2)
 - * Religious freedom that goes beyond tolerance
- Others
 - * In a context where the majority are Christians, present clearly our programme to the parents of our Muslim students and make a written agreement with them.
 - * Study the relationship between the development age and the growth in religious identity
 - * Ask ourselves up to what point can we give space for their expressions in our centres
 - * Ask ourselves up to what point can we exercise tolerance (specially in the face of violence)
 - * Discover the challenges and opportunities in the relations between Muslims and Christians in history and today



The Catholic Church and Muslims According to the Documents of the Magisterium since Vatican II

Fr. Alfred Maravilla SDB*

Introduction

In order to better appreciate the teachings of Vatican II it is necessary to make a brief journey back in history to examine past opinions of Christians about Islam³.

John of Damascus (675-753) wrote a book “The Fount of Knowledge”, part II of which was entitled “False Beliefs” (*De Haeresibus*). He showed knowledge of the Qu’ran and expressed his ideas in a non polemical way with a sincere desire to debate theological issues in order to help Muslims search for answers that were still to be found. In the 9th century, George Hamartolos, a monk in Constantinople, wrote about the history and doctrine of Islam which revealed lack of knowledge of Islam and his inability to understand Arabic. Although his presentation of Islam is so full of hatred, contempt and self righteousness his readers took it for granted as true and handed it on to succeeding generations.

In the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) wrote his *De Rationibus Fidei contra Saracenos, Graecos et Armenos* in response to

* He was a missionary in Papua New Guinea (1985-2006) where he was also a lecturer at the Catholic Theological Institute and Director of the Liturgical Catechetical Institute (2002-2006) of the PNG Bishops’ Conference. He has a certificate in Islamics (PISAI), licentiates in both Missiology and Dogmatic Theology (Pont. Gregorian University). He is preparing to defend his thesis in Fundamental Theology. At present he is responsible of the area of missionary animation and formation in the SDB Missions Department.

³ For the following authors see J.M. GAUDEUL, *Encounters and Clashes. Islam and Christianity in History*. Vol I. Collection “Studi Arabo-Islamici del PISAI” n. 15 (PISAI: Rome, 2000) 30-32, 77-78, 163-166, 310-325.



request by Church officials in Antioch. The human desire for truth, and the ability to grasp it is, for Thomas, the common ground for dialogue with other religions. In fact, he used rational arguments, that is, non-biblical proofs, to respond to Muslim objections to the principles of Catholic doctrine for the purpose of demonstrating that what Catholics believe is neither false nor contrary to reason⁴. Mention needs to be made as well, albeit briefly, of people who sought to study Islam and immersed themselves in to the culture, language and daily life of Muslims in order to bear witness to their faith in Christ like Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916), Henri Marchal (1875-1957) and Louis Massignon (1883-1962).

It could be stated that, in general, we have inherited from history a Christian view of Muslims which is often based on lack of knowledge and understanding of Islam as a religion, as well as an accumulation of centuries of biases. The environment was succinctly synthesized by Michael Fitzgerald when he recalled his minor seminary days: “There was hardly any mention of Islam, and indeed most felt that the apostolate among Muslims was a waste of time. In those pre-Vatican II days dialogue, as a dimension of the Church’s evangelising mission, was not part of the common vision”⁵.

Vatican II

Vatican II ushered a renewed self-understanding of the Church which also caused a radical change in its attitude towards Muslims. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (1964), in the context of its description of different grades of membership in the Church, affirms:

“Those who have not yet received the Gospel are related in various ways to the people of God”. After the Jews “in the first place amongst these there are the Mohammedans, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham,

⁴ J. ELLUL, “Thomas Aquinas and Muslim-Christian Dialogue. An Appraisal of *De rationibus fidei*”, *Angelicum* 80 (2003) 177-200; J. WALTZ, “Muhammad and the Muslims in St. Thomas Aquinas”, *The Muslim World* vol. 46, no. 2 (1976) 81-93.

⁵ M. FITZGERALD, J. BORELLI, *Interfaith Dialogue: A Catholic View* (Orbis: Maryknoll, 2006), 2.

together with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge humankind”⁶.

The Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate* (1965) explains this further:

“The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honour Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting.

Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom”⁷.

At the outset it is important to note that the Council did not presume to make a thorough description of Islam nor evaluate its positive and negative elements. No reference is made to Muhammad, the Qur’an nor of what Islam teaches. Mention is made only of Muslims in general. From these two Conciliar documents, however, important insights how the Catholic Church sees Muslims could be drawn out⁸. Similarly noteworthy is the Council’s use of a wrong in naming the followers of Islam. In the medieval ages followers of Islam were called *Saracens*, then later as *Mohammedans* because it implied that they are worshipers of Muhammad. Hence, the term is offensive. This must have been pointed out to the Council fathers because in less than a year *Nostra Aetate* calls them *Moslems*. This is a clear indication that to initiate dialogue it is indispensable that the interlocutor be named in

⁶ *Lumen Gentium*, 16; No. 841 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is practically lifted from of this text.

⁷ *Nostra Aetate*, 3.

⁸ M. FITZGERALD, J. BORELLI, *Interfaith Dialogue*, 85-146.

the way he or she wishes to be called. Indeed, the way we name our interlocutors indicates our initial attitude to dialogue.

On the one hand, the expression that “together with us Muslims worship the one God” is a clear acknowledgement of Islam as a monotheistic religion. We worship the same God since God is one. In fact, monotheism is Islam’s determining characteristic. Some authors point out that Islam’s understanding of God could be termed as rigid monotheism even if Islamic tradition recognises the 99 beautiful names through which God could be invoked like the most compassionate (*Ar-Rahmān*), the most merciful (*Ar-Rahīm*), the most powerful (*Al-Qādir*), the Judge (*Al-Hakam*). This faith in one God flows into their daily life through their wholehearted submission to God’s will. On the other hand, it is the Church’s constant teaching that the one and Triune God was made manifest in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the fullness of revelation⁹. I note that in no way does *Nostra Aetate* imply that the Catholic Church considers Islam as revealed religion like Judaism and Christianity. Thus, whatever rays of truth in what Muslims believe flow from the universal truth which God has made accessible to the hearts and minds of all peoples.

Lumen Gentium states that Muslims profess to hold the faith of Abraham while *Nostra Aetate* recognises that they imitate Abraham in his submission to God’s plan. Christians see in Abraham’s departure from his country and immigration to a new land as his response to God’s bidding which makes him our father in faith. Saint Paul argued that the promise to Abraham and his posterity was, in fact, fulfilled in Christ (*Gal 3, 16*). Muslims, however, see Abraham’s endeavour to build the *Ka’ba* in Mecca to whose direction all Muslims turn to for prayer as an exemplification of Abraham’s faith. The Council does not enter into this theological discussion. It only wishes to acknowledge that Christianity, Judaism and Islam are monotheistic religions even if there are profound differences in our understanding of God as well as in the way that Abraham is regarded as archetype.

It is our common belief in God as Creator and Judge which becomes the basis of our shared understanding regarding human origin and destiny. This,

⁹ *Dei Verbum*, 2; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration Dominus Iesus*, 14 in *AAS* 92 (2000) 755.

in turn, is our common ground for a joint commitment for the integrity of creation and promotion of justice, peace, freedom and moral values. The Council's presentation of Islam also indicates that the Catholic Church treats it as a separate religion, not as a Christian heresy. It is in this light that it urges Christians and Muslims "to forget the past". But, this does not mean ignore history, but not let ourselves be bound to the past.

It is pertinent to stress here that Vatican II's statements on Islam ought to be understood as well in the light of its theology of religions: It considers religions as "answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition"¹⁰. Hence, it shows "sincere reverence" and "rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions" like "those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all"¹¹.

Ad Gentes further acknowledges the presence of the Holy Spirit in religions and cultures through the "seeds of the word", and recognises "the riches which a generous God has distributed among the nations"¹². In this discussion regarding the Church's attitude towards Muslims, *Gaudium et Spes*'s affirmation that the Church's traditional teaching regarding Jesus' unique mediation is a reality that is open to all because God wishes all to be saved needs to be kept in mind:

"This hold true not for Christians only but also for all persons of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly. For since Christ died for all, and since all are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the Paschal mystery"¹³.

Corollary to the theology of religion is the Council's recognition of the freedom of every human person or groups of persons to the practice of religion as the foundation of human dignity. Endowed with reason and free will, every human person is oriented towards the truth. Once it is discovered he or she freely adheres to it through personal assent¹⁴. Thus, "no one is to be

¹⁰ *Nostra Aetate*, 1.

¹¹ *Nostra Aetate*, 2.

¹² *Ad Gentes*, 11. See also *Ad Gentes*, 3 and *Gaudium et Spes*, 10-11, 26, 38, 41, 92-93.

¹³ *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

¹⁴ *Dignitas Humanae*, 2, 9.

forced to embrace the Christian faith against his own will”¹⁵ nor should anyone use dishonest means to bring about conversion. By the same token the Church “also strongly defends the right that no one be deterred from the faith by deplorable ill treatment”¹⁶.

Post-Vatican II

It is in the light of its renewed self-understanding that the Church embarks on a “dialogue of salvation” which Paul VI pointed out is “an appeal of sincere and ardent love”. As such dialogue is neither dependent on the merits of those with whom it was initiated, nor does it resort to coercion, nor on the results it would aim to achieve¹⁷.

There are different ways and levels of dialogue which enables all members of the Church to contribute according to their own talents, preparation and capabilities:

“a) The *dialogue of life*, where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.

b) The *dialogue of action*, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.

c) The *dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other’s spiritual values.

d) The *dialogue of religious experience*, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute”¹⁸.

¹⁵ *Dignitas Humanae*, 10.

¹⁶ *Ad Gentes*, 13.

¹⁷ PAUL VI, *Encyclical Ecclesiam Suam*, 72-77 in *AAS* 56 (1964) 642-643.

¹⁸ Saceriat for Non-Christians, *The Church’s Attitude Towards Followers of Other Religions. Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission*, 28-35 in *AAS* 76 (1984) 824-825.

Effective dialogue starts from the hearts and minds of the partners by first sincerely seeking “to understand the reasons and feelings of others” as expressed in their joy, hopes and existential needs. It resists anything that could give a tinge of deception, selfish motives or arrogance. Thus, the dialogue of life becomes the indispensable starting point where people, as friends, “open their hearts more freely and share their spiritual and religious experiences in all sincerity”¹⁹.

In the context of postconciliar renewal we have seen two extremes in the Church. On the one hand, there were those who claimed that dialogue has now replaced the Church’s mission and membership in the Church is superfluous. On the other hand, there were those who consider dialogue as a waste of time unless it is a way of bringing in people to the Church. The document *Dialogue and Proclamation* sought to respond to these positions: “True interreligious dialogue on the part of the Christian supposes the desire to make Jesus Christ better known, recognised and loved; proclaiming Jesus Christ is to be carried out in the Gospel spirit of dialogue”²⁰. Indeed, every human person who has grasped the truth, by nature, is inflamed to pass this on to others. Similarly, the Church wishes to share with everyone the fullness of truth and means of salvation, Jesus Christ²¹. The fact that other religions are reflections of the ray of Truth and that their followers could receive God’s grace and be saved does not diminish the Church’s duty to proclaim Jesus Christ²².

In *Redemptoris Missio* Pope John Paul II insisted that the Church fosters interreligious dialogue not out of tactical concerns or self interest but because it is an essential part of its mission. It springs, rather, from a profound respect, openness, truth, humility and frankness so as to discover and acknowledge the workings of the Holy Spirit and the many ways that God has manifested his presence in religions and cultures. Dialogue partners, faithful to their own religious convictions and traditions, are

¹⁹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelisation*, no. 8 in *AAS* 100 (2008) 496.

²⁰ Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 77 in *AAS* 84 (1992) 441-442.

²¹ *Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelisation*, no. 7, 8 in *AAS* 100 (2008) 494-496.

²² JOHN PAUL II, *Encyclical Redemptoris Missio*, 55 in *AAS* 83 (1991) 302-304.

stimulated not only to uncover the “seeds of the Word” and the “ray of that truth which enlightens all” but also to examine more deeply their own identity. Through dialogue the Church also bears witness to the fullness of Revelation which it has received for the good of all. In this light dialogue is intimately connected, though distinct, from proclamation. Hence, the Church continues in this difficult and often misunderstood path with deep conviction that it is the path toward the Kingdom which will certainly bear fruit, even if now we do not know yet “how” and “when”²³.

In 2011 the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue together with the World Council of Churches and the World Evangelical Alliance published a *recommendation for conduct on Christian Witness in a Multireligious World* where they reiterated the importance of sincere dialogue, witness of life and concrete acts of service and justice as the way of proclaiming Christ with respect and love in our present multicultural and multireligious world²⁴.

Dialogue between Christians and Muslims

Our Study Days is in the context of initial proclamation. How could our Salesian presence among Muslims become initial proclamation? This is what we are trying to discover. Over 30 years ago Maurice Borrmans, on behalf of what was then known as the Secretariat for Non-Christians, published the second edition of *Guidelines for Dialogue between Christians – Muslims*. This document continues to offer us refreshing insights and valuable orientations even today. What follow below are important principles drawn out from this document which are helpful for our discussion²⁵.

²³ *Redemptoris Missio*, 45, 55, 56, 57 in *AAS* 83 (1991) 291-292, 302-305.

²⁴ World Council of Churches, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, World Evangelical Alliance, *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World. Recommendations for Conduct* in <http://tinyurl.com/caalqu2> (accessed: June 12, 2012).

²⁵ For this part see M. BORRMANS, *Orientations pour un Dialogue entre Chrétiens et Musulmans* (Cerf: Paris, 1981). The post synodal exhortation after the Synod on the Middle East (Oct. 10-24, 2010) which Pope Benedict XVI will sign in Lebanon this coming September will certainly provide us important insights regarding Christian-Muslim dialogo.

1. Dialogue of Life and Action

The *Guidelines* underline that the first and necessary step is dialogue of life and action. The ordinary daily life in the context of their work, relationships, and celebrations is the most common setting where majority of Christians and Muslims encounter. Another occasion is when they meet to reflect together regarding issues confronting humanity in order find ways to respond to these issues. These are important moments where mutual acceptance and listening, bilateral knowledge and understanding as well as reciprocal witness to their own faith and rituals take place. Here relationships are established and fostered. The atmosphere created by this dialogue of life and action clears the subtle but real threat to Christian-Muslim dialogue: the suspicion, well founded or not, that the other has the ulterior motive of proselytism.

2. Appreciation of Values in Islam

The *Guidelines* highlight that direct contact with Muslims cannot but help Christians to be open to the seeds of the Word, the ray of truth found in Islam like:

a) The Islamic ideal to live in complete submission to *Allâh* (*Islam*) through a constant dependence on God and avoid the temptations of human pride and presumption. Through meditation of the Qur'an, imitation of the Prophet and support of the community one is led to be submissive to *Allâh* (*Muslim*).

b) God is the Transcendent who has spoken through the Qur'an from where Muslims draw out the 99 beautiful name of *Allâh*. "He is *Allâh*, the One ... and there is none comparable unto Him" (*Qur'an* 112: 1-4).

c) The ritual prayer (*salat*) performed five times daily as an expression of the Muslim's complete submission to God; the daily fasting (*siyam*) during the month of Ramadan as an offering to God; the compulsory contribution to charity (*zakat*) as well as the optional (*sadaqa*) as a way to be in solidarity with the poor; the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*) which leads them through various stages of conversion.

d) The obedience and faithfulness in following God's will by scrupulously practicing the legal prescriptions drawn from the Qur'an.

e) Although in general mysticism is not considered orthodox by the

Islamic community as a whole, the intense desire of many Muslims to respond to God lead them to seek humbly to imitate the attributes of *Allâh* like righteousness, kindness, beneficence, mercy, good counsel, etc. The brotherhoods make this mysticism accessible to the masses.

3. Recognising the past with its history

The *Guidelines* point out that sound historical criticism demands studying the history of political, cultural and religious confrontation in their light of their historical contexts. Both dialogue partners need an honest self-criticism and recognition of their relative responsibility in the tragic Christian – Muslim encounters and clashes in our common human history. Christians too need to recognise the slanderous and insulting literature against the prophet Muhammad and Islam produced through the centuries. We should have the courage of Benedict XVI who said: “As a Christian I want to say at this point: yes, it is true, in the course of history, force has also been used in the name of the Christian faith. We acknowledge it with great shame”²⁶. Care should be taken too that we do not identify Islam exclusively with Arab civilisation. Correspondingly, Muslims need to recognise as well their similarly slanderous and insulting literature against the Trinity, Incarnation and their violence against Christians. It is equally important to be aware that Muslims often identify western politics and culture with Christianity. Hence, Muslims often suspect the Church’s effort to foster dialogue as a new western ploy to conquer them. Unless these historical baggages are recognised, even sincere and frank discussions risk opening up old wounds which could easily degenerate into bitter criticism and apologetics.

4. The study of Islam

It cannot be discounted that Muslims and Christians approach each other with certain preconceived ideas which do not correspond with the belief and practices of the other. Thus, the *Guideline*’s insistence on the need

²⁶ BENEDICT XVI, “Pellegrini della Verità, Pellegrini della Pace”, *L’Osservatore Romano* (October 28, 2011) 1.

to study of Islam as an indispensable tool to overcome arbitrary judgement and prejudices, often rooted in centuries of polemics, is extremely relevant. The knowledge of Islam cannot be relied on mere goodwill of individuals. It demands the acquisition of a basic knowledge of the Qur'an, Islamic theology, rituals and traditions. In most cases lack of real knowledge of Islam have led Christians either to be quick in identifying its essential nature with some behaviour of particular Muslims causing perduring prejudices which misrepresent the values of Islam or take a wholesale embrace of Islam to the point of almost losing their own Christian identity. Muslims too need to be encouraged to study Christianity. Here, the role of Muslim scholars of Christianity is important in interpreting to their fellow Muslims how Christians live their faith and understand their doctrines.

5. Know Muslims' view Christianity

Extremely relevant to the present situation is the *Guidelines*'s insistence that Christians need to discover how Muslims view Christianity, less they enter into dialogue with naïvety rendering a disservice to Christian-Muslim dialogue. As a point of departure one has to keep in mind that Muslims are convinced that the Qur'an has given them the authentic and solely reliable source of knowledge of Christianity. Therefore, for Muslims:

a) *Christianity is not a monotheistic religion.*

It is fundamental to note that certain Muslims do not consider Christianity a monotheistic religion and, consequently, they consider Christians as unbelievers (*kāfirûn*). Hence, some Muslims would prefer to underline their understanding of God by refusing to translate *Allâh* from Arabic into other languages. In fact, the Qur'an (*Sura 5: 116*) refers to the Christian faith in the Trinity as consisting of God, Jesus and Mary: "And [beware the Day] when *Allâh* will say, "O Jesus, Son of Mary, did you say to the people, 'Take me and my mother as deities besides *Allâh* ?'" He will say, "Exalted are You! It was not for me to say that to which I have no right. If I had said it, You would have known it. You know what is within myself, and I do not know what is within Yourself. Indeed, it is You who is Knower of the unseen". Thus, although we believe in one God, we do not have a common understanding of the unicity of God.

b) *Jesus is a prophet and precursor of Muhammad.*

The Qur'an presents Jesus (*ʿĪsā*) as the word from *Allāh*, prophet and Messenger (*Sura 19: (Sura 19, 30)*) who was born of Mary through the Spirit. Mary is the preferred creature of *Allāh* who made her pure to be the virgin mother of Jesus (*Sura 3:36, 42*). But it denies any attribution of divinity to Jesus "Say, "He is *Allāh* , [who is] One, ... He neither begets nor is born" (*Sura 112:1, 3*). Instead Muhammad is the last prophet, the *khatam al-anbiya'* (the seal of prophets) "Muhammad is not the father of [any] one of your men, but [he is] the Messenger of *Allāh* and last of the prophets. And ever is *Allāh*, of all things, Knowing" (*Sura 33:40*).

c) *Scriptures have been altered.*

Muslims recognise that the Torah, Psalms, the Gospel and the Qur'an are all revealed by God: "We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you. And our God and your God is one; and we are Muslims [in submission] to Him" (*Sura 29: 46*). The Qur'an similarly states that "some of those who are Jews change words form their context" (*Sura 4: 46*) while others "forget a part of whereof they were admonished" (*Sura 5:13*). Thus, for Muslims the present text of the Torah has been altered or interpreted wrongly (*tahrif al-ma'ani*), while copies of the original do not exist anymore.

d) *The Gospel has been falsified.*

Some Muslim scholars have spread what has now become a popular belief among ordinary Muslims that the true Gospel is the so called apocryphal *Gospel of Barabas* while the Gospels are all its falsified versions²⁷. This apocryphal text presents Jesus as saying that he is not the Messiah while Muhammad is described as the model of creation and the awaited Messiah. It also states that Jesus did not actually die on the

²⁷ In 1046 Ibn-Hazm (died in Cordoba in 1064) first claimed that the Gospel has been falsified in defence of the contradictions and discrepancies between the Bible and the Qur'an. Since the Qur'an is true what contradicts it must be either false or has been falsified. Moses' prophesy of the coming of the Messiah in Dt 18,15 and 18,18-19 and Jesus' promise to send the Paraclete in Jn 14, 15-17, 26; 15, 26; 16,7-8 and 16, 13-14 are considered by Muslims as prophesies of the Prophet Muhammad which existed in the Scriptures before it was altered or falsified. This original text of Scriptures does not exist anymore.

cross because Judas substituted him. For Muslims the discrepancies in the four Gospels are a proof that some parts have been falsified (*tahrif al-nass*) or eliminated particularly those which spoke about the prophet Muhammad. For them the Gospel writers are not reliable transmitters because they were not direct witnesses to the events they reported, unlike the recognised Islamic tradition (*hadīth*).

e) *The Christian Church is a Temporal Power.*

Muslims are conscious of belonging to the Islamic community (*Umma*) which forms, nourishes, surrounds and supports them. By being members of the Community of the Prophet (*Umma al-Nabi*) they compose the “house of Islam” (*Dar al-Islam*) which is also a unified society where Islam binds them closely regardless of race, language or civilisation forming the “the house of peace and justice” (*Dar al-‘adl wa-l-salam*) where religion and state (*din wa-dawla*) are joined in perfect harmony. This is the Islamic model of organising society. In this light, although Muslims today admire the Church’s services in schools, hospitals and social work, they find it hard to comprehend the distinction between Church, the politics of the state and western secular culture. Hence, they easily accuse the Church of colluding with colonial governments in the past or with the present western political and economic powers which they see as continuing to exercise control over Muslim rulers and nations.

6. Foster areas of Cooperation

The *Guidelines* enumerate areas where cooperation between Christians and Muslims could be promoted for the good of our human society: the preservation of the integrity of creation, the defence of life and human rights, the dignity of marriage and family, the promotion of justice and peace and the promotion of sound moral values, etc.²⁸. During his visit to the Hussein bin-Talal mosque in Amman on May 10, 2009 Pope Benedict XVI lamented that “some assert that religion is necessarily a cause of division in our world; and so they argue that the less attention given to religion in the public sphere the better”, but also insisted that often “it is the

²⁸ An example of this is the *Final Declaration of First Catholic-Muslim Forum* (2008).

ideological manipulation of religion, sometimes for political ends, that is the real catalyst for tension and division, and at times even violence". In this light, since we are living in an era "where the opponents of religion seek not simply to silence its voice but to replace it with their own", he traced out the areas of Christian-Muslim cooperation which he has consistently insisted since his election as bishop of Rome: 1) the need for believers to be true to their principles and beliefs; 2) be known and recognised as worshippers of God faithful to prayer; 3) uphold and live by the Almighty's decrees; 4) consistently bear witness to all that is true and good; 5) stress the common origin and dignity of all human persons²⁹. Pope Benedict has, therefore, outlined that Christian-Muslim cooperation cannot be built on mere positive or negative feelings because these are ephemeral and feelings obscure a rational discourse. These five points, instead, are our common ground for cooperation and dialogue of action which continues to produce marvellous results. Indeed, it is only by "committing ourselves to a more heartfelt quest for love of God and love of neighbour" that enables us to offer to the world today "an authentic service of reconciliation and peace"³⁰!

7. Acknowledge remaining obstacles

The *Guidelines* further stress that Christian-Muslim dialogue needs to discuss objectively and honestly the remaining obstacles to mutual understanding due to religious customs and regulations. A clear example is marriage between Christians and Muslims. A Muslim man is allowed to marry a Christian woman but a Muslim woman is prohibited to marry a Christian man. A Christian woman who marries a Muslim man has her right to inherit property limited because of her religion, thus there is a strong pressure to conversion. Certainly such marriages can become a favourable setting for interreligious dialogue but in practice the success rate is low. In cases where such marriages failed, the woman has to overcome enormous difficulties especially regarding the custody of the children.

Islamic dietary restrictions (e.g. alcohol, pork, fasting) could also pose

²⁹ BENEDICT XVI, "Address at the *al-Hussein bin Talal* Mosque, Amman, Jordan. May, 9, 2009", in *AAS* 101 (2009) 512.

³⁰ BENEDICT XVI, "Address to Participants in the Seminar Organised by 'Catholic-Muslim Forum'. Nov. 6, 2008", in *AAS* 100 (2008) 801.

as a hindrance to the development of ordinary friendly relationships. There is also the constant perception of the dialogue partner that the other is doing apostolate with the intention of proselytising. Muslims have difficulties in accepting the cornerstone of religious freedom which grant each person the right to choose his or her religious denomination.

Conclusion

I would like now to draw out three conclusions from this presentation which, I hope, would be useful for our discussions in the coming days.

First, it is obvious by now that dialogue between Christians and Muslims is not an easy task. Hence, Christian-Muslim dialogue, in fact interreligious dialogue in general, needs to be built on reason to withstand the arduous effort involved as well as to resist the temptation to fall into scepticism. When dialogue is built on mere political correctness or on positive or negative feelings it obscures a rational discourse because feelings are ephemeral. In this light, we need to keep in mind that, firstly, effective dialogue presumes the fundamental condition of committing freely one's whole will and intellect to search the truth. Secondly, being human, our way of relating to the truth is imperfect, and each one has a perspective of the truth which the other does not have. Thus, relating with others through dialogue leads both partners to have a greater insight of the truth. In fact, in oriental tradition reason's search for truth is not a metaphysical enterprise. It is done, rather, in the context of trusting dialogue and sincere friendship³¹. Accordingly, with the help of friends and dialogue partners who ask questions and seek a response to their query, one is able to discern what is true in oneself and in others. The more one goes deeper into oneself, the more one discovers the need for others. This, in turn, is connected to the possibility of a personal rapport with the absolute truth³².

³¹ P.C. PHAN, "Fides et Ratio and Asian Philosophy", *Science et Esprit* vol. 51, no 3 (1999): 342-348.

³² F. BERTOLDI, "Appunti su Verità e Dialogo", *Dialegesthai. Rivista Telematica di Filosofia* vol. 8 (2006): (<http://mondodomani.org/dialegesthai/eb03.htm>) [accessed: July 1, 2012].

Secondly, it is a fact that in most cases our presence among Muslims could be limited to a silent witness of life and action through an authentic Christian life³³. This is the reality faced by those who work among Muslims. Yet, “contact with the visible manifestations of God’s love can awaken within us a feeling of joy born of the experience of being loved. But this encounter also engages our will and our intellect”³⁴. When our witness of charity touches the intellect and will, to ask existential or religious questions then, it becomes initial proclamation. On the other hand, as Christians, we have something to offer, we have something to share – the Good News of the loving and merciful God made manifest in the person of Jesus Christ. Hence, our love for God impels us to speak in the name of the Lord when people do not live up to their calling as human persons and as God’s children like the prophets of old. In this light, I would like to recall here the words of St. Francis of Assisi to describe what I believe our presence among Muslims ought to be: “preach always, and when necessary, use words”! I reckon that to be significant our Christian witness of life and action among Muslims needs to be a dialogical presence that leads to prophetic witness, that is, a witness of life that triggers existential questions and the search for Truth. Our Salesian presence cannot be but a prophetic witness and dialogue³⁵ which is precisely the contrary of a “tasteless” (*Mt 5, 13*) presence.

The determining ingredient which fosters prophetic dialogue is the *diakonia of truth*³⁶. By this I mean that the dialogue partners are stirred to seek and confront the truth by helping human reason to widen its horizons through the use of a more existential logic and search for the ultimate meaning of life. This human search for truth is intrinsically linked with the human search for happiness and the endeavour to live according to the demands of one’s own conscience. This, in turn, is open to the religious dimension and to others. With respect for human dignity and the freedom

³³ PAUL VI, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41.

³⁴ BENEDICT XVI, *Encyclical Deus Caritas Est*, 17.

³⁵ S.B. BEVANS, R.P. SCHROEDER, *Prophetic Dialogue. Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Orbis: Maryknoll, 2011), 19-55.

³⁶ JOHN PAUL II, *Encyclical Fides et Ratio*, 49 in *AAS* 91 (1999) 44. It explains the *diakonia of truth* as an act of the Magisterium. Here I use the term referring to the service of confronting truth in a general way.

of conscience, and avoiding any tinge of proselytism, our prophetic dialogue with Muslims should trigger in them the search for truth and ask existential questions. When our Salesian witness of life and action among Muslims triggers in them the desire to ask existential questions that lead to search for the truth, then our presence becomes truly light and salt (*Mt 5, 13-16*).

The famous speech of Pope Benedict XVI in Regensburg on Sept 12, 2006 was clearly an example of this *diakonia of truth*³⁷. No doubt we know not only of criticisms of some Catholics on the passage about Islam but also of the initial violent reaction of Muslims. However, an attentive reading reveals that what the Pope was insisting was the interdependence of faith and reason. Every human person can know God through divine revelation and human reason. Freedom to express one's faith in God is a fundamental human right perceived by human reason. Thus, Benedict XVI underlined, to act violently in the name of religion is contrary to reason, therefore, it can never be a path to God.

The fact is the speech led 38 scholars of all Islamic schools of thought and jurisprudence to speak with one voice for the first time in recent history by writing a letter to the Pope in the spirit of intellectual discussion. One year after that letter, in 2007, 138 Muslim intellectuals and scholars from different schools gathered together, the first time ever since the time of the prophet Muhammad. They wrote an open letter to Christians, *A Common Word Between Us and You*, which traces out what we share in common and conclude it with an invitation to Christians to interreligious dialogue starting from what we share in common. This, ultimately, gave rise, among others, to Muslim-Catholic Forum which has concluded its third meeting a few weeks ago³⁸.

Finally, we all know that dialogue between Christians and Muslims needs a lot of patience, but if and when the Holy Spirit opens the door for us we should not be timid to make known what we believe, yet respectful and attentive to the sensitivities of Muslims, as John Paul II did during his address to the youth of Morocco in the city stadium of Casablanca:

³⁷ BENEDICT XVI, "Fede, Ragione e Università. Ricordi e Riflessioni", (Sept 12, 2006), *Insegnamenti di Benedetto XVI*, vol II, 2 (Libreria Editrice Vaticana: Vatican City, 2006), 257-267.

³⁸ M. BORRMANS, "Reazioni Musulmane alla Conferenza di Ratisbona", *Ad Gentes* vol. 11 no. 2 (2007): 159-183.

“...Loyalty demands also that we should recognise and respect our differences. Obviously the most fundamental is the view that we hold on the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. You know that, for the Christians, this Jesus causes them to enter into an intimate knowledge of the mystery of God and into a filial communion by his gifts, so that they recognise him and proclaim him Lord and Saviour. Those are important differences, which we can accept with humility and respect, in mutual tolerance; there is a mystery there on which, I am certain, God will one day enlighten us”³⁹.

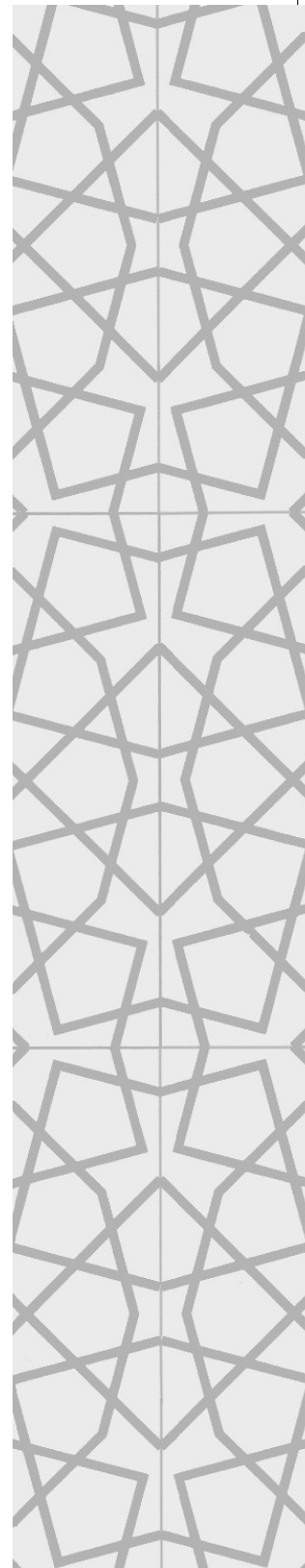


The Lord's Prayer (Mt 6, 9-13)

³⁹ JOHN PAUL II, “Discorso ai Giovani Musulmani”, (August 19, 1985), *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, vol VIII, 2 (Libreria Editrice Vaticana: Vatican City, 1985), 506.

Part II

Study & Reflection







Relations between Christians and Muslims in History: Challenges and Opportunities Today⁴⁰

Fr. Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot MCCJ*

Introduction

Islamic-Christian relations have a long history which goes back to the times of Muhammad himself, the Prophet of Islam. Christianity in its theological reflection has had to face up to the reality of Islam since its birth. In the same way Islam had to take into account the existence of the other monotheistic religions.

The interest in Islam by eastern and western Christianity has always been considerable and it still is today. Publications concerning this history of encounters and conflicts between the two religious groups are copious⁴¹. Some authors give a rather negative analysis of it, underlining in particular the conflicts between these two religious groups⁴², while others have tried

⁴⁰ The first part of this address was given at the Seventh Congress of the Theology of Religions: *Towards a Christian Discernment of Islam. Historical Recognition and Theological Perspectives*, Palermo, May 5-6, 2005.

* M.Á. AYUSO GUIXOT (Seville, 1952) was a missionary in Egypt and Sudan (1982-2002). He has a doctorate in theology and a licentiate in Arabic and Islamic Studies. He is a Professor and Dean of the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies (P.I.S.A.I.), Rome. On June 30, 2012 he was appointed secretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

⁴¹ For the history of relations between Christians and Muslims see, for example, R.M. VOERZIO, *L'Islam e il Cristianesimo* (Mame: Rome, 1962); C. GASPARRI, *Islam e Cristianesimo: Lineamenti per una Storia dei Rapporti Ideologico-Umani fra Due Mondi* (Quaderni di Bibbia e Oriente: Milan, 1962); and G. FINAZZO, *I Musulmani e il Cristianesimo. Alle origini del Pensiero Islamico (sec. VII-X)* (Studium: Rome, 1980).

⁴² See, for example, A. WHEATCROFT, *Infedeli. 638-2003: Il Lungo conflitto fra Cristianesimo e Islam* (Laterza: Bari, 2004).



to underline the positive aspects⁴³. In any case it is a history of conflicts and encounters.

In the historical-religious context of the relations between Christianity and Islam, without claiming to be exhaustive I shall try to underline some relevant elements regarding the interpretation of Islam in the history of Christian theology in a series of “stages”, in a summary account of the more noteworthy periods of these relations and of the impact they had within the Christian world.

1. The initial stage (VII century)

The Christian presence in the Arabic peninsula at the time of Muhammad (VII century) was quite considerable⁴⁴. However, contacts between the Prophet and his newly born community and Christianity were quite limited, and fluctuated between appreciation and opposition. Christians were appreciated for their morality, humility and charity, and also for the spiritual and intellectual life of the priests and monks⁴⁵. But above all because they were “People of the Book” (*ahl al-kitâb*), a community, that is to say, which possessed a revealed Scripture (even though partially corrupted and certainly superseded) and who followed a true prophet, Jesus (*‘Îsâ*), who together with his mother Mary (*Maryam*) the Muslims venerated with great respect and admiration⁴⁶.

But soon differences arose between the two religions. The denial on the part of Christians of the status as prophet of Muhammad gave rise to a series of arguments and discussion, which had begun even during the life of the Prophet of Islam. In fact even in the Qur’an we can see a certain opposition to Christians, shown in a critical attitude, one of suspicion and hostility

⁴³ See, for example, J.M. GAUDEUL, *Encounters and Clashes. Islam and Christianity in History* (PISA: Rome, 2000).

⁴⁴ See the details in T. ANDRAE, *Les Origines de l’Islam et le Christianisme*, trans. by Jule Roche (Paris, 1955) 15-38.

⁴⁵ See, for example, the Qur’an 5, 82. Regarding a friendly attitude towards Christians, see also 5, 82-83 e 57, 27.

⁴⁶ See, for example, G. BASSETTI-SANI, *Maria e Gesù Figlio di Maria nel Corano* (Ila Palma: Palermo, 1989); M. BORRMANS, *Gesù Cristo e i Musulmani del XX secolo* (San Paolo: Cinisello Balsamo, 2000).

towards them⁴⁷. In spite of this, Muhammad maintained an official relationship with the Christians in Najrân⁴⁸, as with other encounters culminating in the promulgation of a law of protection or *dhimma*, which granted to non-Muslims who were living in an Islamic state a *status* of tolerance, which implied respect for their worship and social structure, in return for the payment of a tax (*jizya*).

From the personal experience of Muhammad, as far as can be deduced from the texts of the Qur'an about Christians, throughout history the most diverse situations arose: from those of the 'frontier' and of opposition towards the other, with the subsequent differences, to those of an inter-religious encounter, in the search for possible similarities to facilitate a shared pathway.

2. The stage of doctrinal consolidation (VII-IX centuries)

After the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the *umma* spread quickly in the East and in Maghreb. In this way contacts between it and Christianity continued (VII-IX centuries). These contacts were legitimate, in force of the *status* of *dhimma*. On the one hand, there were practical contacts, through daily encounters between the two groups of believers; and on the other there were psychological contacts, marked by suspicion and a perception of the other as a pagan or a sinner. During this period Christians lived among the Muslims as a social and religious group separate but at the same time protected, maintaining a sort of *modus vivendi* which fluctuated between a general attitude of respect and one of oppression due to impositions sometimes humiliating⁴⁹.

This stage is noted particularly for the theological formulation of the

⁴⁷ See, for example, the Qur'an 2, 120; 2, 111-113; 9, 31-34; 5, 51, 57; e 9, 29.

⁴⁸ On the basis of the *Mubâhala* of Medina (631 d.C.) (see Qur'an 3, 61), Christians in Najrân submitted to the power of the recently born Islamic state, accepting its treaty of 'protection' (*dhimma*). See the article by A. MEZIANE, "Le sens de la Mubâhala d'après la tradition islamique", in *Islamochristiana* 2 (1976): 59-67.

⁴⁹ Pact of 'Umar regarding the *status* of minorities. See, for example, J. M. Gaudeul, Vol. II, 47.

principal fundamentals of religion, for the definition of one's own position with regard to the other and a response to the more serious objections regarding aspects of the other's doctrine.

It was a period of a great variety of encounters with calm and courteous exchanges which slowly progressed from tolerance to intolerance. This encounter of dialogue became more of a competition than an exercise in friendship. Both sides tried to defend and protect their own communities fearful of possible apostasy on the part of some of their members.

The problem of heresies, in the Arab-Christian Orient was a serious subject in theological reflection. Therefore, the birth of Islam, from the Christian point of view, easily led to the consideration that the new religion was another Christian heresy. We probably have to place in this context the theological reflection of St John Damascene (675-753) who, having a good knowledge of the Islamic religion tried to underline the similarities with Christianity rather than consider the Islamic religion as a Christian heresy⁵⁰, "a heresy similar to that of Arius"⁵¹. His principles were followed by the Melkite Bishop of Harrân, Theodore Abû Qurra (740-825)⁵², but only on the polemical level⁵³. Not so the Patriarch of the Nestorian Church Timothy I (728-823) who, in spite of doctrinal differences was able to maintain a conciliatory rapport with the Caliph Al-Mahdî (775-785) regarding the theological question under discussion⁵⁴. On the other hand, the Nestorian 'Ammâr al-Basrî (c. 800-850) could be considered the pioneer in Islamic-

⁵⁰ In *De Haeresibus* (Cap. 100-101). See John W. VOORHIS, *John of Damascus on the Muslim Heresy in the Early Christian Muslim Dialogue: A Collection of Documents from the First Three Islamic Centuries (632-900 A.D.)* (Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute: Hatfield, 1993), 137-162; D.J. SAHAS, *John of Damascus on Islam: The "Heresy of the Ishmaelites"* (J. Brill: Leiden, 1972), 143-155.

⁵¹ *De haeresibus*, cap. 101, P.G. 94, pp. 764-773. An opinion taken up again by some modern authors. See F.H. FOSTER e D.S. MARGOLIOUTH, "Is Islam a Christian Heresy?" in *Muslim World* vol. 22, no. 2 (1932):126-133 and vol. 23, no. 1 (1933): 6-15.

⁵² See I. DICK, "Un continuateur de St. Jean Damascène..." in *Proche Orient Chrétien* (1962): 209-223; 319-332.

⁵³ See A. GUILLAUME, "T. Abû Qurra as Apologist" in *Muslim World* vol. 15 (1925): 42-51.

⁵⁴ Particularly the subject of the divinity of Jesus and the Trinity. See, for example, R. CASPAR, "Les Versions Arabes du Dialogue Entre le Catholicos Timothée I et le Caliphe Al-Mahdî" in *Islamochristiana* 3 (1977): 107-175.

Christian dialogue because of his contribution in Arabic regarding Muslim objections to Christianity⁵⁵.

The predominant tendency in this *rapprochement* was, more than anything else, apologetic. On the Islamic side, through answers (*al-radd*) to Christianity, as was the case of the convert to Islam ‘Alī al-Tabarī (m. 855), there were those who denied the truth of Christianity⁵⁶ on account of the fact that he taught that Jesus was considered at the same time ‘creator and created’⁵⁷; or in the case of al-Jāhiz (776-869), who wrote an answering letter to Christians (*risāla fī-l-radd ‘alā l-Nasārā*), aimed at showing Muslims how to defend themselves against them.

Polemical reactions were not lacking either on the Christian side; one only has to think of the monk George Hamartolos (d. 868), who, without a knowledge of the Arabic language or of Islam, denigrated the Islamic religion considering it as idolatry⁵⁸. In this context, the response of the Nestorian al-Kindī to the letter which the Muslim al-Hāshimī wrote to him in 820 AD remains an example of the effort made to overcome the apologetic frontier to arrive at the dimension of the encounter⁵⁹. With his document there comes to an end that stage of doctrinal consolidation between Christianity and Islam, in which it was a question of defining one’s own doctrinal position in respect of the other, and of formulating the strongest objections in the field of doctrine. These are objections which always retain their force, with greater or lesser intensity throughout the history of Islamic-Christian relations. Among these should be recalled especially the subject of the unity of God, One and Triune for Christians, One and Total for the Muslims; the subject of the prophetic nature of

⁵⁵ See the description in M. HAYEK, “La première Somme de Théologie Chrétienne en Langue Arabe ou Deux Apologies du Christianisme”, in *Islamochristiana* 2 (1976): 69-133.

⁵⁶ A counter-response to the criticism of al-Tabarī was later given by a Coptic layman called Sāfī b. al-‘Assāl (1205-1260). See details in S. KHALIL, “La réponse d’Al-Sāfī b. al-‘Assāl à la Réfutation des Chrétiens de ‘Alī al-Tabarī” *Parole de l’Orient* 11 (1983): 281-323.

⁵⁷ See all the details in the French translation by J.M. GAUDEUL of ‘Alī al-Tabarī, *Riposte aux Chrétiens*, Collection “Studi arabo-islamici del PISAI”, n. 7 (PISAI: Roma, 1995).

⁵⁸ See, J.M. GAUDEUL, *Encounters and Clashes...*, Vol. II, 31-32.

⁵⁹ See, for example, G. TARTAR, *Dialogue Islamo-Chrétien sous le Calife al-Ma’mūn, (813-834): les Epîtres d’al-Hāshimī et al-Kindī* (Nouvelles Editions Latines: Paris, 1985).

Muhammad and Jesus; the subject of the authenticity of the Scriptures; and the subject of the affirmation of the true religion. In this context, both religious groups will experience a stage of rivalry and disrepute.

3. The stage of rivalry and of disrepute (X-XIV centuries)

With the expansion of Islam, Christianity in the Orient found itself living almost as if in a ghetto, which in certain places, encouraged a kind of aversion towards Muslim neighbours. In the West meanwhile, with the continuous growth of Islamic influence, the communities of North Africa began to slowly disappear between the X and XI centuries⁶⁰. On the other hand, the Muslim invasion of Spain, considered a danger for Europe and the blockade of Poitiers (732), gave a sense of security to the West. The frontiers were clearly defined and two powers arose which established themselves during the whole of the Middle Ages from one side of the Mediterranean to the other. It was precisely by means of the Mediterranean that between East and West exchanges were established which enriched both worlds, but which remained blocked on the frontier of religion. In addition, the event of the Crusades, from the end of the XI to the XIII centuries, made relations considerably worse, coming to the point of an almost total rivalry and incomprehension⁶¹.

In this context, the process of polemics and apologetics continued to be followed. The scriptural discredit should be underlined, for example, on the part of some Muslim theologians, such as Ibn Hazm (994-1064),

⁶⁰ The hypothetical lack of *leadership* in formulating a Christian response to Islam led this community to silence and to a gradual dissolution by assimilation. See J.M. GAUDEUL, *Encounters and Clashes*, 59.

⁶¹ The rivalry and intolerance increase considerably in both groups and turn into a "struggle". On the Christian side through preaching and writings which give a negative impression of Islam and of its Prophet; on the Muslim side, through publications which glorify the *jihād*, with a more strict control of those 'protected' (*dhimmi*) and the spreading of polemical writings, which in Spain were already available in the XI c. See, M. DE EPALZA, "Notes pour Une Histoire des Polémiques Anti-Chrétiennes dans l'Occident Musulman" in *Arabica* XVIII (1971): 99-106.

unchallenged master in the field of anti-Christian polemics⁶², and al-Juwaynî (1028-1085)⁶³.

Ibn Hazm introduced the principle of *zâhirismo*, the obligation, that is of a 'literal analysis of the sacred text because he said, the Word of God ought to be accepted without any distortions due to human or subjective interpretations. Consequently he considered all religious systems by the same criteria, in this way attributing to the Bible a 'literary' falsification (*tahrîf al-lafz*), whereas the Qur'an would be the correct Scripture⁶⁴.

As regards al-Juwaynî, starting from the Qur'an, he declared that the coming of Muhammad had been proclaimed by the Torah and by the Gospel, something Jews and Christians deny. On the basis of this conviction, he strove to prove that the text had been altered, changed or substituted (*tabdîl*). Nevertheless there were other authors who showed themselves to be more open and tolerant, even though they rejected fundamental Christian doctrines⁶⁵. This is the case of al-Ghazâlî (1059-1111), for whom Islam is the Truth and the Christian Scriptures are authentic, but they need to be given an Islamic interpretation, through which the texts which refer to the divinity of Jesus become "allegorical" while those which refer to his humanity are "literal". In this way al-Ghazâlî took the Scriptures as they were and used them as the basis of argument against the Christians.

On the Christian side, relations with the Muslims progressed through the words of the writers of the Arab-Christian East, such as for example, Qustâ b. Lûqâ (m. 912), Abû Râ'ita (m. 830), Yahyâ b. 'Adî (793-874), and Elia of Nisibi (975-1046).

In the Latin West on the other hand, contact with Islam took place in the silence of the monasteries, in practice at Cluny, where the Abbot Peter of

⁶² For the critique of Christianity, see R. ARNALDEZ, *Grammaire et Théologie chez Ibn Hazm de Cordoue* (Vrin: Paris, 1956), 305-313. See also I. DI MATTEO, "Le Pretese Contraddizioni della Sacra Scrittura Secondo Ibn Hazm" in *Bessarione* 39 (1923): 77-127.

⁶³ See M. ALLARD, *Textes Apologétiques de Juwaynî* (Dâr al-Machreq: Beyrouth, 1968).

⁶⁴ These principles were dealt with by the author in the second volume of his book on discernment among confessions and sects (*kitâb al-fisal fî-l-milal wa-l-nihal*). See a summary of the book and critique on Christianity in J.M. GAUDEUL, *Encounters and Clashes...*, Vol. I, 115-120.

⁶⁵ Of interest is the article by L. MASSIGNON, "Le Christ dans les Evangiles selon Ghazâlî" in *Revue des Etudes Islamiques* (1932): 523-536.

Cluny (1094-1156)⁶⁶ organised the magnificent work of the translation of Islamic texts, assembled in the collection of Toledo (c. 1150)⁶⁷, the contents of which contributed to making known part of the history of Islam, its prophet Muhammad, his teaching and especially the Qur'an, translated for the first time into Latin (1146). This knowledge also gave rise to a series of disputations. In particular, the intention of Peter was to make it understood that the Muslims were obliged by the Qur'an to recognise the books of the Bible as revealed by God. Now given the contradictions between the Qur'an and the Bible one of the two books had to be rejected. But the Bible could not be rejected because that would go against the principles of the Qur'an. However the opposite was possible. In this way it could be proved on the basis of both the Bible and the Qur'an, that the latter had not been revealed by God and that Muhammad was not a prophet in the biblical meaning of the word⁶⁸.

During this dark period of history, and despite a radical ideological approach and the rejection of the Scriptures, as with the violence unleashed by the Crusades, real efforts were made to overcome this 'religious frontier,' by means of episodes of tolerance and fraternity.

The example is well-known of St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) who, in a spirit of fraternity, hoped for a 'spiritual crusade', took part in the fifth Crusade (1217-1221), and met the Sultan al-Malik al-Kâmil at Damietta (Egypt), with the desire to hold a dialogue with the Muslims⁶⁹. In the same spirit, the Franciscan Tertiary from Majorca, Raymond Lull (1235-1315)⁷⁰, proposed a loyal peace dialogue based on mediation between the two

⁶⁶ Details in J. KRITZECK, *Peter the Venerable and Islam* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1964).

⁶⁷ See, for example, S. HAYYEK, "Escuela de traductores. Toledo, Despensa Cultural de Occidente" in *Encuentro* (1990): 219-220.

⁶⁸ See details about the negative view regarding Maometto on the part of Peter of Cluny in J.M. GAUDEUL, *Encounters and Clashes...*, Vol. II, 253-254.

⁶⁹ See for example, G. BASETTI-SANI, *L'Islam e Francesco d'Assisi* (La Nuova Italia: Firenze, 1975); F. DE BEER, "St. François et l'Islam" in *Concilium* 169 (1981): 23-36; J.G. JEUSSET, *Rencontre sur l'autre Rive – François d'Assise et les musulmans* (Ed. Franciscaines: Paris, 1996).

⁷⁰ About him it is possible to consult the publications of D. URVOY, "Ramon Lull et l'Islam" in *Islamochristiana* 7 (1981): 127-146; and *Penser l'Islam: les Présupposés Islamiques de l'Art de Ramon Lull* (Vrin: Paris, 1980).

cultures and the two religions. To this end he promoted the creation of centres of formation and of special studies who those who had to work in a Muslim context.

But these studies were also promoted by the Dominicans⁷¹, such as the *Studia Linguarum* by St. Raymond of Peñafort (1180-1284)⁷², one of whose students, Raymond Martin (1230-1284), knew Islamic philosophy and theology very well⁷³. On his part, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), when establishing a dialogue with non-Christians, knew how to distinguish well between the fields of reason and those of faith, because the Christian faith includes mysteries which go beyond reason. Thus, he proposed natural reason, commonly accepted by everyone, and moral or philosophical reason, accepted by the Muslims⁷⁴. In practical terms, two other Dominicans should be mentioned who emphasised the importance of knowing the language and the sacred books, as essential elements in working among the Muslims: William from Tripoli (1220-1291)⁷⁵ and Friar Ricoldo from Montecroce (1243-1320); their spirit is still that followed by the Order of St Dominic⁷⁶.

Over and above these particular examples which testify to the spirit of the interreligious relations between Christians and Muslims, in this medieval period and in the theological context two main approaches to the interpretation of Islam from the Christian side can be mentioned: one starting from a strictly theological standpoint (*Corpus* of Cluny and the theologians of the XII century), the other from a “missionary dialogue” perspective (among the missionary orders, Franciscan and Dominican)⁷⁷.

⁷¹ See, in this regard, A. CORTABARRÍA BEITIA, “L’Etude des langues au Moyen-Age chez les Dominicains” in *Mideo* 10 (1970): 189-248.

⁷² Third Master General of the Order (1238-1240).

⁷³ See, for example, A. CORTABARRÍA BEITIA, “La Connaissance des Textes Arabes chez Raymond Martin O.P. et sa Position en Face de l’Islam” in *Islam et Chrétiens du Midi, Cahiers de Fangeaux* 18 (1983): 351-371.

⁷⁴ See his work “De Rationibus Fidei contra Saracenos, Graecos et Armenos” in *Opuscula Theologiae* 955 (1954).

⁷⁵ About him see M. VOERZIO, *Fr. Guglielmo da Tripoli, Orientalista Domenicano del sec. XIII, Precursore da Fra Ricoldo di Monte Croce* (Il Rosario: Firenze, 1955).

⁷⁶ Institut Domenicain d’Etudes Orientales (I.D.E.O.) in Cairo, founded in 1945. For details and information, visit the web site: www.ideo-cairo.org.

⁷⁷ See, G. RIZZARDI, “La percezione dell’Islam nella cristianità occidentale” in S. ALLIEVI, *L’Occidente di Fronte all’Islam* (FrancoAngeli: Milano, 1996), 51.

“The process of an approach to Islam takes place in the context of the model of the *disputatio theologica*, at the centre of which is the question: is Islam a religion which is based on Revelation or on reason, does it come from on high (*auctoritas divina*) or from down below (*auctoritas rationalis*), is it a faith or a philosophy? The question posed in theological terms had these results. Attention focused on three particular problems, the theological nature of Islam, whether heresy or error, Christology according to the Qur’an and the prophetic role of Muhammad”⁷⁸.

In this way the controversy literature with its preconceived notions⁷⁹ sees Islam as a challenge on several different levels: on the scriptural level (dismissing the thesis of the *tahrîf* and demonstrating the superiority of the Gospel over the Qur’an), on the Christological level (through an ‘antichrist reading’ of Islam), on the ecclesial level (considering the claim of the ‘catholicity’ of Islam) and finally on the moral-spiritual level (giving the impression of an Islam *sine lege*)⁸⁰.

Nonetheless in spite of the positive efforts, the balance of these centuries remains rather clouded by the negative judgements of the western world with regard to Islam and of Islam regarding Christianity, judgements that leave the two civilisations drifting apart.

4. The stage of closing the gap (XV-XVIII centuries)

Starting from the XV century and continuing for the next four centuries, the two worlds kept their distance and were close at the same time, so much so that it was one of the poorest at the level of theological reflection, particularly in the field of interreligious relations, even though, thanks to the

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 51-52.

⁷⁹ “The main preconceived ideas behind all the controversy literature are: the setting up of parallels, unfounded in terms of the Qur’an – Bible- Qur’an, Christ-Maometto – and the confusion regarding a fundamental term i.e ‘creatural’ understood as ‘natural’; in this way Islam is presented as the religion of “nature” rather than of the “creature”; the first is philosophical language and refers to the ontology of the person, whereas the second is religious and refers to the relationship of man to God”. G. RIZZARDI, “Verso un discernimento cristiano dell’Islam” in *Ho Theólogos* 19/3 (2001): 325.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 325-326.

experience of travellers and to their diaries and reports Europe acquired a new awareness also of the reality of Islam.

In spite of academic contacts, the political situation strongly influenced this period. It was a time of wars⁸¹, in spite of the great discoveries, the birth of the spirit of the 'nation' in Europe, of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation⁸², of the Renaissance and of Humanism.

On the other side, the Islamic world began progressively a period of intellectual stagnation (*jumûd*) which lasted until the XIX century. In this way relations fluctuated between indifference, a lack of intellectual curiosity and an instinctive aggressive attitude.

During this period some tried in good faith to remove the barriers, although with little success. Such was the case of George of Trebisonda (1396-1486) who, minimising the differences between the two religions, defended the religious unity of all peoples⁸³. So too with John of Segovia (1400-1458)⁸⁴, who insisted on the need for an exact translation of the Qur'an to make a critical analysis of the text possible. To this end he promoted a *Contraferentia* to discuss with Muslim theologians the passages in the Qur'an which were critical of Christianity, and he sent repeated invitations to the ecclesiastical leaders, including Nicholas of Cusa (or Kues) (1401-1464), who "drew up in his *De pace fidei*, a clear and at the same time passionate text aimed at demonstrating how all the human religions are marvellously summarised in God and recognise themselves in His will"⁸⁵. His dream was the reunion of all the religions in a single faith,

⁸¹ In various parts of the world the mutual antagonism between Christians and Muslims led to wars which in spite of having political or commercial motives in fact appealed to religious motivations and used the vocabulary of religious wars: crusades or *jihâd* in Spain (Reconquered in 1492), in North and East Africa, as also in South East Asia. See details in: J.M. GAUDEUL, *Encounters and Clashes...*, 204-205.

⁸² The divisions within Christianity (for example, the excommunication of Luther in 1520 and Henry VIII's break with Rome in 1534), led Christians to concentrate on their internal problems with the result that there was relative indifference regarding Islam as such.

⁸³ On the project of Islamic-Christian agreement, see A. KHOURY, "Georges of Trébizonde et l'Union Islamo-Chrétienne" in *Proche Orient Chrétien* (1971): 101-102.

⁸⁴ See details in D. CABANELAS, "Juan de Segovia, Adelantado del Diálogo Islamo-Cristiano a Finales de la Edad Media" in *Encuentro* 192 (1988).

⁸⁵ F. CARDINI, "Il Dialogo Interreligioso negli Ultimi Quaranta Anni" in *Pro Dialogo* 116-117 (2004): 298.

a single religion and in a variety of rituals⁸⁶. In this way it is possible to present, within the context of the interpretation of Islam, another question from the suggestion regarding “peace among the faiths,” as proposed by Nicholas of Cusa, in the line of medieval tradition⁸⁷.

In reality, while the Reformation⁸⁸ led to the opposing of the errors of Islam with the Truth, an idea shared by Catholics and Protestants, Europeans, in general, showed a certain indifference towards Islam as a religion and hatred towards the Turks because of their antagonism towards Europe⁸⁹. But it was in this unfavourable setting that Ludovico (or Lewis) Marracci (1612-1700) produced a noteworthy academic work with his monumental translation of the Qur’an into Latin⁹⁰. The purpose of his work was to offer missionaries a handbook useful in their mission among the Muslims. In this manual he recommended a *rapprochement* to Islam in three ways: scientific, theological and missionary⁹¹. His main concern was that of remaining faithful to the medieval apologetic trend affirming the primacy and the absolute nature of biblical Revelation, the theological errors of the Muslims regarding God and Christ, the superstitious nature of Islam and the veracity of the Christian religion. It could be said that with Marracci scientific orientalism took its first steps.

In the XVIII century under the influence of the Enlightenment, Christian Europe came to reject the complexities of theology, and Islamic-

⁸⁶ See his *Cibratio Alcorani* (1460) where he gives a critical analysis of the Christology of the Qur’an, of the teaching of the Qur’an about the Trinity, the death of Christ and Paradise, and then shows the doctrinal inconsistencies in the text and so proves the superiority of Christianity over Islam. [...] On this issue, see G. ANAWATI, “Nicolas de Cues et le problème de l’Islam” in *Atti del Congresso di Bressanone 1964* (Sansoni: Firenze, 1964), 141-173.

⁸⁷ G. RIZZARDI, *La percezione...*, 51.

⁸⁸ On Islam and the Reformation, see, for example, V. SEGESVARY, *L’Islam et la Réforme, Etude sur l’Attitude des Réformateurs Zurichois envers l’Islam (1510-1550)* (L’Age de l’Homme: Lausanne, 1978).

⁸⁹ The siege of Vienna in 1663 and 1683.

⁹⁰ A work produced in two phases: the *Prodomus ad Refutationem Alcorani* in 1691 and then the *Alcorani Textus Universus* with the *Refutatio Alcorani* in 1698. On the academic work of Ludovico Marracci, see M. BORRMANS, “Ludovico Marracci et sa Traduction Latine du Coran” in *Islamochristiana* 28 (2002):73-86.

⁹¹ “Aiming to convince the Muslims of their errors [...] so as to bring them to leave their superstition and embrace the true religion”. G. RIZZARDI, 55.

Christian relations became more and more academic and cultural, sometimes philosophical and rationalist, thanks to orientalism, which was in general terms a cultural phenomenon rising above the introverted tendencies of European culture and addressed itself to the positive observation of the cultures and the religions of the orient. In this way starting from the beginning of the XIX century, some academic perspectives emerge regarding Islam. One of these interprets Islam as a natural and rational religion in which a rationalist theism is professed, in which its prophet Muhammad merits consideration but no more than as a hero of humanity; a second, which with regard to Islam tends to promote a culture of suspicion with regard to the humanity of Muhammad and his sincerity; and finally a third perspective which will develop in the XX century, which is inspired by the principles of scientific research and which carefully studies the historical origins of Islam so as to throw light on the components which are original and those which are introduced from other religions or cultures⁹².

5. The stage of vitality and of propaganda (XIX century)

During the XIX century, there were two events which put both groups Christians and Muslims on the same path of vitality and propaganda.

On the Christian side, a great missionary zeal developed which gave rise to the foundation of a number of missionary institutes and societies and the consequent increase in the Christian presence among the Muslims. This presence produced among the Muslims feelings of acceptance-rejection on the one hand, and of humiliation-anger⁹³ on the other, feelings which in a certain way are at the origin of a certain Islamic reformism⁹⁴. This period will also be marked on the level of Islamic-Christian relations by the

⁹² G. RIZZARDI, 57.

⁹³ In reality, what was most humiliating for the Muslims was the fact that Europeans, Christians and atheists, described Islam as a backward, fatalistic and fanatical religion.

⁹⁴ For an up to date interpretation of the Islamic reform movement, see, T. RAMADAN, *Il Riformismo Islamico. Un Secolo di Rinnovamento Musulmano* (Città Aperta: Troina (En), 2004).

confrontation between Islamic *da'wa* and the Christian mission. It is in this context, in fact, that there arises a new interest in polemical and apologetic literature on both sides⁹⁵.

European orientalism comes on the scene definitively, which will undertake the systematic study of oriental cultures and the history of religions⁹⁶, and will make an effort to interpret Islam and to understand its followers having recourse by preference to Arab-Muslim sources and basing itself on scientific criteria, without on this account excluding current ideology.

6. The stage of spiritual approach to Islam (end of the XIX - beginning of the XX centuries)

At the end of the XIX century and at the beginning of the XX, in an effort to establish more positive relations new ways of approaching Islam arise. For example there should be remembered the person of Miguel Asín Palacios (1871-1944), precursor of the theses of the Vatican Council II⁹⁷; or those who, on the spiritual plane, try to live a spirituality of to *rapprochement* to Islam. Among these for example there is the witness of the "hidden life at Nazareth" of Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916)⁹⁸, and the theories of Louis Massignon (1883-1962), such as for example, his conception of history, the theory regarding Sufi spirituality and the rapport with the Muslims through hospitality and the 'substitution' (*badaliyya*)⁹⁹. I

⁹⁵ For example, the "Maomett Controversy" in India among Protestants and Muslims, on which see, C. TROLL, *Sayyid Ahmad Khân. A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (Vikas Publications House: New Delhi, 1978), 58-70; or else the polemical literature against Christianity, particularly in Egypt.

⁹⁶ See, for example, P. BRANCA, "Il Fascino dell'Altro: il Riformismo Islamico e l'Orientalismo" in S. ALLIEVI ed., *L'Occidente di Fronte all'Islam* (Franco Angeli: Milano, 1996): 126-144.

⁹⁷ See J. VALDIVIA VALOR, "Un Hombre de Nuestro Tiempo: Miguel Asín. Un Precursor de las Tesis del Concilio Vaticano II" in *Encuentro* 231 (1991).

⁹⁸ See, for example, A. MERAD, *Charles de Foucauld au regard de l'Islam* (Chalet: Paris, 1975).

⁹⁹ See L. MOREAU, "La Badaliyya et la Mission d'Aujourd'hui", in *Parole et Mission*, Octobre 1966, 561-574. On his view of Islam, see, L. MASSIGNON, *Sur l'Islam, Confidences* (L'Herne: Paris, 1995).

think one must mention too the person of Kenneth Cragg (1913-), especially for his *The Call from the Minaret*¹⁰⁰ and his pressing invitation to an accord with Islam; likewise the experience of the Franciscan Jean-Mohammed ‘Abd el-Jalil (1904-1979), witness to the Qur’an and to the Gospel¹⁰¹.

But the great renaissance in relations between Christians and Muslims on the part of both Catholics and Protestants will only take place in the second half of the XX century when the World Council of Churches will have discovered new kinds of apostolate among the Muslims¹⁰² and the Vatican II will have offered new theological dimensions on the mystery of the Church.

7. The stage of interreligious dialogue (XX century)

With the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) a new period of understanding opened in relations between Christianity and Islam: from a situation of “frontier peoples” there was progress to interreligious encounter¹⁰³. Islam, academically and theologically appreciated as a form of monotheism which was linked to the promise to Abraham is seen by the Church in a new way. And in fact, with the *Declaration* of the Vatican Council II *on the relationship of the Church to Non-Christian religion* the stage of Islamic-Christian dialogue opens. “In this way after having experienced centuries of theological and political polemic and after having suffered some periods of inappropriate proselytising, relations between Christians and Muslims today seem to have entered a phase of respect and

¹⁰⁰ See, K. CRAGG, *The Call from the Minaret* (Galaxy Books: O.U.P., 1956).

¹⁰¹ See M. BORRMANS, ed., *Jean-Mohammed Abd el-Jalil. Témoin du Coran et de l’Evangile* (Cerf, Editions Franciscaines: Paris, 2004).

¹⁰² The activities of CMC are numerous. See, for example, J.B. TAYLOR, “The Involvement of the World Council of Churches in International and Regional Christian-Muslim Dialogue” in *Islamochristiana* 1 (1975): 97-102; S. BROWN, *Meeting in Faith: Twenty Years of Christian-Muslim Conversations Sponsored by the World Council of Churches* (WCC: Geneva, 1989).

¹⁰³ See, for example, J. FARRUGIA, *The Church and the Muslims* (Media Centre: Gozo, 1988), 12-32; R. CASPAR, “Islam According to Vatican II” in *Encounter* 21 (1976); and M.L. FITZGERALD, “From Heresy to Religion. Islam Since Vatican II” in *Encounter* 296 (2003).

understanding in which Christians are inclined to esteem Muslims considering the better part of their religious experience”¹⁰⁴.

The development of interreligious dialogue promoted by Vatican II has brought numerous fruits¹⁰⁵, not only at the level of interreligious meetings and the ongoing activity of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue¹⁰⁶, but also and above all at the level of theological reflection¹⁰⁷ with the overcoming of the traditional view of *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* and the collocation, in the Divine plan of salvation, of the other religious traditions in relation to Christ, the Saviour and Mediator between God and men¹⁰⁸.

On the other hand, the legitimacy of a “Christian interpretation” of Islam is supported by the theology of religions. A. Terrin declares: “The theology of religions is a study of the religions totally within theology. In fact it is a question of bringing a value judgement on religions starting from one’s own Christian faith, formed by a knowledge of the Bible and of the tradition of the Church”¹⁰⁹. This interpretation led to some ‘working hypotheses’ different among themselves both from the point of view of determining the biblical or theological area considered in a “Christian interpretation” of Islam and according to a different methodological

¹⁰⁴ M. BORRMANS, *Orientamenti per un Dialogo tra Cristiani e Musulmani* (Urbanian University Press: Roma, 1991), 20.

¹⁰⁵ Known to all are the very many activities and initiatives that can be consulted in the magazine *Islamochristiana* of the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies. See also the critical analysis by M. AYDIN, *Modern Western Christian Theological Understandings of Muslims Since the Second Vatican Council*, Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change Series II A, Islam, Volume 13 (Washington D.C., 2002).

¹⁰⁶ See K. AKASHEH, “Riflessioni su Quaranta anni di Attività del Pontificio Consiglio per il Dialogo Interreligioso nel Dialogo con i Musulmani” in *Pro Dialogo* 116-117 (2004):195-204.

¹⁰⁷ The works should be noted by the G.R.I.C. (Gruppo Ricerche Islamo Cristiano) in the area of theological reflection between Christians and Muslims. See, for example, J.P. GABUS, “L’Expérience de Dialogue Islamo-Chrétien dans le Cadre du GRIC” in *Islamochristiana* 19 (1993): 117-124. See also, *Islamochristiana* 28 (2002): 13-33. For a view of the reflection undertaken by the World Council of Churches, see, J. SPERBER, *Christians and Muslims. The Dialogue Activities of the World Council of Churches and their Theological Foundation* (Walter de Gruyter: Berlin-New York, 2000).

¹⁰⁸ See the basic text of Saint Paul: 1 Tim. 2, 4-5.

¹⁰⁹ A.N. TERRIN, *Introduzione allo Studio Comparato Delle Religioni* (Morcelliana: Brescia, 1998²), 27 quoted in G. RIZZARDI, “Verso un discernimento...”, 331.

approach. Among these: the “abrahamic way” (L. Massignon, Y. Moubarac and K.-J. Kuschel), the “the prophetic way” (The Islamic-Christian Congresses in Cordova 1977 and in Carthage 1979) and the “nohachica way” (G. Rizzi)¹¹⁰.

Publications on the theology of religions are numerous, here I limit myself to suggesting that you read some examples of theological reflection presented to the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (14-19 May 2004) by Michel Fédou¹¹¹. He recalls that the two fundamental requirements that any kind of Christian theology has to make the effort to take into consideration are: respect for “what is true and holy” in other religions; and, obviously, fidelity to Christ, which the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* (§ 2) does not describe as “unique”, but the various expressions of which mean the same thing: Christ is “the way, the truth and the life”¹¹².

8. Conclusion

Summing up and using the description of Mons. Michael L. Fitzgerald, the interpretation of Islam in the history of Christian theology has progressed from its being viewed as a heresy to that of a religion¹¹³. In other words as Giuseppe Rizzardi suggests, through four models which are likewise historical stages:

- the “theological” model (medieval) with a perception of Islam that is partial and limited, because of having recourse to Augustinian-scholastic-Thomistic theological culture in the analysis and valuation of Islam;
- the “orientalist” model (XVIII century) which uses as a filter of observation not the Christian theological categories, but coordinates of an historical philosophical character;
- the “friend of Islam” model (XIX-XX centuries) in which the

¹¹⁰ See details in G. RIZZARDI, 332-335.

¹¹¹ See M. FÉDOU, “Lo Sviluppo del Dialogo Interreligioso dal Concilio Vaticano II. Riflessione Teologica” in *Pro Dialogo* 116-117 (2004): 172-194.

¹¹² See, M. FÉDOU, 181-188.

¹¹³ M.L. FITZGERALD, 1.

approach to Islam consists in a cross-section examination of the world of Islam “removing the focus from oneself, from one’s own cultural and religious world in order “to concentrate” on the other, the different;

– and finally the “student of Islam” way (the contemporary tendency) which is gathering the fruits of a slow and gradual progress towards a correct perception of Islam¹¹⁴.

After this brief look at the history of relations between Christians and Muslims, with a particular emphasis on the development of the Christian view of Islam, one can only look with satisfaction at the progress made down the centuries; so much more so today when “Islam appears on the stage of history with its own, autonomous and justified plan for the progress of mankind, of society and of history”¹¹⁵. This plan astonishes some and terrifies others. In the editorial introduction to the book of Franco Cardini, *Europa e Islam. Storia di un Malinteso*, it is said that Islam is once again knocking at the door of Europe. This book one reads in a review, “reconstructs thirteen centuries of misunderstandings, lies, deceptions, errors, calumnies which have divided Europe and Islam. From Muhammad “the Christian heretic” to Islam “a diabolical religion,” from “the fierce Saladin” to the Turk “the enemy of the cross”, relations and exchanges between Europe and Islam – which were numerous, intense, fruitful, friendly – appear as almost always lived and believed in the light of an often gratuitous hostile prejudice. It is slow to die: so much so that at the end of the nineteen hundreds it re-emerged almost intact”¹¹⁶. Very true. However it cannot be denied that towards the end of the nineteen hundred in the Christian world there had arisen a whole spiritual movement which aimed at a *rapprochement* with Islam. This movement then merged with Vatican II and subsequently it developed to such an extent that, thanks to it, theological reflection, undertaken through contacts, has brought us to a respectful theological interpretation of the other, to an “ecumenism of religions”¹¹⁷ which has placed all of us on the path of

¹¹⁴ G. RIZZARDI, 51.

¹¹⁵ G. RIZZARDI, 68.

¹¹⁶ F. CARDINI, *Europa e Islam. Storia di un Malinteso* (Laterza: Roma-Bari, 2000) 347. See by the same author, *Noi e L'Islam. Un Incontro Possibile?* (Laterza: Rome-Bari, 1994).

¹¹⁷ See G.R.I.C., *Ces Ecritures qui Nous Questionnent: la Bible et le Coran* (Centurion: Paris, 1987), 22.

interreligious dialogue. A dialogue ‘persecuted’ by so many, ‘challenged’ by others, but in any case ‘desired’, since it is the means which brings Christians and Muslims closer and allows a past that was dark and monolithic in its interpretation of each other to be changed into a present full of exchanges to supersede the frontiers and promote an encounter. Also because as the Muslim scholar Mahmut Aydin declares, “Islamic-Christian dialogue is no longer a luxury, but a theological necessity in order to build a world in which Christians and Muslims can live together at peace”¹¹⁸.

9. Challenges and opportunities today

Among the challenges and opportunities of this historical experience of relations between Christians and Muslims, I should highlight the following:

Our societies and our religions are together facing the challenge of a globalisation which demands intercultural and interreligious dialogue as the necessary means to build a future of peace for everyone.

In this context, cooperation between cultural and religious groups is absolutely necessary to overcome all kinds of community tensions so as to be able to live in the hope of living together and of peace.

It needs to be recognised that some events at the beginning of the new millennium (11 September, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Middle East, etc.) have darkened the world¹¹⁹, now seen as a global village thanks to human progress, and placed it in a delicate position which requires collaboration at all levels to ensure world peace.

It is evident that religion has a fundamental role in this process of integration, of living together and of peace. In fact, in the last decades intercultural and interreligious dialogue with Muslims has brought countless benefits.

¹¹⁸ M. AYDIN, 242.

¹¹⁹ See the message of Pope Benedict XVI at the *Angelus* on Sunday 16 September 2007, in which the Pope recalling his Predecessor John Paul II, declared “After the tragic events of 11 September 2001, which darkened the dawn of the third millennium, he invited Christians and men of good will to believe that the mercy of God is stronger than any evil, and that only in the Cross of Christ is to be found the salvation of the world”.

There is no need to become discouraged nor even disillusioned believing that the current situation of interreligious dialogue has changed. In fact, it is not Islamic-Christian dialogue that has changed, but our world.

This fact requires a combined effort so as to continue to weave together these relations which are so necessary for our world, with all its changes in the political, social and cultural fields, as also in the perception of other. Lights and shadows coexist in a process still in its development phases.

This is a process which unfortunately is often threatened by ignorance, suspicion and prejudice. The political, social and cultural situation – and especially the *escalation* of international terrorism – do not help these things. Therefore it is the duty of Christians and Muslims discover and to promote from within their own religious traditions, the seeds of brotherhood and peace. We need a “critical dialogue” in order to preserve and promote human dignity¹²⁰.

In this way the current perspective of Islamic-Christian dialogue implies the need to make the best use of some fundamental elements such as: education to/in dialogue, a constant search for common and shared values and finally, mutual collaboration in the creation of a society more peaceful and harmonious.

9.1. Education to/in dialogue

In a meeting on “the Future of interreligious dialogue between the monotheistic religions”, organised in January 2003 by the Muslim University al-Zaytuna in Tunis, one of those taking part, Professor Ahmed M’chergui, rightly said that nowadays religious illiteracy (*ummiyya dīniyya*) predominates.

Educating to dialogue presupposes an adequate formation at all levels. It also presupposes a good knowledge of one’s own religious tradition and an openness to a different one of the other person. In this sense, Professor Ahmed M’chergui recognised that many Muslims nowadays are ignorant about almost their whole theological, ascetical and mystical heritage, which

¹²⁰ Cf. M.L. FITZGERALD, “The Relevance of *Nostra Aetate* in Changed Times” in *Islamochristiana* 32 (2006): 63-87.

enriched the great thinkers of Islam in the Middle East during the Middle Ages. It is also what is happening in the west where our contemporaries are suffering from a collective and Christian loss of memory as the result of a secularism that excludes the religious from the scholastic and social areas¹²¹.

In fact, being open to knowing the other as a necessary element in order to establish healthy interreligious relation, implies: in the first place an objective and honest knowledge of the other person's world; from this understanding flow esteem and sympathy which lead to openness and availability; then one comes to discovering one's own identity, making it possible to accept existing differences; and finally one discovers the importance of the witness of life, lived with a twofold dimension, that is: in the appreciation of the other from one's own perspective and in the freedom to witness to one's faith from one's different standpoint.

9.2. Constant search for common and shared values

The right kind of education concerning the other will show Christians and Muslims that both religions can share many values. The purpose of interreligious dialogue is not some kind of agreement about the beliefs of the different religious traditions, but rather the common search for shared values to foster an encounter in a spirit of respect, trust and friendship.

In this context, there was a positive result in the first Seminar of the *Catholic-Muslim Forum* established in March 2008, and held between 4 and 6 November 2008 in the Vatican, the consequence of the response of the Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, in the name of Pope Benedict XVI to the Open Letter which 138 Muslim intellectuals (actually about 300) had sent to the Pope and to all the authorities of the other Christian Churches. Entitled "*A word common among us and you*" the letter is an invitation to take up the common value of the love of God and of one's neighbour to build a better world¹²².

Genuine dialogue requires that Christians and Muslims accept each

¹²¹ M. BORRMANS, "Partidarios y Adversarios del Diálogo Islamo-Cristiano" in *Encuentro* 386 (2004): 9.

¹²² See the full text on www.acommonword.org

other with all the similarities and differences in theological, moral and cultural matters. Pope John Paul II declared that “*only in the mutual acceptance of the other and as a result of a mutual respect, deepened in love, will the secret of a humanity finally reconciled be found*”¹²³.

By searching for common and shared values, Christians and Muslims will work together in the service of life of justice of freedom and of brotherhood. This is what happened at the Catholic-Muslim Forum and it enabled a clarification of what was meant by the dialogue between Christians and Muslims desired by His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI. The *Osservatore Romano* indicated the process: “The starting point? Recognising objectively the different theological and anthropological views. The method? Listening to one another without prejudices, with mutual esteem and respect. The basic attitude? A sincere desire to come to know and to understand each other. The aim? To offer the men and women of our time a genuine service of peace, of reconciliation aware that the name of God can only be a name of peace and brotherhood, justice and love”¹²⁴.

The constant search for common and shared values ought to lead us to live together in the spirit of a ‘culture of peace’. In fact this was the topic of point 45 of the 63rd General Assembly of the United Nations in a High Level meeting at which an attempt was made to analyse the role of religion in developing this culture of peace. For this and in the face of our world’s indifference two things are fundamental: witness and service. Witness because there is the need for believers to be consistent and credible in their religious traditions, therefore condemning violence, hatred, fanaticism, etc.; service, because we are called to promote common and shared values in a practical way, and that is by defending life, human dignity, freedom of conscience and of religion, etc. This was the witness and the appeal of the President of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, H. E. Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran at the United Nations¹²⁵.

¹²³ Prayer of Pope John Paul II at the prayer vigil for peace at Assisi. Cf. *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 10 January 1993, p. 2.

¹²⁴ *L'Osservatore Romano*, 7 November 2008, p. 1.

¹²⁵ *L'Osservatore Romano*, 16 November 2008, p. 2.

9.3. Mutual collaboration in the creation of a society more peaceful and harmonious

One of the challenges in the context of the new prospects for Islamic-Christian dialogue, is the fostering of greater mutual collaboration in the creation of a more peaceful and harmonious society. In practical terms this means working together for the promotion of the dignity of every individual through a commitment to justice. In fact, Christians and Muslims, following their respective religious traditions call attention to the truth of the sacred character of the dignity of the individual person. This is the foundation of our mutual respect and esteem and the condition for collaboration in the service of peace among nations and peoples, the deepest desire of every believer and of every person of good will.

Pope John Paul II said: *“This means that religion is the enemy of exclusion and discrimination, of hatred and rivalry, of violence and conflict. Religion is not, and must not become, an excuse for violence, particularly when religious identity coincides with cultural and ethnic identity. Religion and peace go together! Religious belief and practice cannot be separated from the defence of the image of God in every human being”*¹²⁶.

For his part, Pope Benedict XVI, in the *lectio magistralis* at Ratisbonne – a *lectio*, among other things, little read and much commented upon – made it very clear that the foundations for a just and constructive dialogue needed to rest on the acceptance of the truth, the recognition of differences, the rejection of violence, the sharing of the absolute and transcendental values starting with the sacred character of life and the dignity of the individual.

The Muslim Professor Hmida Ennaifer, in an open letter to the Pope, wanted to emphasise that the remarks of the Holy Father demonstrate the symptoms of a serious religious crisis of identity. In fact, the Ratisbonne address had the effect of an ‘electro-shock’ to re-awaken dialogue and to invite believers to study the real issues.

It was something similar that the Islamist Tariq Ramadan, recognised on the eve of his participation in the Catholic-Muslim Forum, and that is that the Ratisbonne proposals have opened up areas need to be explored and made the most of in a positive manner¹²⁷.

¹²⁶ Cf. *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 29 March 2000, 8.

¹²⁷ *Le Monde*, 5 November 2008, 21.

In this sense it is necessary to build together a world of peace and brotherhood, so ardently desired by all men and women of good will, and learn to work together to avoid intolerance and oppose violence, so as to be able to open up a field of religious freedom for all.

In fact the truth of the sacred character and the dignity of the human person, together with respect for religious freedom, are the basis for collaboration at the service of peace, which leads towards the path of authentic dialogue¹²⁸. In this way H.H Pope Benedict XVI said in his address at the audience granted to those taking part in the Catholic-Muslim Forum *“Only by starting with the recognition of the centrality of the person and the dignity of each human being, respecting and defending life which is the gift of God, and is thus sacred for Christians and for Muslims alike – only on the basis of this recognition, can we find a common ground for building a more fraternal world, a world in which confrontations and differences are peacefully settled, and the devastating power of ideologies is neutralised”*¹²⁹.

10. Final Conclusion

Fr. Maurice Borrmans, professor emeritus of the PISAI and a well-known promoter of Islamic-Christian dialogue declares that *“in the midst of all the questions and confusion generated nowadays by the international situation regarding Islam-Western relations and in the midst of the uncertainties and worries of so many men and women accustomed to dialogue, it is necessary on both the Christian and the Muslim side not to be discouraged but to take heart”*¹³⁰.

This dialogue continues, as we have seen, in spite of difficulties and obstacles. A number of institutions, Christian and Muslim, are committed to/engaged in this work. Many criticise this dialogue and even come to believe that it is useless and sometimes dangerous, for both parties. In

¹²⁸ Cf. Address of Pope Benedict XVI to the President for Religious Affairs of Turkey in the “Diyanet” at Ankara on 28 November 2006.

¹²⁹ *L’Osservatore Romano*, 7 November 2008, p. 8.

¹³⁰ M. BORRMANS, “Partidarios y Adversarios del Diálogo Islamo-Cristiano” *Encuentro* 386 (2004): 9.

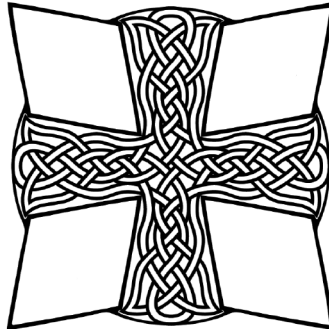
reality, the current situation is offering everyone a good opportunity to purify their intentions, improve their methods and multiply their activities.

We need a common platform to develop interreligious relations in daily life, in interreligious cooperation, in theological reflection, as well as in a spiritual encounter.

Our times, every day more globalised, have an urgent need for harmonious relations which foster religious freedom, healthy mutual exchange and the promotion of peace. Our “planetary society” needs to foster the project of a lay/secular society respectful of freedoms and of beliefs, with a specific commitment to peace, based on justice and the rule of international law, and with the solidarity of believers bearing witness to the transcendent in a secularised world.

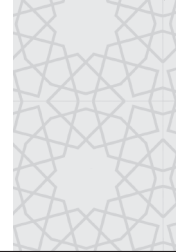
All this needs to be carried out through interreligious and intercultural dialogue with optimism and hope, precisely because this dialogue cannot be reduced to an optional extra; on the contrary, *“it is in fact a vital necessity, on which in large measure our future depends”*¹³¹.

translated from the original text in Italian



¹³¹ Discourse of Pope Benedict XVI to representatives of the Islamic communities in Cologne on 20 August 2005.





A Response to Miguel Angel Ayuso Guixot

Fr. Julio Palmieri SDB

In the first place we thank Fr. Miguel Angel Ayuso Guixot for his valid intervention, the result not only of his high professional competence but also of his vast personal experience in this field. On the one hand he has presented to us some of the more relevant elements of the journey of Islam-Christian dialogue in history. In fact, it has been a presentation that balances the past, present and challenges for the future, and looks not only at dogmatic theology but also at a pastoral approach. On the other hand, he has enlightened us with proposals which concern us in the present context: education to dialogue, search for common values and mutual cooperation. In short, with a spirit of optimism and hope, he invites us to take courage and engage ourselves in intercultural and interreligious dialogue because it is worth it...!

With the sole purpose of helping our reflection in some way, I would like to highlight some points that could help us in our discussion and reflection:

1 - First of all the epistemological aspect: It refers to how the way of knowing and reflecting at any specific moment of history conditions theology and the mode of understanding religion and how this influences the style of relationship between the different believers [it refers to the type of mentality, to the importance given to religion and to the way of thinking (pre critical, philosophico-critical, historical critical or say more “internal”) and, to the different levels of “education” and “consciousness” of the believers among whom it is possible to establish dialogue].

2 - Another point is the fact how this journey of fourteen centuries has been influenced by **the political aspect**, or rather, how political power (and the fact who had the power at every moment of history) had a powerful influence in the relationship between the different religions and believers [it



refers to the contexts of majority or minority for every religion today, to the use of religion for justifying economic or political interests and to the authenticity of motivations. (What would happen if, say, one day we were to be again in a situation of growth and superiority?).

3 - Thirdly, I would like to highlight the fact how within the same church, be it at **the dogmatic or at the pastoral level**, everyone has tried to respond within one's own historical contexts with approaches sometimes complementary and at times also contradictory [regarding our discernment in the face of the concept of revelation in Islam (how to become capable of giving a reason to our hope without being "exclusivist") and many pastoral choices which call into question the witness of our identity (e.g., the conditions of the possibility of praying together...)].

4 - Another element that emerges is the fact that **the Salesian charism** has begun to be part of this long history only from the 19th century. On the one hand we feel proud of our brothers and sisters who have preceded us in this mission and from whom, with humility, we have many things to learn. On the other hand, it becomes an opportunity to deepen our life in the Spirit in order to be capable of bringing our contribution to the mission of the Church [all this necessitates our personal conversion and our specific formation, the capacity to network with others and our openness of mind not to identify one specific charismatic expression with the charism itself...].

5 - As a point of arrival in this process which is still in a developing phase, and after Vatican II, is the consciousness that at present we find ourselves in a delicate situation which calls for collaboration at all levels. To promote human dignity and peace we need a '**critical dialogue**' ("even though sometimes it is contested, considered futile or even dangerous, it is always desired"). Fr. Miguel tells us: "Christians and Muslims have the duty to discover and promote the seeds of brotherhood from within one's own religious traditions" (I ask myself: what is our true conviction with regard to dialogue?).

6 - To become authentic witnesses: The actual prospective of Islam-Christian dialogue, according to Fr. Miguel Angel, calls for the necessity to strengthen: a) education to dialogue, b) the continuous search for common values, c) mutual collaboration to create a peaceful society. In other words,

the new generations are asked: a) to know, appreciate and live one's own religious tradition, b) to know, appreciate and respect the other, c) to find common values in order to live in mutual collaboration, and finally, d) to become authentic witnesses of this "collection of dynamics". [This vision implies maintaining a tension between a "we" (fidelity to Christ) a "they" (respect for what is true and holy in the other religion) and a "we" that is "shared and convergent" (fidelity and respect for each other). I ask myself how precisely "they" see it (be it for the possible practical consequences or for a question of intellectual honesty)].

7 - To put into practice all that we have said till now requires a delicate **exercise of continuous hermeneutics and charismatic discernment**, which implies being faithful to continuity and discontinuity (to conserve and change at the same time) in different contexts. Thus, we could exercise a hermeneutics of coherence (meaning how we present ourselves before "them"), of trust (how "we" understand "them"), a hermeneutics of suspicion (how "their understanding of us" can be an invitation to change or purify something in us), and finally, a hermeneutics of liminality (or how we shall be able to remain in the "convergent we" "between them and us"). We need to continue to learn and discern, allow ourselves be transformed and live in "liminality". And for all this we must absolutely be able to live in fidelity to the Holy Spirit.

Dear Fr. Miguel Angel, the sharing of your approach and your vision really enriches and motivates us. We thank you once again and we congratulate you for your new ministry as of the Council for Interreligious Dialogue and we assure you of our commitment to live this journey of dialogue in the communion of the Church with a Salesian style and giving the best of ourselves.

Come Holy Spirit! Spirit of plurality! Spirit of liminality! Spirit of authenticity!

translated from the original text in Italian





Christian Witness as a 'Prophetic Presence' (with Particular Reference to Muslim-Christian Dialogue in Asia)

Francesco Zannini*

Introduction

We often ask ourselves where interreligious dialogue begins. The answer to this question is very simple: dialogue is born where people are of goodwill. Various events throughout my university career have allowed me to travel and to see many countries of the world not as a tourist, but as scholar and researcher, and this has given me the opportunity to live among people of different cultures, particularly in the Muslim world, sharing their life and their anxieties for the future those that they are currently facing.

Living in Egypt and in Bangladesh, or visiting Turkey, Pakistan, Malaysia or Indonesia, I have realised how diverse the Muslim world is, whether one considers it from a social and ethnic point of view, or from a cultural and even religious perspective. Muslims have been my classmates, in Egypt, colleagues of university, my pupils and my neighbours, in Bangladesh, where even my landlady and my cook were Muslim. These encounters have allowed me to relate with them and overcome cultural obstacles and my western preconceptions.

One of the dominant feelings in our society today is the fear of Islam and Muslims, whose world and system of values are seen as distant from

* Doctor of Modern Languages and Literatures at the Catholic University of Milan, he continued his studies in Quranic Exegesis in Cairo at the American University in Cairo and at Yale University, USA. He is a professor of Arabic and Islamic at the PISAI, where it holds the Chair of Contemporary Islam at the Fondazione Universitaria "San Pellegrino" in Misano Adriatico. He is the editor of the Journal *Encounter* and a member of the editorial board of the Journal *Islamochristiana*.



the Christian ones. However, if you relate with Muslims at a personal level, you will gain a new perspective and feel a greater closeness among 'believers'. In fact, when, thanks to the personal relationship, this distance decreases, we realise that the other person is one of us, all barriers collapse and a common humanity and common spiritual values emerge. In the debates about Islam, we look too often at the 'Muslim world' as an abstract category and as culturally distant. In reality, not only is Islam closer to Christianity than we might think, but Islam is a universe constituted by peoples with whom it is possible and necessary to share values and express them through dialogue. As Vatican II has emphasised: "The Church regards with esteem also the Muslims. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all- powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God"¹³². On the other hand, the attitude of solidarity and sharing each Christian must have for all is clearly expressed in the *incipit* of *Gaudium et Spes*: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every man. That is why this community realises that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds"¹³³.

While dealing with particular experiences of dialogue, this paper will focus only on the countries of South, Central, and Southeast Asia. This is because I lived there for most of my life and because Islam takes shape in Asia in ways that are not at all present in the Middle East, and dialogue is a natural part of the common sentiment of the peoples of this continent.

¹³² *Nostra Aetate*, n. 3.

¹³³ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 1.

1. Christian witness among Muslims

The respect and love Muslims have for Christians is expressed in the Qur'an itself: "And you will find the nearest of them in affection to those who believe to be those who say: Lo! We are Christians. That is because among them there are priests and monks, and because they are not proud"¹³⁴. Here, Christians are appreciated because of the witness given by spiritual figures like priests and monks and by the fact that they are humble persons. This could be the basis of our reflection on how Christians should behave among Muslims in order to bear witness to Jesus, who according to Saint Paul: "being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross"¹³⁵. This humble attitude can also help us to get beyond the hostilities of the past and present and, in spite of the many theological and ethical differences, be partners together with Muslims to face the challenges of globalisation, modernity and post-modernity, problems related to global financial growth and crisis, neo-colonialism, war and terrorism, social justice, exploitation and poverty as Vatican II states in the document *Nostra Aetate*: "Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom"¹³⁶.

This openness and sharing, however, requires a deep awareness of the relevance of the structure of Christian faith, as it has been expressed in Holy Scripture and formulated through the history of the Church. Our witness should be clear, in fact "Dialogue is not relativism, but rather is based in an essential insight of theological epistemology: that the Church confesses the coming into history of divine life, something not immediately obvious and

¹³⁴ Q. 5:81 (translation of Yusuf Ali).

¹³⁵ Philippians, 2:5-11.

¹³⁶ *Nostra Aetate*, n. 3.

therefore in need of witnessing”¹³⁷. This does not mean that we should have a sort of static attitude. On the contrary, we should relate in such a way that the Christian witness renews itself through the dialogical process¹³⁸, as confirmed in the document of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue: “in the context of religious plurality, dialogue means ‘all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment’, in obedience to truth and respect for freedom. It includes both witness and the exploration of respective religious convictions”¹³⁹.

The necessity of bearing witness to the Gospel, as well as showing the prophetic attitude of the Christian community appears also in other declarations and documents that followed Vatican II and in several events of bearing witness in the life and experiences of many Christians among people from other cultures and religions, that characterised the life of the Church in the recent years.

In Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (The Mission of the Redeemer) the Kingdom of God is presented as broader than the Church itself¹⁴⁰, which is at the service of the Kingdom¹⁴¹. Something similar is also expressed in the document *Dialogue and Proclamation* which states that part of the role of the Church “consists in recognising that the inchoate reality of this Kingdom can be found also beyond the confines of the Church, for example in the hearts of the followers of other religious traditions, insofar as they live evangelical values and are open to the action of the Spirit”¹⁴², without forgetting that “this is indeed an inchoate reality, which needs to find completion through being related to the Kingdom of Christ already present in the Church yet realised fully only in the world to

¹³⁷ F. KÖRNER SJ - Debating Dialogue (Where the Christian-Muslim Encounters Must Cut More Sharply) p. 535, <http://www.con-spiration.de/texte/english/2008/koerner-e.html>. Translated from the original German in *Stimmen der Zeit, Die Zeitschrift für christliche Kultur*, München, 8/2008, 535.

¹³⁸ See: F. KÖRNER, 535-546.

¹³⁹ PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, “Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ”, n. 9.

¹⁴⁰ JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio*, Chapter II – The Kingdom of God, n. 12-30.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.* n. 20 and: *Dialogue and Proclamation*, n. 59.

¹⁴² *Dialogue and Proclamation*, n. 35.

come”¹⁴³. We find a similar attitude in the documents of the First Bishops’ Institute for Missionary Apostolate, in 1978¹⁴⁴ when it says that dialogue can be used in a very superficial sense, while it should be understood as “a witnessing to Christ in word and deed, by reaching out to people in the concrete reality of their daily lives, in their particular cultural context, their own religious traditions, their socio-economic conditions”¹⁴⁵. The document emphasises that interreligious dialogue is neither a replacement nor a precursor for the proclamation of Christ, dialogue itself *is* bearing witness to Christian faith: “In humility and mutual support we seek together with our brothers and sisters that fullness of Christ which is God’s plan for the whole of creation, in its entirety and its great and wonderful diversity”¹⁴⁶. In fact, dialogue and *proclamation* of the Gospel are not contrary ministries, as if one could replace the other. Both are aspects of the one evangelising mission of the Church¹⁴⁷. “These two elements must maintain both their intimate connection and their distinctiveness; therefore they should not be confused, manipulated or regarded as identical, as though they were interchangeable”¹⁴⁸, because through interreligious dialogue Christians are able to discover the mystery of God in people of other religions and proclamation bears witness to God’s mystery as it has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

It is through our spiritual encounter with believers of other religions that we can discover deeper dimensions of our Christian faith and broaden our vision of God’s salvific presence in the world. Consequently, “dialogue is a new way of being Church”¹⁴⁹, where there is not any kind of ‘relativising’ our faith in Jesus Christ or dispensing with a critical evaluation of religious experiences, we are called upon to grasp the deeper truth and meaning of the mystery of Christ in relation to the universal history of God’s

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ BIMA I: Letter of the First Bishops’ Institute for Missionary Apostolate”, 27 July 1978, Baguio City, Philippines, in G. ROSALES and C.G. ARÉVALO, eds., *For All the Peoples of Asia*, I (Orbis: New York, 1992), 93-96.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, n. 5.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, n. 10.

¹⁴⁷ *Dialogue and Proclamation* n. 8-9.

¹⁴⁸ JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 55.

¹⁴⁹ PAUL VI, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesiam Suam*, n. 63.

self-revelation”¹⁵⁰. This leads us to recognise that “it is the same Spirit, who has been active in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus and in the Church, who was active amongst all peoples before the Incarnation and is active amongst the nations, religions and peoples today”¹⁵¹.

Our prophetic presence in the Muslim world should be based on the fact that we have Good News for our Muslim friends and neighbours. By our faith and life we confess that there is One God who has spoken to mankind and that the Word to which we are subject, to which we surrender is the supreme revelation of God himself in the person of Jesus Christ¹⁵². In fact, as the scholar in Muslim-Christian relations, Lyle Vander Werff¹⁵³ states “To follow Jesus means to submit to God’s reign, to enter into his kingdom. In our witness to our Muslim friends, all is secondary to the message that the God of the universe acts through Jesus the Messiah for the salvation of the world he loves. (John 3:16) Christians live under the great commandment to love God with their fullest ability and to love their neighbours (all nationalities) as themselves. For those who would heed Christ’s commandments to ‘love their Muslim neighbours’ and bear witnesses to the Good News that the kingdom of God has arrived in the person of Jesus”¹⁵⁴.

Christians are responsible then for bearing witness to this mystery, being aware that the concept of ‘History of Salvation’ accomplished in Christ, bears a different meaning from the one that appears in the Muslim statements about God and that, at the same time, there is a larger capacity for sharing many religious beliefs and practices. This makes believers in interreligious dialogue aware that they are in the presence of God and that they work under God’s impulse, bearing witness to one another, taking into account what unites Muslims and Christians as well as what divides them.

Interreligious dialogue, in fact, cannot be reduced to a sort of exercise

¹⁵⁰ “Our Mission and Interreligious Dialogue”, 34th General Congregation of the Jesuits (1995), Decree 5, n. 135.

¹⁵¹ FABC Statement of November 1986, in *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 259.

¹⁵² John. 1:1-18.

¹⁵³ Dr. Lyle Vander Werff served in Kuwait, completed his doctoral work in Islamics and Mission at the University of Edinburgh, and currently serves as Professor of Religion at Northwestern College in Iowa. He serves as Director for International Students.

¹⁵⁴ L.VANDER WERFF, “Christian Witness to Our Muslim Friends”, *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, vol. 13, no. 3, July-September (1996): 111.

in comparative religion and must keep its highly personal and spiritual dimension. In this way our witness among our Muslim neighbours should be a response to the call to love our neighbours as we love ourselves¹⁵⁵, seeking our neighbours' good with gentleness and respect, believing that the saving hope that is ours in Christ must be offered to all. This spiritual love should be also expressed by listening to and learning from our neighbours while we share what is most important to us. This growing closer in a friendly attitude, will bring about peace and understanding and opens the way to a sincere dialogue in a time of tension between our two faith communities which makes Muslims and Christians good neighbours and friends, who share common values that are deeply rooted in their own faith. A response to the Christian witness and prophetic presence can be found in an important document issued by Muslims in order to foster interreligious dialogue, *A Common Word between Us and You*¹⁵⁶ where it is stated: "Muslims and Christians together make up well over half of the world's population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians. The basis for this peace and understanding already exists. It is part of the very foundational principles of both faiths: love of the One God, and love of the neighbour. These principles are found over and over again in the sacred texts of Islam and Christianity. The Unity of God, the necessity of love for Him, and the necessity of love of the neighbour is thus the common ground between Islam and Christianity".

2. Muslims in Asia

Islam has its origin in the Arab world and Muslims all over world are substantially united in the faith and values preached by the Prophet Muhammad, which are expressed in the *Qur'ân*. Muslims consider themselves part of a supranational community, called the *Umma*. It would

¹⁵⁵ Matthew 22:36-40.

¹⁵⁶ "A Common Word between Us and You" (13.10.2007) is an open letter some Muslim Leaders forwarded to the main Christian authorities.

be, however, a mistake to conceive of Islam in monolithic terms. The Islamic world is constituted by peoples from different cultures and traditions, which have produced various ways of living the same Islamic faith and tradition.

Almost 2/3 of Muslims in the world today live in Asia. Countries such as Indonesia can account for 15% of the world's Muslim population and 30% of the world's Muslim population lives in three South Asian countries: Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. Actually, less than 20% of Muslims live in Arabic-speaking countries. It could be said that the future of Islam is in Asia. There are several signs of a developing Muslim society: the growing Muslim population, the developing of a new theological approach to the tradition of Islam, the activity of Muslim youth (both men and women) in freedom and human rights movements, an active involvement in modern mass communication such as internet, journalism, radio and television broadcasting.

Particularly in Asia, Islam became established in Asian societies in a relatively short time and, throughout history, entered into a deep process of acculturation. The local religious and traditional practices of indigenous peoples, who became Muslim through persuasion, conversion and conquest, are now part of the life of the majority of Asian Muslims. This process of acculturation has become the constant factor that brought Islam to take many different shapes from Morocco to Turkey, from Caucasus to China, from Thailand to Malaysia, and from Indonesia to the Philippines. There, Muslim believers practice the same faith and are guided by the same Islamic Law. However, this is expressed through different ways of life according to their own philosophical and religious institutions, as well as through various local legal systems.

One of the main factors of the growth of Islam in Asia was the expansion of Sufism on the continent. In fact, the early Sufis did not put a great emphasis on doctrinal formulation or political questions, but rather emphasised an interior piety and submission to God's will. Instead of taking on a confrontational approach to traditional Asian spirituality (which was mostly a kind of pantheistic religiosity centred on cosmic and interior harmony), the Sufis focused on a few basic principles of Islam. In doing so, they accommodated many traditional practices related to the spiritual world and the veneration of holy persons and places.

This process of acculturation took place in both religious and juridical

fields as well as in social and political ones. This created new ways of interpreting Islamic traditions according to the local Asian context. Some founders of Muslim nations expressed in their ideologies a great open-mindedness to integrating different ethnic and social groups within the pluralistic national context of their countries. This developed a tolerant Islam, based on keeping a good relationship with religious minorities. There are several examples of this, such as Jinnah in Pakistan, whose birth has been characterised by stressing the religious factor in a secular form according to the philosophical ideology of Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), or Sukarno in Indonesia, whose Constitution is based on the *Pancasila*, which stresses both human rights and anti-communal spirit. In fact, in most new Asian nations where there is a Muslim majority, people tend to focus both on the local cultural roots and on the synthesis that Islam has been in some way capable to introduce as a warranty of external interferences - or as in the case of Bangladesh, refusing external interferences (see the Language Movement).

There are also other modern attempts of acculturation such as the 'Civilising Islam' or *Islâm Hadhari* introduced by Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the premier of the Malaysian Federation. This approach tries to harmonise the Islamic and Malaysian traditions with the on-going process of modernisation of the nation. Many new Asian Muslim leaders try to enhance new generations with a real respect for democracy, by fighting for religious freedom of minorities and for a better consideration of Muslim women in the Islamic world.

These new positive approaches to the tradition of Islam do not exclude the fact that a resurgence of radical Islam is badly reacting against the process of acculturation, through the project of 'islamisation', which tries to introduce Arab elements mixed with a strict interpretation of the *Qur'ân*, within an Asian cultural context. These radical groups consider the local traditions as an obstacle to practice true Islam.

3. Catholic-Muslim Dialogue in Asia

In sharing its life and values with the peoples of Asia, the Catholic Church finds itself in a context of a plurality of religions. In responding to the various problems in Asian society, Muslims play an important role with

their variety of ethnic and local experiences, traditional acculturation, modernism, human rights and liberation as well as fundamentalist movements.

The complexity of Catholic-Muslim relations in Asia is due to several demographic, ethnic, political, financial and social factors that have influenced and still influence the ways Catholics and Muslims relate to each other.

If we look at the demographic aspect, it clearly appears that there are countries like Pakistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Brunei and the Central Asian republics where the Catholic minority faces a large Muslim majority. On the other hand, in a country like the Philippines, the Muslim minority is surrounded by an overwhelming Catholic majority. The relationship between the two religious communities is completely different in areas like India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Singapore, China, where Catholics and Muslims are both minorities or in countries such as Malaysia, where the majority varies from state to state of the federation. In these cases it is crucial that both communities live in harmony and co-exist in order to give their respective contributions to the formation and strengthening of the common good in pluralistic and democratic societies.

Ethnic factors are not to be overlooked, particularly when Islamic or Catholic faiths are identified as part of Muslim or Christian ethnic identity. In the case of the Malays throughout Southeast Asia, or the Maranao, Maguindanao and Tausug peoples of the Philippines, often Islam is seen as part of what makes one belong to those ethnic groups. While the Tagalog, Cebuano, and Ilonggo peoples of the Philippines, or the people of Flores in Indonesia and of Timor consider themselves a Catholic people.

As far as political power or economic strength, some countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, and many republics in Central Asia, Muslims control the political system but Catholics are generally in a stronger financial position. This situation creates a sense of unease among Catholics because the political strength of Muslims and a growing negative feeling among Muslims towards Catholics who are perceived as those who control the country and the life of its citizens by dominating the financial sphere.

The majority-minority dialectical relationship in the political, economic and social fields of countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh continues to create problems for the Christian minority. In this situation, the potential

relationship lurks behind the tension that arises at various times between Christian and Muslim communities. The case is different where both communities are minorities in a country dominated by a third dominant group. In these situations, relations between Muslims and Christians are often friendly, less problematic and the two communities grow closer to each other. This would be the case in Hindu India, Buddhist Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand, or Confucian Singapore, where both the Muslim and Christian experience of marginalisation (and sometimes persecution) such as in Myanmar, India, and Communist China.

4. The role of the FABC

Perhaps the most helpful, albeit brief reference to the theological methodology of the FABC is the following observation by Stephen Bevans: “What is clearly evident as one reads the various FABC documents is the employment of a method that starts from experience, from lived, actual realities. In every document issued by a plenary assembly (with the exception of the third plenary assembly which begins with a theology of church) and in many documents that result from the various bishops’ institutes, the starting point for reflection is Asian reality. Asia, say the documents, is a continent in transition, undergoing modernisation, social change and secularisation. These things threaten traditional values in Asia, and so the church needs to witness to the rich spiritual heritage that is the hallmarks of Asian religiosity in all its variety”¹⁵⁷.

The basic orientation of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) is in favour of dialogue with the religions of Asia. The FABC was instituted in 1972 by the coming together of various Episcopal Conferences to form a federation in order to better serve the Church in Asia. The Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (OEIA) is one of its first offices and runs several seminars for clergy engaged in interreligious dialogue. Since 1979, it has organised and carried out a series of study programs

¹⁵⁷ See: in S. BEVANS, “Inculturation of Theology in Asia (The Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, 1970-1995)”, *Studia Missionalia* 45 (1996): 10.

through the Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs (BIRA). In these programs, the Asian Bishops have tried to reflect on the documents of the Church and theological issues in order to increase their understanding of the other religions present on the continent.

Specific issues related to dialogue with Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism were taken up in the assemblies of the Bishops' Institute for Religious Affairs (BIRA) I, II and III. In particular, the International Congress on Mission held in Manila, in 1979 underlined the urgency of interreligious dialogue for the local Churches in Asia.

It was the BIRA II (1979) that had the specific purpose of deepening the Church's understanding of, and commitment to, dialogue with Muslims. Both Christians and Muslims share an eagerness to serve one God, await his judgment, and hope in his eternal reward. However, certain fears, prejudices, and a general ignorance of one another's religion, coupled with the triumphalistic attitudes of both religions hinder dialogue between them. In spite of these obstacles, there is a growing awareness among Christians to dialogue with Muslims. In its pastoral orientation, BIRA II identified several different forms of dialogue at various levels of encounter between Christians and Muslims.

Starting from the fifth FABC Plenary Assembly (1990), the BIRA started taking a new shape. In previous years, the emphasis was on the formation of bishops for dialogue. Now the bishops feel that it is time for them to be in actual dialogue with persons of other religions. Thus, the new phase of the BIRA V series (BIRA V/1 was a Muslim-Christian dialogue) evolved into new programs where groups of bishops met persons of other religions for days of face-to-face interreligious dialogue.

In the BIRA sessions several papers on Islam were presented and discussed. Among them, some were of particular relevance for Catholic-Muslim Dialogue. The ones worth-mentioning are: *Questions Muslims Ask Catholics*, by a Tunis Study Group (1980), *Muslim Perception of Christian Community*, by Terence Farias (1982), *Christian Presence among Muslims in Asia*, a Consultation on Interreligious Dialogue (1985), *Christians and Muslims in Dialogue*, by Thomas Michel, S.J. (2002).

All of this shows the way the leadership of the Church in Asia views the urgency to carry on Catholic-Muslim dialogue with a deep conviction and renewed commitment in the Asian context while facing the challenge of

both traditional Islam and the upcoming Islamic fundamentalism. This can also be seen in the sermons, speeches and pastoral letters addressed to the Catholic Bishops, the clergy, the laity and to Muslims of Asia by the Popes who visited the continent.

5. The different types of Dialogue

5.1. Dialogue of theological exchange

A new theology of dialogue is developing in Asia, but because of its typical contextual language and philosophy is often not fully understood and even misunderstood in places like the West, North Africa, the Middle East. Asia is an enormous continent and there are many different philosophies and ways of life.

Asia is a place where universalism and even some forms syncretism are part of an ancient tradition and where recently in some areas, fundamentalism and communalism are growing. Where the ancient cultures and religions still influence the social and personal life of each single individual, there are particular ways of interpreting modernity, progress, and revolution in Asia.

Catholic theology is also undergoing a process of deep transformation in Asia in both its language and its philosophical foundations. This process desires to be local without losing the peculiarities of Catholicism that are part of a universal experience of faith and love. The Church and Muslim-Christian dialogue may contribute to the elaboration of a new Catholic theology in Asia, while, at the same time, Catholic theologians and intellectuals may play an important role in supporting the Muslim theologians who try, particularly in Asia, to see and reinterpret Islam in the context of a new emerging world. It is a service to the faith, a contribution to a new theological understanding, which can give a new scope for dialogue at the intellectual level by avoiding the easy ways of a simple tolerance and syncretism and go deeper into a serious theological reflection.

This context, however, cannot be overlooked by the ever-growing Christian fundamentalist sects, with their aggressive preaching and attempts of mass conversions of non-Christians by proselytising. This creates a very

difficult task of developing a theology of dialogue in a harmonious way within their given contexts for Asian theologians. Also, the spreading of extremist forms of Islam in Asian countries such as Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia must not be overlooked. This presents real challenges to the traditional Asian sense of harmony and impedes a way for a new theological approach to these issues in Asia.

5.2. Dialogue of cultural and spiritual exchange

People belonging to both religions live on the level of cordiality and friendship. At a grassroots level, many Catholics visit mosques and Muslim shrines and have encounters with *mullahs*, as well as Sufi *pîrs* and *murîds*. It is common in Asia for people of different religions to exchange visits, greetings and gifts, on the occasion of religious festivals.

Formal dialogue encounters, which address explicitly spiritual themes are held both in the continent and outside the continent. Several have taken place in Rome. It is worth mentioning that a colloquium on “Holiness in Islam and Christianity” took place at the Pontifical Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies in Rome in May 1985. The Muslim participants were mainly from Asia and were particularly from the Indian subcontinent. Papers were presented on the concept, models, and understanding of holiness in Islam and Christianity and an opportunity was given for mutual critique. ‘Spiritual emulation’ has been a feature of the ecumenical movement, which can also find its place in interreligious dialogue between both Catholics and Muslims. The *Qur’ân* itself states: “*If God had willed, He would have made you one nation; but that He may try you in what has come to you. So be you forward in good works; unto God shall you return, all together; and He will tell you of that whereon you were at variance*”¹⁵⁸.

Commissions for Catholic-Muslim dialogue are present in most of the dioceses in Asia and Islam has become a regular subject in all the Catholic High Schools, Seminaries and Theological Faculties, often through the aid of Muslim teachers. There is also a proliferation, all over Asia, of Catholic centres for Islamic Studies and Muslim Christian dialogue, such as the ‘Silsilah Dialogue Movement’ (founded in the Philippines in 1983), where

¹⁵⁸ Q. 5,48.

both Muslims and Christians share at all levels of life. The 'Islamic Studies Association' of India was founded more than thirty years ago by Catholic bishops, priests, religious and laypeople. It promotes knowledge and understanding between Muslims and Christians in India. The Pastoral Institute Multan is run by the Dominicans in Pakistan. It is also interesting to note the case of Bangladesh, where Catholics support and cooperate in programs of peace and value education given in the Muslim run Department of World Religions at Dhaka University.

5.3. Dialogue of life and action

There is also a work of dialogue that is centred on helping people in need. This is done during natural calamities such as floods by providing financial and moral support and shelter to people without any kind of religious discrimination. The situations in Pakistan, Bangladesh, India and the Philippines can be given as examples.

Many Muslims and Christians in Asia are involved in working together for the social welfare of the community and for human rights. In Bangladesh, the 'Bangladesh Interreligious Council for Peace and Justice' (BICPAJ) was founded in 1983 and joins together Christians and Muslims for peace efforts, conflict resolution, education, research, women's empowerment. The Chairperson is always a Muslim and most of the members are Muslims (both men and women), but its ideology is very much guided by the Bible. With its Liberation Theology leanings, it uses and promotes the philosophy of non-violence as envisioned by Gandhi as well as the ones of Paulo Freire and Martin Luther King. In the southern Philippines, there is an umbrella group of people's organisations in 120 villages called MUCARD (Muslim-Christian Agency of Rural Development). It is involved in human development and anti-poverty work. The 'Zamboanga's Islamic-Christian Urban Poor Association' works for justice and the PAZ (Peace Associates of Zamboanga) works for peace. The 'Muslim-Christian Interfaith Conference' and 'the Moro-Christian People's Alliance' carry out the task of reconciliation often in connection with and the efforts of the 'Silsilah' group, which works for mutual understanding and education in dialogue. 'Identity, Merge and Action' (AIM) is a Catholic NGO in Pakistan which works to enhance the dignity of poor Christian and

Muslim women by offering them: training courses in sewing, stitching, computer literacy, health care, family planning, and adult education facilities. The 'Asian Muslim Action Network', a progressive movement of Muslims in twelve Asian countries which organises peace seminars and workshops together with the offices of the Catholic Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences and the Christian Conference of Asia. They are all working together to build a common 'peace curriculum' that can be offered to imams, religion teachers, seminarians and catechists.

These are only some examples of the many associations, spread all over Asia, where Catholics and Muslims work together for the social welfare of the community.

Of particular relevance in this context is the Bishops-Ulama Conference (BUC) co-convened for the first time in 1996 by Mutilan, president of the Ulama (Islamic scholars) League of the Philippines with Catholic Archbishop Fernando Capalla of Davao. At this Conference, Catholic and Protestant bishops as well as Muslim and indigenous peoples' leaders do their best to help build peace in the southern Philippine island of Mindanao. Priests, imams and pastors hold regular forums and plan a variety of Christian-Muslim activities among youth, social workers and other groups.

CARITAS offices and Catholic NGOs are spread all over the continent. They share with the Muslims, who are often staff members of the organisation, their concern for the poor. Muslims are also welcomed in Catholic Schools and Hospitals where there is no discrimination based on religion and beliefs. All this makes the Catholic charitable works recognised and highly appreciated by Muslim governments and civil authorities who often give awards to single Catholics and Catholic institution in the fields of education, medicine, art, film, law, literature, and both civil and armed forces.

6. Conclusion

While speaking of Christian witness as a 'prophetic presence' among Muslims through dialogue, particularly in the Asian context, no one can deny the fact that both religions of Islam and Christianity were established in Asia during the very first century of their foundation. Both are universal

and missionary religions that spread mainly through the inspiration of the mystic saints. Believers of both religions have been living side by side. There have been many positive efforts made by the Catholic Church in interreligious dialogue, which are significant at every level. Particular achievement can be seen in the fields of intellectual and spiritual exchange, as well as in the dialogue of life and action. However there are factors that may hinder dialogue and harmony between the Catholic Church and Muslims in Asia. In fact, local policies such as in Malaysia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan can create a hindrance for dialogue. Christians often feel threatened and reduced to second-class citizens when facing both government policies implementing Islamic laws and the attitude of Islamic 'fundamentalists'. They are discriminated against on the basis of religion. Signs of religious intolerance have appeared during recent years in some Asian countries, under the pressure of particular groups and governments in nations where some elements of the Muslim majority do not seem to demonstrate that tolerance, which is a part of the original Islamic tradition. There are attempts to change the legislation by introducing policies, which effectively deny the rights of religious minorities. In this context the 'prophetic' presence of the Christian community, which fosters dialogue and understanding, with humility and charity, will play a fundamental role in 'converting' the minds and the hearts of those among the Muslims who are affected by the narrow-minded attitudes of groups, which are not the expression of the Asian common feeling of respect and tolerance for all religions and philosophies. Christian witness will eventually bring them back to the main tenets of their faith, creating a solid ground for understanding, peace and love. The Christian faithfulness to Jesus' message of love, even for enemies, will enhance the efforts of some great Muslim thinkers of our days, like the Asian Muslim scholar H.A. Mukti Ali, who, at an interfaith conference held in Colombo, Sri Lanka in 1974 said: "In this search for an ethical system that will enable people to survive as civilised human beings in the coming decades, it is of the greatest importance that the various world religions continue their dialogue with each other".





A Response to Francesco Zannini

Sr. Ibtissam Kassis FMA

I thank Professor Zannini for the passion with which he has shared his experience in the Asian Multi-religious World; I would like just to add something to the picture of the initiatives for Interreligious dialogue in the Middle East, something different from what professor shared about Asia but which are signs of a lively Church, aware of its mission in the Muslim world. As example I just mention a few.

1. Prominent figures in the field, yesterday and today

- Fr Youssef el Haddad (born in Yabroud-my countryman) the first I personally met.
- Louis Massignon (orientalist and Melkite priest), with Marie Kahil, the only ones I did not meet, but with whom I feel very much in tune; with their reflection and witness of life. I learned from the practise of solidarity.
- Fr Georges Kanawati.
- Fr Alfred Havenith.
- Mons. Hanna Kolta.
- Fr Christian Van Nispen.
- Fr Samir Khalil, who in spite of being committed in the Christian-Arabic heritage, has some reflections about Islam, interreligious dialogue.
- Fr Rafik Khoury. And many more...

2. Meaningful events and gestures

- The letters that the Catholic Patriarchs have addressed to their faithful from 1991 to date contain direct references to presence-witness. In particular the third letter entitled: “Coexistence between Muslims and Christians in the Arab world (together before God)”.
- The Synod for the Holy Land.



- The Synod for Lebanon. In both Synods it is strongly stressed the dialogue of life and the daily sharing in the destiny of the peoples where the Church is present.
- The visit of Pope John Paul II, around the year 2000, to several countries of the Middle East. His speeches, where he encouraged Christians and Muslims to communion, to forgiveness and dialogue were collected everywhere. In Syria, the volume that commemorates the occasion is entitled: “Syria’s National Unity, the Pope’s visit is a symbol”.
- In 2000 there were days of study and dialogue with Muslims who in turn, exalted the figure of Christ and his influence in humanity’s history.
- After September 11 and what led to the “the war of cultures”, the Catholic Church in Jordan organised a conference in Reggio Cultural Centre, which developed the historical role of Christian Arabs as “cultural bridges between East and West”, not only the Eastern bishops urge their followers not to emigrate, but even the ‘moderate’ Muslims say: you are our ‘salt’, without you our life has no meaning. And speaking to Christians emigrated to the West they say: you are our ambassadors, make a cultural bridge, tell your experience of living together ...
- The Year of St. Paul was marked in Syria as a national event. President Assad in his address presented Damascus as Paul’s city. And the Film produced ‘Damascus Speaks’ in which most of the actors are Muslims, is a voice that adds up to others which speaks of fraternity and full citizenship.
- The Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for the Middle East titled: The Catholic Church in the Middle East, Communion and Witness.
- In Egypt, the dialogue with the Azhar has had its own configuration, has had some great moments. It seems that in the Middle East it is not possible to program long-term projects and with certain consistency: Here the local and global political events always have an impact on every day’s life. I do not want go on the current situation of our country; it is too hasty to make judgments. Let us give history time, even if we cannot and we must not be indifferent, but pledge to create opinion and therefore ability to make wise decisions.
- The various television channels, including CTV (Coptic TV) and Telelumiere (Lebanese) each have more than one program on Islamic-Christian dialogue conducted competently.

- Many websites, such as www.abouna.org and many others offer various services on that topic.
- Lebanon has declared a national holiday on 25th March each year. “Around Mary, in whom we all believe and worship, we reassemble the national unity”.
- In Jordan, the discovery in recent years of the place of baptism beyond the Jordan, and all the investment made by the nation, the gift made by the King to all religions so that they can build a church and meeting places, another important sign of benevolence.

The Middle East generally has been more concerned about the dialogue than the knowledge of Islam. We are born into it, five times a day we hear the Muezzin, there is no one who does not know *shada* and *fatiha* by heart ... radio, TV, public transport, all transmit suras from the Qur'an. Of course, Christians know much more about Islam than Muslims about Christianity. Those who attend our schools, have this advantage, but not much. The fear of being accused of proselytising makes us very cautious. Every so often a young woman asks to participate in religion class, and she is admitted. One mother told me one day: “Please evangelise and bring civilisation”, she repeated this three times.

3. I will now say something about **inter-religious dialogue which we seek to live in our settings**. Of course it does not take place in official places or with the masses. But personally and with whoever is available ... normally it is the Muslim interlocutor who takes the initiative. In 12 years of travel through the roads of the Middle East, in taxis, trains, airplanes I got to meet so many people whose faces and voices remain etched in my memory and have become the object of my prayers, some have become real friends with whom we have even established correspondence by mail. I quote some key expressions:

- What you say and do cannot come from you, surely there is a greater force that sustains and inspires you!
- How I wish that Christians were like you, most committed to their religion to be able to respond to our many questions. Very often they shun dialogue, they are afraid to take it up.

- It is clear that your religious state gives you freedom!
- Your habit caught my attention.
- You are angels of mercy.
- You, at school, do not make differences; we all feel one family. To you I owe the life of my daughters, you have educated them and trained them for life.
- Some time ago in Jordan a young Palestinian-Egyptian Muslim with serious concern came to us. He had already knocked on various doors of convents and churches, but no one could hear him. I invited him in and to sit in the parlour, I offered him something to drink and listened to him. He was shaken by what was going on between the Muslims after September 11. In his school those who had managed to inflict serious damage to the American democracy were praised for their enterprise. He could not understand how it was possible that someone could rejoice for the death of so many innocent people. He began to express his concerns, but was silenced, because his teachers were concerned that he would influence his friends. He then began to knock on many doors, with an insatiable thirst for truth. I listened to him, he continued coming, he met the other sisters ... while we showed a lot of respect for his religious affiliation, we tried to tell our faith and give reason for our hope, to say what is for us the truth, or rather, who is our Truth. We established with him a beautiful friendship, not to make him a Christian, but to have a Muslim friend whose mind and heart are open and able to help others to be like him ... the Lord surely will do the rest.
- A few weeks ago, one of our past pupils, a Muslim woman from Nazareth, had to do an illustrated homework to be presented at the University with pictures of people or events that have marked her life. She came to school to take pictures of the sisters, even the elderly ones who have spent their lives in this school and for many young people. She even looked for Michael, the gate keeper. In her opinion, he also had an educative role in her life!!!!

I feel that for us it is urgent to learn to speak to the Muslims about our faith in a language accessible to them, not to convert them, but to make them real friends! I often say: your religion for you is faith, for me it is culture, and my religion to me is faith and I will offer it to you as a culture; to break down barriers it is important to get to know each other.

Living in Nazareth, with people belonging to three major religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and a significant minority of Druze) does not leave us indifferent, but stimulates us to educate to coexistence, mutual acceptance and peace. The dialogue with Islam is sometimes easier for the common cultural roots; we have them every day at school, as students and lay collaborators, with the opportunity to meet their families often. Authentic Islam loves Christians; in the Qur'an is written: closer to those who believe are the Christians. In the Holy Land Islamic fundamentalists respect us, while the fundamentalist Jews despise us with vulgar manners. With the Druze there is no dialogue, women know little about their religion and men do not talk about it; with them is a friendly dialogue of life. With moderate Jews there are very beautiful relationships. The Minister of Education Gideon Sa'ar, in his first lecture to school manager of Galilee so expressed: "We are here from all religions, and from many political orientations, but we are united by our common commitment to education. Indeed we feel one big educating community", concrete steps of a peace that we so hope.

In our work we have had friendship and sympathy with the school authorities, the parents of the students, the teachers and the students themselves. The past-pupils have a strong sense of belonging, of gratitude; it is interesting to hear from the mouth of Muslim girls say: I am the daughter of Mary Help (in Egypt our schools bear the name of Mary Help of Christians, and they know that is the name of Mary) while those of Nazareth are all FMA (school logo). Muslims are more proud than the Christians of being pupils and past pupils of Christian religious schools; they feel that this makes them gain more respect.

4. Is our witness really prophetic?

To what has been said until now, and that in itself is an effect of our prophetic witness and of all Catholic institutions who live and work with commitment in the Middle East. We add:

- The educational method of Don Bosco lived as open acceptance as a family, as interest for every young person makes the students happy and open. Often with a sense of curiosity and sympathy they ask us, for whom do you do it? Why did you leave the family, your home country,

why did you not get married? Why do you welcome Muslim boys in your schools? And they understand that this is only out of love and for their sake, so that they may have life in its fullness...

- We inculcate Christian values, without naming Christ explicitly, but our saints are familiar to them. With the older and the adults from time to time we talk about Christ, his teachings. Some friends in particular have received the gospel to read, not to convert them, but because they have the right to know what we believe in ... they ask us easily for prayers ... and in me, in us, the conviction grows that the that Muslims, at least those who come to our place have the right to know our faith, our rituals. A subsidy to point out to my sisters is this.

Thomas Michel SJ, *An Introduction to Christian Theology*, Rome, Italy, 1987 translated into Arabic in 1995. These are conferences held in Ankara - Turkey at the Faculty of Islamic law in a course on comparative religion. I think and hope, that today there are new productions on the issue.

A major difficulty we face is when some of our acquaintance either through her own or dragged by others, become Muslim, or are kidnapped ... here it becomes impossible to intervene and the disasters that follow are unsolvable. Because it is easy to enter Islam but one only comes out dead! This is a problem that we talk about a lot with Christians, and we want to warn every person male or female, Arab or Westerner about this danger, which if lost, could become almost normal as if there was no fanatic that demands that the other, either man and woman, becomes Muslim, because it is the best religion! In Nazareth and the Jewish context there is less fanaticism regarding this matter; there are families in which two religions, sometimes one Jewish, live in peace and mutual respect.

I talked about school, the environment of formal education. But in the Province we have youth centres for Christians and Muslims who have been active for years with a very encouraging and positive experience. Although at first we found resistance from Christians who consider the oratory property ... but time and the results have confirmed the validity of the experience.

In Damascus since 1913 we run the Italian hospital, which belongs to ANSMI, here, being prophetic witness touches the maximum. The majority of patients are Muslims whose gratitude to the sisters is unparalleled. A

terminally ill asked to be admitted, because his father ended his days in the hospital and he wants to do the same, because the sisters accompany not only the sick person but also his family.

Ayman Kasabashi is a Muslim who wanted to modernise the intensive care unit giving the necessary funds. To him the reason is because “whoever does good deeds is close to God regardless of their religion”.

5. A rather painful note

Unfortunately, witness, dialogue, desire to have a real coexistence are in the hearts and minds of Church leaders, of religious, and especially of missionaries. It is not uncommon to find among the natives, also religious, fanatical people, who cannot bear to see the Muslims, because in life or in the family they have had negative experiences and they remain stuck. There is a lot of work to be done to purify the memory and forgive.

Many Christians live their faith with indifference, they react only if they are affected or derided, but church attendance, involvement in catechesis, the sacramental life, are all relegated to the crucial moments of life. This phenomenon is more prevalent in Nazareth and in general among Christians-Israelis. Catechesis in schools is not enough to heal this.

6. Conclusion

At the end of what has been said I would like to affirm:

I believe in the school apostolate and informal education. This is not only working with a young, but with the family and society itself.

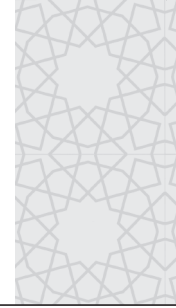
I believe in social work also in hospitals, in the concern for the poor, in giving work whenever is possible.

I believe in friendship, and the friendship will save the rest of the Christians remaining in the Middle East. It will be friendship which will open new doors for dialogue and cooperation at all levels.

I think the witness of our lives is the more eloquent Gospel, we influence some without being aware of it.

translated from the original text in Italian





As Good Witnesses of Christ how to Dialogue with Muslims: Dialogue and Proclamation

Fr. Maurice Borrmans M. Afr.*

[*These few pages of mine provide the outline I intend to follow, commenting and explaining. I would recommend the reading and meditation of my little book **ABC per Capire i Musulmani** (Milan: San Paolo, 2007)*]

“But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these there are the Mohamedans, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind”. (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 16).

“The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all- powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth (5), who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honour Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their desserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting.

* Born in France, he has a doctorate in Literature (Sorbonne, Paris). From 1964 he has taught Islamic Law, Islamic Spirituality and the History of Islamic-Christian relations at the PISAI. He has been Director of the Journal *Islamochristiana* and was a consultant of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples.



Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom". (*Nostra Aetate*, n. 3).

Providing commentaries on these fundamental texts are the Encyclicals: *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964) and *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), the Documents of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue: *The Church and other Religions - Dialogue and Mission* (June 10, 1984) and *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* (1991), the Text of the International Theological Commission: *Christianity and the World Religions* (1997); and that of *Dominus Jesus* (2000): *Declaration on the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*.. Then the address of John Paul II to young Muslims in Casablanca, Morocco (19 August 1985), the Message of Cardinal Martini to the citizens of Milan (6 December 1990): *We and Islam*, and the Letter of the 138 Muslims to Christian religious leaders (13 October 2007): *A Common Word between Us and You*.

Muslims are believers for whom "*Islâm* consists in professing the Islamic faith, in saying ritual prayer, in giving legal alms, in fasting the whole month of *ramadân* and in making the pilgrimage to the house of God, the temple of Mecca, when one can". They call themselves Muslims, submissive to the One God whose book (the Qur'an) they meditate and they imitate the Prophets (Abraham, Moses, Jesus and especially Muhammad). They live the solidarity of a community of believers, affirm the transcendence of God and they adore Him sincerely with a simple form of worship. They want to be obedient and faithful to the prescriptions of His Law and some are happy to seek the ascetical and mystical sublimations of the Islâm. Many try to ensure that religion and the State mutually help each other to change this world into a "dwelling place of peace and justice", that is "the dwelling place of Islâm". For them life is sacred, work is praised, earthly goods ought to be shared in an equitable manner and the family enjoy social prestige and legal protection. However, they are not Christian. Indeed they reject the fundamental mysteries of Christianity (Trinity, Incarnation, Redemption), while knowing the Gospel exists and that

Christians are close to theme. Twelve times the Qur'an speaks of the Gospel that God gave to Jesus (*'Īsā*). It is also said that this Gospel is "full of correct guidance and light" (5, 46) and it is regretted that it is not put into practice as it ought to be (5, 66). Certainly, this Gospel according to them, has nothing to do with our canonical four gospels: it would be a monotheistic message entrusted to Jesus and then forgotten or rather falsified by the Christians, who would also have exaggerated in their love for Jesus. However, the exceptional nature of his personality remains: there is therefore a mystery about Jesus (conflicting Christology). In the Qur'an, it is said to Muhammad: "You will find that those closest in spirit to those who believe are those who say: 'We are Christians'. This happens because among them there are priests and monks and these are not proud" (5, 82). And then the God of the Qur'an says: "We will put into the hearts of those who follow Jesus meekness and mercy and then monasticism instituted by them" (57, 27). But according to the Qur'an the definition of the true religion echoes more or less both the ten Commandments of Sinai (17, 22-40) and the Sermon on the Mount: "Piety does not consist in turning your face to the east or to the west but rather, true piety is that of the one who believes in God, in the Last Day in the Angels, in the Book and in the Prophets, and gives from what he has [...] to his relatives and to orphans and to the poor and to travellers and to beggars and to ransom prisoners, and of the one who Prays and pays the tithe, of the one who keeps the promise he has made, and who in sorrows and in adversity is patient and in days of misfortune: these are the sincere ones, these are those who fear God !" (2, 177).

It is necessary to bear in mind the current obstacles: to know and to forget past injustices, to free oneself from some prejudices (Islam as fatalism, legalism, laxity, fanaticism, stagnation), to know what the person you are speaking with thinks about Christianity (falsified Scriptures, irrational, unacceptable and useless Mysteries, Monotheism blemished by polytheism, the Church a political institution, Christians unfaithful to the message of Jesus). *It is necessary to become engaged in the necessary forms of collaboration:* improving the world, the service of humankind, the organisation of society (the dignity of matrimony and of the family, cultivation of the fine arts and of culture, economic and social balance, harmony in the political communities, institutions and international peace),

the human imitation of Divine activity. *It is necessary to think about possible areas of spiritual convergence:* the mystery of God, the gift of the Word, the role of the Prophets, the presence of the Communities, the secrets of Prayer, the ways to Holiness. It is, therefore, a matter of “vying with each other in doing good” as the Qur’an suggests (5, 48) and to grow in the service of God in the name of a ‘spiritual emulation’ aimed at the ‘promotion of the faith’. Avoiding in this way that unjustified form of proselytism which presents the faith as a commodity and collects adherents as statistics, the commitment and spiritual witness of Christianity involves accepting the other person, mutual understanding and dialogue, collaboration and sharing, daring and risking, becoming for each other a witness of God, demanding and merciful as He is: dialogue in daily life, dialogue in activities (work, schools, hospitals), dialogue of the experts (intellectuals, theologians), dialogue of ‘spiritual people’. With engagement such as this it will be possible to facilitate the gradual progress, through a fourfold ‘conversion’, to the values of the Kingdom of God (the Beatitudes), to God’s approach (his Fatherliness), to the fascination of Christ (his Brotherhood) to communion with the Church (the Family of God).

“Circumstances are sometimes such that, for the time being, there is no possibility of expounding the Gospel directly and forthwith. Then, of course, missionaries can and must at least bear witness to Christ by charity and by works of mercy, with all patience, prudence and great confidence. Thus, they will prepare the way for the Lord and make Him somehow present”. (*Ad Gentes*, n. 6. “The one in conversation has to be consistent with his own traditions and religious convictions and open to understanding those of the other, without pretence or intransigence, but with truth, humility, loyalty, in the knowledge that dialogue can enrich each one [...]. Dialogue leads to purification and interior conversion” (*Redemptoris Missio*).

translated from the original text in Italian



A Response to Maurice Borrmans

extracts from the text of Fr. Erando Vacca SDB

I live in Cairo in the Salesian Technical Institute as an English teacher. I live and work in the Middle East since 1965. I have a good knowledge of the Arabic language: I read, I write, and speak both classical Arabic as well as Palestinian and Egyptian Arabic and I understand enough of Lebanese Arabic since I studied Arabic in Lebanon. I've always been in contact and lived with Christians of various rites and with young Muslims having been school Principal in Bethlehem, Alexandria, Nazareth and Vice-Principal in charge of discipline and order at these schools. In addition to being charged of extra-curricular activities: oratory, youth clubs. With this I just wanted to give some back-ground of my experience in the Islamic world. I am truly grateful for this chance to be able to give a response to your presentation on how to dialogue with Muslims. It is a difficult task. [...]

Dear Fr. Borrmans, I made this premise as an introduction to the response to your text on dialogue with Muslims, as a believer, a Christian and a Salesian with some experience in the Muslim world, at least to the Middle East. I am perplexed to accept what you stated in the first and following paragraphs, even if I know that this is the mind of the Church, [...] that Muslims, referring to the faith of Abraham, worship the one and merciful God affirm and that, in the final analysis, we and they believe in one God.

To my opinion, we Christians and Muslims do not have the same concept of God. [...] The God of Abraham and of Jesus Christ is the Saviour [...] We Christians know that the name of our Triune God is Love. (Instead) the Qur'an tells us that Muhammad initially acted like the Jews: he fasted; he turned to Jerusalem for prayer; he believed in the authenticity of the Torah and of the Gospel; many precepts in the Qur'an are the same or similar to those of the Torah, and it is referred to as a source of sure and



certain authority which had to be followed; then all of a sudden [...] the following verses that tell us how different is his and our concept of God: (surat-al-Kafirun 109,1-6) (“Say: O you that reject Faith! I worship not that which you worship. Nor will you worship that which I worship. And I will not worship that which you have been wont to worship. Nor will you worship that which I worship. To you be your way and to me mine.”) [...] Now could you tell us how any interfaith discourse between the two religions is possible?

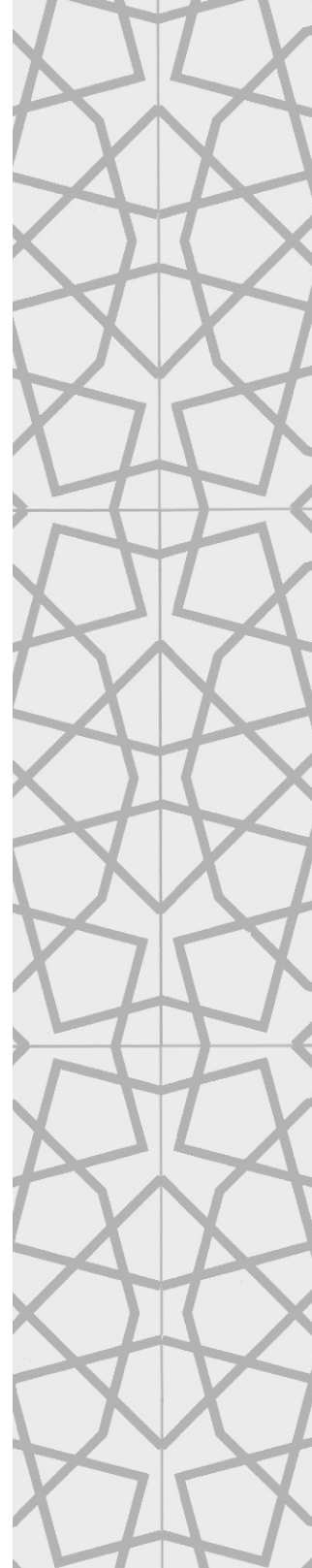
Our categories are not identical to theirs; and we who live in their midst and with them know that. What is stated in the Qur’an is deeply anti-Christian. This is why the Qur’an says “In blasphemy indeed are those that say that Allâh is Christ the son of Mary” (Al-Maida 5,17). It continues following what was stated above: “those who reject faith and do wrong Allâh will not forgive them nor guide them to any way except the way of Hell to dwell therein for ever: and this to Allâh is easy” (Al-Nisa 4,168-169). In talking and dialoguing with Muslims we must have a model to propose. Their incomparable and perfect model is Muhammad. The Qur’an states: “You have indeed in the Apostle of Allâh a beautiful pattern of (conduct) for anyone whose hope is in Allâh and the Final Day and who engages much in the praise of Allâh” (Al-Ahzab 33:21). [...]

I made these long quotations to underline how difficult is an honest, sincere and truly productive dialogue with Muslims[...]

translated from the original text in Italian

Part III

Formulating Conclusion





Meaning, Opportunities and Challenges of Salesian Presence Among Muslims

Fr. Maria Arokiam Kanaga SDB*

Introduction

The presence of Salesians among the Muslims is by now about 120 years old. Today in 50 countries we are present among them. Yet we are still coming to terms with the *meaning* of this presence and wonder how best to be effective. Naturally, for us Salesians, it is the question of what God wants from us in this regard. We firmly believe that God is calling us to be effectively present among the Muslims because the charism of Don Bosco is meant for all His children. The search for meaning therefore is the search for His will. Keeping in mind this faith perspective will help to grasp the challenges, opportunities and strategies He offers us. This is the faith perspective.

Another way to approach the topic is to ask: How would Don Bosco respond to God's call today if he found himself among young Muslims? What strategies he would devise to be a sign and bearer of God's love among them? What would be his dream for Muslims, given the present complex relationship between Christians and Muslims? The answer is of course, that he would follow his basic charismatic inspiration – the Salesian Spirit and the Preventive System. This is the charismatic perspective.

These few reflections presuppose all that has already been shared in these study days. We need not once again 'invent hot water', seek theological justifications for inter-religious dialogue, review doctrine and repeat scholars. We presuppose them. Our task is to reflect on the Salesian spirituality that gives us the meaning of, and the strategies for an effective presence.

* Fr. Maria Arokiam Kanaga is the Regional Councillor for South Asia. He has an M. A. in Sociology (Annamalai University) and a doctorate in Philosophy (Salesian Pontifical University). Before his election to the General Council he was involved in formation and was the Vice Provincial of the Province of Chennai (India).

1. Being Present among Muslims

In spite of our presence among the Muslims in 50 countries, we must admit that ours is still a *marginal presence*, as a Congregation. Again, it seems to be a *hesitant presence*, even if our communities and confreres work enthusiastically. Due to various historical, social, cultural and theological reasons we have many apprehensions. We have taken the opportunities that came our way, but we have not purposefully sought them, in spite of a certain amount of success and appreciation that we have tasted. It is unfortunately true that we face numerous difficulties, including the possibility of hostility and violence. It is enough to think of objective difficulties we face in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia. There are several subjective prejudices too. The previous speakers have elucidated them well.

And yet it is a *necessary presence*. God calls us there. One fifth of humanity cannot be excluded from the purview of the Salesian charism. More than 40% of the Islamic world is made up of young people. This is reason enough to move in. Such a large chunk of world's young people, who are economically, educationally, culturally and spiritually poor need our *large, willing and enthusiastic presence*. In fact we need a strategic plan from the Salesian Family!

2. Learning from Great Missionary Enterprises

We could learn a lesson or two from the great and successful missionary enterprises of the Congregation: Project Latin America (by Don Bosco), Project Asia (Don Rua) and Project Africa (Don Viganò). We have today Project China and Project Europe! These too will produce fruits in God's own time. Our presence among Muslims too cannot wait for ideal conditions!

The Salesian Family made a miracle of *Project Africa*! In a matter of 25 years Africa-Madagascar area has become a Region of hope for us. Our 'investment' brings 'returns' today. Apart from the large amount of good we are doing to the young people of Africa, there are many vocations and the first missionaries have crossed the shores of the continent for other

areas! Our presence among Muslims may seem apparently sterile today, but it can produce surprising fruits for our Congregations in direct and indirect ways. It would contribute to world peace, Gospel witness. It could attract vocations in large numbers from the minority Christians communities in these areas. Factually it is the minority Catholic communities from poorer countries that give many vocations to the Church today!

Project Africa has not been a well reasoned, long thought out project, but the result of a “nudge of the Holy Spirit”. Don Bosco went ahead as God inspired and the circumstances prompted! Project Africa was a Pentecostal event at the General Chapter XXI, triggered by the touching appeal of an African Salesian, the late James Ntamalizo. The Chapter Assembly responded with a thunderous support in an emotionally charged atmosphere. The Rector Major and his Council took it seriously and it soon elicited the response of many provinces, resulting in the mushrooming of Salesian presences in Africa. It is a heart-warming history today and a sign of hope for the entire congregation. Initially many would have been sceptical about it. Today, in retrospect we perceive the meaning of a project like that.

The Indian Miracle: India is a country with 82% Hindus, 13% Muslims (140 million) and 2.7% Christians (30 million of which only 18 million are Catholic). This minority Church is a telling example of how a minority church should live among the majority people of other religions. Overcoming the widespread prejudice as the religion of the colonial oppressors, it has contributed to nation building, and religious harmony in a large way. The Church has endeared herself to the majority of the Hindus and Muslims there through its ‘dialogue of service’ particularly education and health services. Missionaries from the Indian Church work in 168 countries today according to a recent survey by the Conference of Religious of India. In Africa alone there are 1960 Indian Catholic missionaries! Yet, it is a Church that has had, and still has several serious difficulties arising from its ‘foreign’ image and minority status. Even the present persecution by fanatic Hindu fringe groups is primarily a reaction to arrogant and exploitative colonialism of the past and the Church’s dubbing of their religions as superstitious and inferior.

In just about 90 years (1922-1012) India has become the country with most number of Salesians. There are about 6300 consecrated members of

the Salesian Family in the country belonging to 11 groups. The evangelisation of the North East of India is nothing short of a miracle. Where there was a single small diocese in 1945 (Shillong), today there are 15 dioceses. Yet the evangelisation of the area was by no means a cake walk. There were several seemingly insurmountable difficulties, including official government opposition and violence by ethnic groups. Today Don Bosco is a household name in North East India, and it has been one of the greatest educational, cultural and religious influences in the area.

Of course, Hinduism is not Islam! The former is an eclectic and inclusive religion open by its very nature to other faiths and cultures. The latter is doctrinally speaking, an exclusive one, as Christianity itself is. Dialogue with the Hindus is possible not only at the level of our common commitment to the welfare of humanity, but also at theoretical levels of doctrine. Christian theologians have spoken of the Hidden Christ of Hinduism; and Hindu thinkers have often tried to prove that the basic teachings of the Gospels are perfectly in tune with the basic teachings of the Vedas and the Upanishads! Nevertheless, the Church's experience in India could give us clues for our presence in the Islamic world. In India itself, Christians and Muslims live in harmony. Seeing bishops and imams on the same platform is a common sight.

3. Our Presence Among Muslims

Our presence among Muslims has to be very different from other projects. We are faced with a much more difficult situation than in other cases. At the most it could be likened to the attitude of the nascent Church. They faced organised, political, religious and violent opposition from the Roman Empire. And yet the Empire became Christian in three centuries. What defeated the sword of pagan Rome was the double edged sword of the Word. It was a war not by soldiers but by mystics, prophets and servants!

Many voices of rabid religious fanaticism and open hostility in the Islamic world, and the many preconceptions and selective perceptions of the Christian world, have vitiated the atmosphere for a peaceful dialogue, as we have seen. But we should not fall prey to what we could call *Jonah Syndrome*! Jonah was a reluctant prophet who was convinced that the hard-

headed people of Nineveh can never be converted. When he ran away from his duty, God had to force him to the task through a near-death experience. And yet, the pagan Nineveh was converted instead of being burnt by the wrath of a Jewish God! When the prophet was angry God said “why should I not be concerned with Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, to say nothing of all the animals?” (Jonah 4: 11). There were *young people* who were reason enough for God to be concerned! But a troublesome role in a difficult world could tempt us to take an escape route.

We already heard of the respect that Qur'an itself advocates towards Christians and among them towards priests and monks: *“And you will find the nearest of them in affection to those who believe to be those who say: Lo! We are Christians! That is because among them there are priests and monks, and because they are not proud.”* The prophet Mohammad thinks that these monks and priests are not proud! God could be beckoning us to his people and ‘humble submission’ to God's will is not only a Muslim virtue but also Christian.

4. The meaning of Salesian presence Among Muslims

Presence is a rich Salesian concept, central to the Preventive System. It is not just a physical collocation among others. Presence is ‘being alive’ to the other person in an dialogical I-Thou relationship. It means that our being itself is a being-towards others, and should make a difference in their lives. Presence is also a call and an invitation to love. We cannot love people from far. For God himself it did not work. He had to come down and pitch his tent among them, and enter into their flesh and blood. The prophet has to go to the people.

A truly loving presence precludes both superiority and inferiority complexes, but implies a sense of brotherhood. We are there not mainly to ‘convert them’, proselytise them and correct them. We are there to live the life of authentic children of God, who had the fortune of knowing the Son of God Jesus came not primarily to create a religion but to love people. He did not consider it a trouble, or below his Divine dignity to be present and face the consequences. Basically the meaning of our presence anywhere is

this. This is eminently so also among Muslims. All the rest are consequences and corollaries of this main concept of Presence. We are not going there for some advantage but “to be signs and bearers of God’s love among the young, particularly those who are poorer”.

The concept of *Incarnational Presence* is often not well understood by us. We are not present in a place primarily to *do* things and *achieve results*. Action oriented as we are, Salesians are people in great hurry. As soon as we reach a place we would like to achieve results. Large projects come up in no time and we settle down to administer them. Loving presence is meaningful even when the works we do may look fruitless, or even failure. The Incarnation of the Lord Jesus itself is a case in point. Our presence among Muslims is not a call to be successful in certain enterprises, but to be faithfully witness to God’s radical love towards humanity. In this sense ‘failure’ may produce more fruit than a commercial and external success of the institutions and works we may carry out. A non threatening and understanding presence is needed. Muslims look at Christian presence among them with suspicion. So it is not through a flourish of sudden activities that ought to characterise our presence among Muslims, but through constant presence of goodness, and service and the loss of the so called superiority complex of the Christians.

It is important to be present among Muslims, and not always remain in the periphery, dealing with only the safe forms of Islam. The apostles bore witness to the Christian message especially in hostile settings!

The main motivations can be listed as follows:

- To preach the Gospel in whatever way possible. Whether we are able to proclaim it explicitly or only through witness, does not matter.
- To be an Incarnate Presence.
- This means that ours will be an inculturated presence. We appreciate all that is good and beautiful in their culture and we participate in it.
- To work for the integrated development of the young, particularly those who are poorer
- Education of the young, by preventive system and by creating a family atmosphere where the young can grow naturally.
- Community building and social harmony.
- Building a civilisation of life, where justice, equality, peace, human rights and the dignity of the individual are respected and promoted.

- Accompanying the young in their life choices and being with them in the fulfilment of their vocation in life. We that human life itself is a vocation – the fulfilment of the purpose for which God creates his children.
- Implant the Church and the Salesian Charism

5. The Challenges we face

There are several internal and external challenges for an effective Salesian presence among the Muslims. Some of them are mentioned here below:

Internal Challenges

- Ignorance of Islam, Qur'an, and Islamic culture and history. Most SDBs and FMAs are blissfully ignorant of even the basics of Islam and the Islamic world. It is largely an unknown domain.
- Fearful and prejudiced outlook: What is unknown produces fear. Hearing mostly negative news from the media feeds aversion. It is also the result of a long history of hostility, war and mutual suspicion. A millennium of fight for the Holy places in Palestine, and the over-focus of the media on the present west Asian problems only increase this fear.
- Hesitant presence: Even when we are present among the Muslims, it is not an enthusiastic presence, in spite of problems. Our aim seems to be mainly to care for the Catholic minority in these areas.
- Lack of formation of Salesian missionaries to work in Islamic contexts. Salesians are hardly present in fora of inter-religious dialogue. We are mostly in the dialogue of action, not at the doctrinal level.
- Sparse presence of communities: We are still not present in large numbers in order to make a mark on them with our spirit and mission.
- Lack of personnel both prepared and willing to work among Muslims. Poverty of vocations from these countries.

Lack of a well-planned strategy for our presence among Muslims at the congregational and provincial levels.

External Challenges:

- The political and military conditions; acts of terrorism rightly or wrongly attributed to Muslims, total closure of many Islamic countries for other religions, and several others, which need not be repeated here. They have been amply dealt with in the previous sessions.
- Restrictions for Christian presence in many countries. The arrogance of the leaders of oil-rich countries.
- Closure and self-preservative reaction from those who feel threatened by a domineering West which according to them is Christian! Anti-Americanism and Anti-Nato Forces are confused by a large number of Muslims with anti-Christian feelings! This is very unfortunate since we know that the political and intellectual leaders of the West are very often against Christianity itself, at least in its organised forms.
- Restriction for Christian presence by the Church and by the governments. It is not always that the local Churches are happy to invite the Salesians. We could see sometime rivalry between the dioceses and religious, and among religious to take up the few opportunities that are available.
- Lack of prepared personnel among Salesians; and lack of willing missionaries.
- Dangers for life, property and mission due to persecution, terrorism and anti-Christian regimes and officials.

6. Opportunities and Strategies

God always provides us with opportunities to spread his Kingdom. We need to be on the lookout for them. Some of these may appear as obstacles than opportunities. There are no shortcuts and quick-fix solutions. Here below we briefly mention a few opportunities and strategies. They are not some clever and imaginative tricks, but the basic features of our own charism:

Fidelity to our religious consecration is the first and most indispensable strategy. Authentically holy and spiritual people have a universal appeal irrespective of religions. We have seen that Qur'an itself expresses respect and reverence for Christians priests and monks. True religious provoke a high degree of reverence. If we are truly mystics, prophets

and servants after the heart of Christ, all obstacles for the sharing of Christ will disappear.

Quality Education: In general the Muslim populations are not as well educated. In several countries the education they receive is near totally coloured by religion. At present they are becoming aware of their need for systematic, secular and quality education. This is one of the reasons for their approaching Christian schools. Bishop Camillo of Kuwait is a great believer in education. It is the best tool, according to him, to form a new mentality in the younger generations. He is quite appreciative of the work of the Salesians in Kuwait. In the Gulf area Salesians have found some degree of appreciation and acceptance among Muslims due to the fact that we provide integral education of high quality education. This experience shows that high quality education is probably the gateway to enter into the soul of these populations. In Saharan and Sub-Saharan Muslim countries too we are with the poor, mainly through social work, and education in academic and technical schools.

The Arab Spring: The winds of change sweeping through the Arab nations is a sign of the times. It brings out the long suppressed and innate longing for freedom, individual dignity and right to self determination, values that people in the West take for granted. This creates a new opportunity. The change is not merely in the forms of Government but in every other aspect of life, like culture, religion and social cohesion. Even if the spring is at present limited to the Arab world, its reverberations are sensed all over the Muslim world. It is unfortunate that Christian communities in some areas have perceived this spring as a problem than as a possibility. In a freer society there is always a greater possibility of dialogue and living together than in totalitarian societies.

Christian Immigration: The large immigration of Christians into the Muslim world, particularly in the richer Arab countries is another opportunity for us. It has offered us an entry point in to these countries. But it is important not to keep the Christians in a ghetto but to educate them to be active contributors to common good, merge into the mainstream society and work for greater understanding between Christians and Muslims.

Muslim Immigration into countries of Christian majority, like in Europe and America is another highly significant opportunity. Most of them are

suffering people looking for survival. When they see themselves being treated as dignified human beings, equal to everyone else, the message and the good will spreads in their native countries. We should expect them to be attached to their faith, culture and basic convictions. They also bring along with them certain essential values which are disappearing in the West, such as family values, openness to new life through children, community spirit, etc. There seems to be a kind of phobia about the possible domination of Islam in the West. The statistics of their fast growth in certain countries fuels this fear further. Such over-reactions do not help construct world peace and protect minority Christians in the Islamic nations. Good relationships of Christians with Muslims in countries where both are minorities is also an influencing factor of creating good will in other countries.

Allying with Moderate Muslims for Peace and Inter-Religious Dialogue:

There was a significant event in India recently which, unfortunately passed unnoticed by the media. It was the massive conclave of about 10,000 representatives of more than 6,000 *madrassas* of India from all the streams of Islam. They assembled to deliberate on the widespread perception that Muslims perpetuate violence and terrorism in the name of Islam. The conclave unanimously declared that Islam is a religion of mercy for all humanity and sternly condemned all violence and terrorism. Such an unanimous landmark declaration by a massive gathering of Muslim religious leaders, repeated in various places and times, that should put to rest frenetic negative propaganda of dubbing all Muslims as terrorists and chauvinists. We need to actively support moderate and enlightened majority of Muslims. Salesians need to actively participate in inter-religious dialogue and support such groups. We need to work with the best of them, and not totally be blocked by the activities of the worst of them. We have rabid fanatics in every religion.

A non-threatening language and style: In strictly Islamic countries it is important to avoid the public use of terms such as evangelisation, conversion, planting the Church, etc. Terms and concepts like God's Kingdom, Civilisation of Love are better suited. We do not of course deny the fact that we are essentially Christians and missionaries. But for effective presence we need to be present more like salt in the food, yeast

in the dough and the seed in the earth. Strangely, presenting Don Bosco as a loving educational genius who worked for the young and the poor, is easier than presenting Christ. This is the experience of Salesians in Hindu and Buddhist contexts.

Women's Empowerment: One of the most important doors to unlock the mysterious fortress of the Islamic culture is the empowerment of women. It is possible only through education. The presence of women religious in significant numbers, is very important to access the homes of the Muslims. There could be a spontaneous fellow-feeling between Muslim women and the Catholic women religious! The female members of the Salesian Family must be induced to be present more seriously among the Muslims.

Focussing on common goals: We must partner with our Muslim brothers and sisters for causes such as world peace, human rights, environmental protection, respect for life, equality, community building, rooting out corruption and equitable sharing of the world's resources. Working together is prior to inter-religious dialogue. When we have passionate common goals to work towards, communion grows. In all our institutions there should be an Educative Pastoral Community (EPC) which should also include Muslims of good will. This creates also a sense of belonging among them.

Appreciating all that is good in Islam: There are several areas of spiritual convergence. The belief in one God, a sense of *Umma* (community), respect for God's word, roles of prophets, the value of asceticism and fasting, preferential option for the poorest and the least in the society, etc. are shared values. Our presences are mostly located among the poor in the Muslim countries. This itself is an asset. In the future presences too this should be an important criterion. Important festivals such as Id, Ramadan, Christmas, Easter and Don Bosco, when celebrated together bring together hearts.

Education to Dialogue: First of all Muslims should learn their own rich religious doctrine of which most Muslims are ignorant. They hardly know their own religion in depth, but mostly the political type of Islam of the leaders. Hence, even in our educational institutions, we can promote a good knowledge of Islam and its roots to Muslims

themselves. In the same way, Christians should study Islam. This openness to the other helps to appreciate one's own better.

Formation of the Salesians: The Salesian Family, the Congregation and the provinces must come up with an organic plan for our presence among Muslims. Promotion of missionary vocations, learning of Arabic and other important languages, insertion of the study of Islam and Islamic culture in the curriculum of studies, training for inter-religious dialogue, setting aside personnel to qualify in the field, organising live-in experiences among Muslims, promoting research into the Islamic world, etc. are important and indispensable initiatives for our mission among them.

7. The Practice of the Preventive System

This is a major strategy for effective and evangelising presence anywhere in the world, and hence also among Muslims. It is sometimes said that Muslims do not appreciate the preventive system of education but prefer the repressive system. This is not true. It cannot be. The core of every human heart is love and what cannot be achieved by a loving presence and service cannot be achieved by any other method. We need to be faithful to our own system. Of course, the system needs to be inculturated to various contexts. Here I examine, in a schematic form, the basic concepts of preventive system spirituality and their application to the Islamic contexts.

Concept	Traditional Understanding	Adaptation to Islamic Contexts
Reason (reasonableness)	Convincing the boy reasonableness of our educative choices	<i>Transparency and open way of dealing.</i> Openness to all that is good in others and readiness for dialogue with the people. Common sense is the common factor among all.
Religion	Practices of piety and teaching of Christian faith and celebration of the sacraments, etc.	<i>Teaching the presence of the Divine in all human beings and in nature; Bearing witness to Christ by word and witness; Entering into inter-religious dialogue; Appreciating the best in other religions.</i>
Loving Kindness	Loving the youngster; being a father and brother to the young	<i>Identification with the people to whom God sends us; inculturation; becoming all things to all men.</i>
Pastoral Charity	Zeal for the souls of the boys and for the boys who are going astray, etc. imitation of the Good Shepherd	<i>The zeal with which we fight for the dignity of God residing in all, particularly the poor; Making the youth religious minded and spiritual. Presenting the unconditional love of Christ for people, irrespective of any type of affiliations.</i>

Predilection for the young and the poor	Working exclusively with the young, by bringing them into our house and giving them good education	Even among the young, making a preferential option for the poorest and those most in need. The universal acceptance of Mother Theresa, even in Islamic countries is a proof of this.
Family Spirit	Familiarity, mutual affection, sharing, family atmosphere.	<i>Building community</i> , the <i>Umma</i> ; Islam, like Christianity, is a community religion; It is against divisions of caste and class
Optimism and Joy	Cheerfulness; belief in the goodness of the young	<i>Believing in the presence of Christ in History</i> and in the goodness of the human person; believing in the optimistic humanism of St. Francis of Sales.
Creativity	Creative methods of education	Ability to launch into new areas of ministry and the <i>courage to experiment</i> without undue fear.
Work and Temperance	Tireless work and frugal way of life	Planning, strategising, and creating projects; the best use of the resources available; leading simple and detached life; being a servant like Christ and Don Bosco.
Initiative and Flexibility	Expressed in dealing with the young and situations	<i>Ability to change</i> in the face of changing situations; learn continuously and adopt new methods; ability to move from one paradigm of ministry to another; the willingness to be mobile.
Presence	Being physically present among the young with love	<i>Being incarnate, establishing presences and living among the people</i> ; locating our presences in the poorer areas with their type of life-style.
Assistance	Watching over with love, helping the boy in all ways	<i>Supporting</i> ; letting people be the protagonists; being background supporters.
Sense of the Church	Defending Catholic Religion	Giving up triumphalism; seeing Church as people of God, being Catholic, universal. Openness to the presence of the <i>semina Christi</i> in others religions.
Honest Citizen	Law abiding citizen who respects his civil duties & authorities	Forming <i>socially and politically active citizens</i> ; participating in public life and willingness to fight for just causes and for world peace.
Kingdom of God and Politics	Politics of the Our Father	<i>Participation in public life</i> . We are not private people doing some private good to people. Working for the common good.
Civilisation of Love	Establishing loving human relationships	<i>Transformation of culture</i> , knowing that it is culture that forms and maintains value systems; love as basis of all culture; evangelising the culture.
Sense of Belonging	Ownership of our properties	<i>Sharing responsibility through EPC</i> . Participating in the joys and sorrows of those we live with.
Lay Collaboration	Getting people to help us in our work	<i>Networking</i> with “anyone who has the needs of the young at heart” (GC26, 104). Being collaborators with Governments and NGOs, Salesian Family and people of other religions.
Prevention	Avoiding of evil; crowding out evil with good.	<i>Preventing social evils</i> . Pre-venire = to come before - to go before and lead by example; taking the first step in relationships.

8. Conclusion

We are preparing for the bicentenary of the birth of Don Bosco. Returning to him does not only consist in celebrations and study, but also in recapturing his adventurous spirit. For the sake of saving souls he would go to the extent of temerity! He started daring ministries for street kids, founded religious congregations in a hostile political climate, introduced a fresh system of education, sent missionaries when his congregation was still young and inexperienced, and put his trust in his young collaborators. The Challenge of Islam is a major one and Don Bosco would have given it a serious thought. The propitious time to respond to God's call and to take up the challenge is now. The hour to be significantly present among Muslim is upon us.

One fifth of the world's youth await us. We need not 'flood' the Muslim world with houses and services, but plan and intelligently establishing highly meaningful presences that will become beacons of our belief in the humanistic optimism of St. Francis of Sales who was sent by God among the Calvinists on a seemingly futile mission!

Looking outward could be a cure for internal inertia. Every time the Church stagnated in some way, what rejuvenated her have been the arrival of daring saints, starting of new forms of religious life and grand new missionary thrusts. As vocations go down, and we become tired and bored with a certain meaninglessness of our lives, what can rejuvenate our congregation and family, will be certainly our holy lives, but also a grand new missionary thrust. It gives us a large space to experiment, a new challenge to face and an opportunity to break free of the box within which we functioned for long. Islam and its vast youth population in need of help, throw down a gauntlet. More than a threat, this is an opportunity for the daring disciples of Christ.

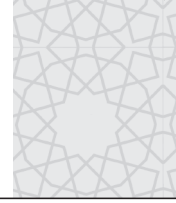
Muslims definitely need a radical witness of the Gospel which alone will make the Catholic faith a leaven in the dough among Muslims, a seed hidden in the earth. But the salt must not lose its saltiness, nor the leaven its strength or the seed its vigour. If these are in good health, the effect is certain. They will eventually produce the desired fruits. While the sower goes to sleep the seed sprouts and grows by the power of God!

Let us conclude recalling to our minds that we are a blessed people and that we have to be a blessing for others. But it is not the blessedness of this world, conceived in terms of power, money, pleasure and comfort. It is the blessedness of the *beatitudes*. The Lord calls us, Salesians and members of the Salesian Family, to be:

1. *Poor in spirit*, namely to *metanoia*, to be consciously a servant, in need, because that is the way to win the Kingdom.
2. *Meek*, namely, to be unaggressive and gentle even in the face of provocation, certain of the power of the Gospel that we carry in our hearts. Bravado and violence in any form can only generate violence. An eye for an eye will leave the whole world blind, as Gandhi would say. It is the gentle who will inherit the love of the nations.
3. *Mourners*, namely those who can voluntarily expose themselves to risk and suffering when it is necessary. Without this we cannot find laughter.
4. Those who hunger for justice, namely those who passionately fight for justice and equality with the arms of faith, hope and charity. The Lord will satisfy this hunger in his own way and in his own time.
5. *Merciful*, namely those who can see from the others' point of view and sympathetically understand their fears and anxieties, and empathise with them in their own struggles. We will receive mercy, sympathy and empathy.
6. *Pure of heart*, namely to be totally transparent, not to have hidden agenda, because only in this way can we see God and make His true face visible to others.
7. *Peace makers*, namely those who can put up a fight for peace, not injuring others, but facing squarely the consequences of this fight; God faced the consequences of his attempt to re-establish his covenant with his people. This shows them to be his own children.

To be calm and strong even in the face of persecution just because we are the ambassadors of Christ, because the Kingdom of God has always flourished against the current.





A Response to Maria Arokiam Kanaga

Sr. Nadia Aidjian FMA

Today, Islam is present in many countries and in many social settings. The mass media circulate non-stop news often about painful realities ... We cannot ignore this reality, even if, the story is not new. Today, Don Bosco and Mary Mazzarello would look with the heart at the children and young Muslims, who are often victims of people's madness. Then, we heard, why not consider doing something with the whole Salesian Family?

A presence

Fr. Kanaga confirmed it: our PRESENCE among Muslims should not be a marginal or hesitant presence, but indispensable and enthusiastic, because it is a presence among young people who make up more than 40% of the Islamic world. And where the young are, there is Don Bosco! A presence among the poor, affected by economic difficulties, lack of schools, education, culture or spirituality.

- A vital presence, made of dialogue and respect, prudence and solidarity, humility and invitation to recognise the differences. This requires from us a knowledge of Islam, of Muslim history and culture, to speak or act with discernment and, above all, clear convictions about our Christian identity. You cannot put on the same level: the Qur'an and the Gospel!

- A presence among the Muslims is also an invitation to look at what is beautiful, great, true in the other and to love others as God loves them so as to build together a more fraternal and just world because we are all children of the same God the Father.

- A presence, not of fear but of friendship, a presence of incarnation, which surpasses all divisions, violence, terrorism, wars to be with those who suffer, with those who wait and seek, with all the men of good will, signs and bearers of the one God's love. In fact, I believe in the dialogue of life, in 'working together' rather than in a theological dialogue. This is confirmed by



all those who live in contact with Muslims. Of course, the PRESENCE can be experienced differently according to the reality. I take examples from the experiences of Tunisia and France. Two very different realities!

The FMA presence in our school environment in Tunisia today

Our French FMA Province, from its foundation (more than one hundred years ago), includes Tunisia and once upon a time even Algeria. In Tunisia, since 1875, our sisters, especially in schools, used to welcome Christian students. Then, after Independence in 1956, at the request of the Church, we continued the educational work among young Muslims. Today, two FMA international communities are present in Tunisia. One community of SDB has the responsibility also of a school. We cannot forget the violent death of thirty-four year old Father Marek Rybinski, on 18th February 2011. **There we are strangers in the midst of Muslim believers.**

Muslims in our schools in France

France has received a significant number of Muslim immigrants from North Africa for nearly fifty years. Today, there are also immigrants from other nations. Muslims in France today are almost six million from which 2 million say they are believers and committed. The integration into French society is not always easy, for several reasons. Racism, unemployment, violence, insecurity, fear ... intertwine and create very painful situations and ghettos are formed in the neighbourhoods with strong Muslim population. Therefore, many parents choose for their children the Catholic school. There are also schools with a majority of Muslim students with a specific educational project. To answer all the questions, the Catholic school in France has published the documents entitled: "Muslims in Catholic schools".

In France, they are the foreigners, in a society which is secularised, multicultural, multireligious, and antireligious.

Of course, if the way to place ourselves in these two realities, for us

FMA and SDB, there is only one way to live our Salesian religious consecration and the Preventive System with the laity, even if they are Muslim-majority, as in Tunisia. The Salesian pedagogy is linked up at all times with all religions. It is the miracle of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello. Today, more than ever, in countries which has a high percentage of Muslim population, it is important to work together to undertake social initiatives, protect the environment, develop networks for health, communication, culture, science, human rights ... to build together, **but above all to develop the education of children and young people.**

- **Salesian education in Muslim environment**

In Muslim circles, when we take care of their children, we are always well received. Echoing the intervention of Fr. Kanaga, and referring to my life experiences, I enumerate some aspects that seem important to me:

- **Being an ecclesial presence, a “Eucharistic” presence for our life together, a witness of fraternal love, “See how they love one another”, and of prayer.**

TUNISIA

When, in 1985, the Bishop of Tunis asked us to take responsibility of a school in Menzel Bourguiba, to take over an institution that could no longer continue, he took us to visit this school. Sr. Ilka Perillier, then visiting mother, came with us. After making the tour of the house, we stopped in the chapel. And the aging sister superior beg Sr. Ilka: “Mother, if the FMA do not send some sisters to this school, this lamp will be extinguished forever. There will be no ecclesial presence in this territory of Menzel Bourguiba”! These words deeply moved the heart of the visiting mother. Back in Rome, Sr Ilka presented the request to the General Council, and a new international community in Tunisia was opened.

The two communities of Tunis and Menzel Bourguiba live today at the service of children and young Tunisians through the implicit proclamation of the Gospel which passes through the witness and the gift of their whole being. “You are women of prayer”, is how the Tunisians call the sisters. They respect the time of their prayers in the chapel. For them, prayer is the priority, and God is always present in every day’s life. In a way, it is easy

to educate both children and young people to interiority, to spirituality. Even in France religious life has a meaning for Muslims. The other day, a Muslim woman, speaking to one of our sisters on the street, said: “You are women of peace”.

- **Living the Preventive System with young people and adults and train Muslim educators to Salesian pedagogy.**

Reason - Religion - Loving Kindness - as Fr. Kanaga explained very well, are riches that make miracles. When the Salesian pedagogy is explained and experienced in all its dimensions, it is well received and works wonders in all countries and also in the hearts of Muslims. “Living together” in a family spirit, in simplicity of relationships, in trust, in joy be it in celebration or at work, are aspects of the Salesian pedagogy that touch a lot and meet the aspirations of their hearts. The boys and girls of state that “at school we are at home. We are a family”. Taking care of young people, from the smallest to the oldest is also a feature that fully responds to the character of young Tunisians. They feel ‘proud’ when responsibility is assigned to them.

I experienced one of my greatest joys during a trip to Tunisia, with all the leading staff of our French SDB and FMA schools. The teachers of Menzel Bourguiba presented their educational project with great simplicity and freedom, and explained how they lived the pedagogy of Don Bosco. Discovering that the educational method of Don Bosco was lived in Muslim lands was a revelation to all the French! Of course, on that day, the sense of belonging to the Salesian Family grew!

Even in France, the Muslim staff members participate enthusiastically in Salesian formation meetings. Don Bosco unites and creates fraternity. Allowing to speak of God and living Love without mentioning Jesus and his Gospel.

- **Welcome with Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello’s heart**

FRANCE

When the parents came to apply for registration of their children in our school, I asked them their motivations, without looking at their religious affiliation. “Why choose a Catholic school in which God is spoken of and

try to live the Gospel?” The response of Muslim parents was usually the same: “Because here, there are no differences among the children, whatever their religion or their social or cultural origin. Here, our children feel loved. Here, they speak of God and prayer, and if our children want to integrate into French society, they must know the Christian culture”.

TUNISIA

Several times, the mothers repeated to the sisters: “When our daughters are with you, we are at peace, because with you they are happy and feel loved. You put God in the hearts of our children”.

- **Joining with moderate Muslims to live fraternity without fear.**

TUNISIA

The day after the September 11, 2001, Tunisia has experienced a period of upheaval. In the school, the atmosphere was tense. The mayor of Menzel Bourguiba wanted to protect our schools and the sisters, sending policemen every night and during the day to guard the house. When I went to see him to thank him for taking care of our sisters, he replied: “You do not have to thank me because your sisters are also our sisters. They do so much for our children. And we love them so much. They need no fear any danger”.

FRANCE

In France, the film “Of God’s and Men” has touched a lot the hearts and spirit of the people, showing the truth of brotherly love among men so different, even to the giving of oneself to death. As a result, encounters between Christians and Muslims have given the opportunity of constructive exchanges on the subject, which have enabled one like others to get out of their prejudices and their fears. Everyone agrees to respect each other without trying to convert them.

Two points are very important:

- * Do not leave a community of brothers or sisters too isolated. In the same nation, think of at least two communities.
- * It is also essential, especially in Muslim countries, working with other members of the local Church: priests, other religious institutes, lay Christians.

- **Attention to times of sharing joy and suffering.**

The Muslim Feast are moments of sharing of sweets, gifts ... I saw Muslim women taking bunches of flowers for the Sisters' chapel for Christmas. These attentions must be reciprocal. Students celebrate with the sisters and teachers and with the help of some parents, the Gratitude Feast or New Year's party. What rich and happy moments! Music, singing, traditional or modern dancing, colours, party dresses ... give the party the nuances of the Salesian joy! It is important to be able to share with families these privileged days which help to create bonds of friendship, mutual recognition, and to bring down the cultural or religious barriers.

TUNISIA

I'll dwell on an event that impressed me very much: April 2, 2005, I was in the community of Menzel Bourguiba. At 21:40, when the TV announced Pope John Paul II' death, the phone rang. What a surprise to hear a teacher, then another, and another, and then the parents of the school children ... all saying that they shared our pain! The next morning, many students arriving to school with their parents approached the sisters to offer their condolences. Discreetly, a parent stood before a sister, the school's principal, and gave her a parcel saying, "Here, for you, for your prayer room. Pray for the good Pope". There were three candles ... During evening prayer, in community, we prayed for the Pope in the light of the three candles offered by a Muslim. John Paul II somehow turned on the light of peace in the heart of our Tunisian friends.

- **Attention to the quality of vocational training.**

To enter into adult life and find a place in society, young people need 'to be recognised,' because for them, social life is not easy (unemployment, racism, marginalisation). Only their professional skills and qualities of heart and intelligence, together with the taste of a job well done and commitment, will allow them to find a job in order to become 'good citizens' and take part in the social and cultural life of their country. For this reason, our centres, our schools must have high standards. We must also attract the attention of government authorities and cooperate with them as much as you can. In France, we are developing this kind of skills training and apprenticeship centres, sheltering a large number of young migrants.

- **Support women in their expectations of recognition.**

In some Muslim majority countries, the woman's dignity is not always recognised. Even today forced marriages, exploitation and humiliation exist. As FMA, we cannot be silent. Only a solid professional training, education to life, life as wives and mothers, and particularly to the education of children will give Muslim women their place and prepare a more just society, respectful of human rights.

- **Our Muslim brothers and sisters can, unbeknownst to them, reveal Jesus**

For many years, for one month during summer, a group of French young people went to Tunisia to animate a youth centre for young people who are on the streets. This time was a time of discovering another culture, another religion, but also an internship of working together. I tell you here an episode that years ago, made me reflect a lot.

After a hot day, the French animators accompanied the children to their homes. A great joy for everyone! It was one way to discover the living conditions of the family ... One evening, we accompanied Mounira, the girl whom one of the sisters had seen looking in a pile of rubbish for something to eat for her little brothers and sisters. The mother used to prepare the bread and bake it in a stone oven. After the children went to sell it in the streets ... It was the only means of supporting the family. The mother did not speak French and we did not speak Arabic! Her eyes spoke a lot! With a big smile, her mother gave us two loaves of bread, two 'tabouna'. The widow's offering! We could not refuse!

Every evening, the Salesian priest who accompanied us celebrated the Eucharist. That evening, one of the young people proposed to celebrate with those two round loaves. All gathered around the altar, listening to the song of the muezzin calling to prayer, the priest pronounced the words of blessing and consecration over the poor widow's bread. And the bread became the Body of Christ broken and shared on the land of Islam!

After the good night, before going to bed, a girl approached me and confided as a secret: "You know, up until now, I could not believe that Christ could be present in a host. Tonight, when the priest in his hands the bread of Mounira's mother and said, 'This is my body' I was enlightened by a

force of inner faith that removed all doubt. I believed in Jesus present in the Eucharist and among us.

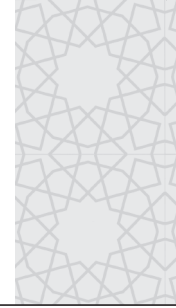
Arriving in Heaven, Mounira's mother must have discovered how her gift gave birth to belief in the heart of a young French woman. The poor evangelise us! Speak to us about and give us Jesus!

In France there is fear to the rise of Islam. Reading some books, I was struck by what Christian Delorme, a priest who works hard for Muslim-Christian dialogue in the Maghreb districts of Lyon wrote. "Islam which is found in France is not a threat to society. Rather, it brings the values of hospitality and peace, which are the heart of its spiritual life" (*L'Islam que j'aime, l'Islam qui m'inquiète* - Bayard 2012).

It is true; the events of the so-called 'Arab Spring' are disturbing! Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, today Syria ... The arrival of the Islamists in power leaves us expectant. Fear of fundamentalism, fear of seeing "the spring turned into fall." Nevertheless, Bishop Georges Casmoussa, Archbishop of Mosul-Iraq, said he was confident of the future of the Church in Arab countries, because young Christians are numerous and dynamic. In the midst of war and suffering, they built towns, published newspapers and books, seminaries are open. They live in hope. Where Christians are, there is real dynamism.

In Lebanon, after fifteen years of civil war, the younger generations are not afraid to confront the Muslims. Christians have become 'indispensable' for the country's future. At the Synod of the Eastern Churches in Rome in October 2010, Mohammed As-Sammak, representing the mufti (Sunni) of the Lebanese Republic said: "To live my 'Arabness' I need the Christians". And many Muslims confirm it: without Christians, the country would lose its freedom and most of his wealth.

translated from the original text in French



Emerging Perspectives during these Study Days in view of a Renewed Missionary Praxis

Sr. Runita Borja FMA & Fr. Piergiorgio Gianazza SDB

Introduction

The aim of these days is not that of conducting a course in Islam nor is it of offering practical solutions and easy prescriptions to face different pastoral situations; rather, it is meant to stimulate personal reflection and dialogue in community in view of gaining prophetic insights and a deeper commitment in concrete situations that are often similar but at the same time different. This is especially true for the necessary basic distinction (of opportunities, challenges, themes, operational strategies, etc.) among those who work in predominantly Muslim areas and those who work in regions of recent (or almost recent) Muslim presence.

1. Spirituality and motivations

We are present in Islamic contexts because Jesus has sent His disciples unto the ends of the earth. We witness to His presence by showing God's universal love. Love seeks to be near to the beloved, like what God has done in the Incarnation. Therefore we are present in these contexts as authentic children of God, following the example of Jesus who did not come to create a 'religion' of precepts and norms, but to love people up to the point of offering His own life.

As Christians, what more are we called to offer? It is something that is totally out of the ordinary to the Muslim worldview: an absolute gift, that is, a love up to the point of offering our life for others. This love encompasses forgiveness, acceptance and love for all, even of one's enemies. We imitate Jesus who came so that "ALL may have life and have



it to the full” (cf. Jn 10:10). Therefore, for Jesus and for us, the human person is at the centre.

Called in a special way to discipleship, Don Bosco has learned from Jesus to have a pastoral heart for all young people of the whole world. With Don Bosco we are invited to realise our Salesian and missionary vocation in one of the most difficult educative-pastoral contexts in the world.

We are called to become ‘priestly mediators’, to be ‘Eucharistic presence’, presenting to God the prayers and aspirations of our Muslim brothers and sisters. We are to be contemplative spirits (even in action) that rely more on ‘being’ than on ‘doing’ and ‘being successful’. We shall then become living gospels. We shall be a tree on which they can build their nests.

Our witnessing must be given above all as community, more than as individual persons.

To be men and women of God is the most beautiful gift we can offer to our neighbours.

2. Dialogue as the privileged way of our presence and approach

Today the way of dialogue and of education to dialogue is a necessity at all levels. This is totally in line with our Salesian charism. Therefore, education to dialogue should be taken care of, whether it be for adults (FMA, SDB, lay collaborators of whatever faith affiliation) or for young people. Our capacity to educate the young to become persons of dialogue is a good measure for evaluating the effectiveness of our pastoral work. It will be one of the greatest services to society and to the future.

The following are the fundamental elements of dialogue according to Pope Benedict XVI: 1) The starting point: recognising objectively the different theological and anthropological views; 2) The method: listening to one another without prejudices, with mutual esteem and respect; 3) The basic attitude: a sincere desire to come to know and to understand each other; 4) The aim: to offer the men and women of our time a genuine service of peace, of reconciliation aware that the name of God can only be a name of peace and brotherhood, justice and love.

This dialogue happens above all in everyday life. In this way, common values do not remain as abstract generalisations; rather, they become the fruit of a sincere and serious common reflection on the events of our shared history.

To promote deeper personal relationships is the key to dialogue. This opens us to new perspectives and makes us closer as 'believers'. Thanks to such personal relationships, distances are bridged, barriers crumble, common spiritual, moral and religious values emerge, and we come to recognise our shared humanity. This should not be considered as a mere strategy; rather, it is an expression of our fidelity to Christ, man-for-all, a universal person. One of the good ways of establishing personal relationships is that of sharing the events of our everyday life. This enables our relationships to go beyond functional rapport, as what happens between an employer and an employee.

When we dialogue, we come in sincerity and truth. Therefore, it is essential to know, to be clear and firm on non-negotiable points of our Christian faith, particularly the truths that we profess in the Creed. In fact, dialogue does not mean negotiation, bargaining, mutual concession for the sake of peace, or silence on points of differences. Today one of the recurring reflections is that true dialogue requires that both sides are clear of their own identity since dialogue must be done in truth and in complete openness and trust. When this is present, dialogue can become the place where the Spirit will speak to us and make us grow in our faith. Our Muslim brothers and sisters may become dialogue partners that are open to the values preached and lived by Jesus, according to our Christian vision. On our part as Christians, as we listen to them, we can clarify and also correct our vision of Islam. This can lead to a mutual enlightenment, overcoming prejudices and stereotypes on both sides.

2.1. The exercise of dialogue

In view of deeper sharing, it is suitable to use parallel texts of the Qur'an and the New Testament, as regards common doctrine and human behaviour. This calls for wisdom and prudence so as not to fall into the trap of easy concurrence which is both insincere and far from the truth.

It is necessary to learn the art of helping our interlocutors (Christians or Muslims) to come up with questions, to know how to recognise these

questions (even those that are not expressed) and to give them space so that, through discernment, our interlocutors themselves may be able to find in the depths of their hearts the response to these questions. As dialogue becomes praxis in daily life, our Muslim brothers and sisters may be inspired to re-read their texts from a new perspective. Perseverance in dialogue, especially at higher levels, will help to open ways towards the recognition of the right to religious freedom as it is expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Of course this calls for patience to await God's time, entrusting ourselves to the Holy Spirit and knowing by faith that the Kingdom of God is already present but is also eschatological. It is not up to us to determine the times and the ways of God. We sow the seeds, but it is God who makes them grow (cf. 1 Cor 3,7). What is asked of us is to be involved starting from the reality of everyday life. Hope is a fundamental theological virtue for those whose mission is in an Islamic context. But we are assured of that "hope which will not let us down, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (Romans 5:5).

2.2. Dialogue and proclamation

In regions or areas where there is religious freedom, it is necessary to have the courage to propose a journey to know Christ that could lead to Baptism and discipleship, using wisdom and discernment according to the Gospel. Jesus Christ has given this mission to all His disciples. It is universal since the call and Jesus Christ's teachings are addressed to all peoples and all times (cf. Mt 28:18-20). Instead, in areas where religious freedom is threatened or even repressed, we accompany the journey of the people to live human values inspired by the Gospel. The Church assures us that this is already Baptism of desire that opens one to salvation: "we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22). It will be useful to know and to analyse the different journeys of conversion towards Jesus. This will keep alive our hope and enable us to learn valuable lessons in the accompaniment of others.

3. Adequate knowledge

Obviously, those who work in these contexts need to have adequate knowledge (deeper knowledge is even better) of Islam: what do they believe in, what are their practices, what do they say about Christianity and Christians.

For this necessary foundation we rely not only on reading good manuals and studies written by Christians who are experts in theory and praxis but also on original texts of Islam (Qur'an, hadith...), at least for those who have the necessary skills to do so.

We emphasise the importance of learning the language of the place, with its various nuances, terminologies, expressions and meaning, with both their ordinary and deeper senses. Certain words and expressions that seem to be the same may have different meanings according to the religious, social and cultural tradition ... Certain concepts and doctrines that may seem the same for Christians and Muslim may be totally different. For example, our concept of God, His characteristics and especially our relationship with God, our understanding of Jesus and of Mary are quite different. This requires due care so as not to stir up negative feelings, misunderstandings or misconceptions.

To this effect we try to go deeper in order to understand how Muslims see reality and history. This will enable us to cultivate empathy that leads us to be non-judgmental while remaining clear of our own stand and of a Christian understanding of history. As a general rule it is important to use clear, understandable and common language, especially when engaged in theological dialogue.

4. Formation

4.1. Specialised formation

Those who are sent in mission in Islamic contexts are to be adequately prepared. Those who are already working in these areas are encouraged to participate in available ongoing courses in loco. It is commendable that each Province, from time to time, sends a confrere/sister for further studies on Islam.

The Preventive System, understood in its totality of contents, methods, style and educative processes, has shown itself to be effective in the world of youth of whatever context or culture. The challenge today is to renew and inculturate it, using the values, language and other resources present in the context. An ideal framework of such re-interpretation and representation of the Preventive System in a Muslim context could be the one presented by Fr. Kanaga in his conference. We remain open to new horizons, mentality and structures.

At all levels and in our structures we give value to the feminine presence. This is a real challenge, opportunity and prophecy since in the Muslim vision and praxis, women still suffer a certain inferiority and inequality of rights. It is also our way of showing our esteem for Mary, the mother of Jesus. The Marian dimension is an essential element of the Salesian spirituality.

To live the 'Beatitudes', in a daily heroism constantly renewed, especially as a community, is always prophetic, attractive and challenging in whatever context, since it expresses a positive ideal that opens grand horizons, arouses admiration and stimulates imitation.

4.2. Formation of collaborators

It is important to have care of the formation of educators, starting from positive elements, without falling into relativism or ingenuity, remembering the recommendation and the example of Jesus: "to be cunning as snakes yet innocent as doves" (Mt 10,16).

It is absolutely necessary that our collaborators, of whatever faith, acquire an adequate knowledge and correct use of the Preventive System. We must keep present that in the triad "reason, religion, loving kindness", 'religion' for our non-Christian collaborators does not necessarily refer to 'Christianity', rather, it may refer to 'the religious sense or religiosity' that every person has (universal religious values). Therefore, in regions where any kind of evangelisation is expressly forbidden Don Bosco's expression "honest citizens and good Christians", which is the objective of education-evangelisation, is translated by Salesians into "honest citizens and good believers". On the other hand, we can educate Muslims to Christian values even without explicitly mentioning the name of Jesus. After all, the values preached and lived by Jesus are universal values.

4.3. Formation of Christians in this context

We distinguish between two kinds of context: those predominantly Muslim and those predominantly Christian.

In the first context (predominantly Muslim), there is to be a specific pastoral care for young Christians in our centres, cultivating a true ecumenical sense. In particular we help them to live with and to dialogue with Muslims, going beyond barriers and prejudices and purifying historical memories.

In the second context (predominantly Christian), the attention to Muslim immigrants should not lead to a neglect of the Christian immigrants and the youth of the place. To all of them we propose a holistic education starting from the recognition of the dignity of the human person.

It is important to promote a systematic, gradual and integral education to the faith for those who are Christians. It must support a faith that is understood and professed (catechesis), celebrated (liturgy), lived (moral) and prayed (everyday life). The Basic Christian Communities and the Small Christian Communities are suitable places for education to the faith. Parishes, oratories, youth centres and schools must be likewise.

5. Planning

In our works present in Islamic contexts, our programmes for initial formation, curriculum of studies and the style of pastoral work and experience should necessarily insert adequate plans in the study of Islam, interreligious dialogue and ecumenism

In determining assignments, a certain stability of place and of responsibilities must be assured so that the Sisters and confreres may gradually insert themselves in the Muslim world, its language and mentality and be able to undertake adequate educative-pastoral programmes.

The superiors are asked to be aware of the context in order to send the right person, considering also his/her curriculum vitae.

It is important to consolidate the Salesian communities in Muslim countries for greater efficacy and better witnessing. In particular, these factors must be taken into consideration: composition of the community as

regards quality and quantity, placement, possibly more than one house or community, type of work, etc.).

So far very few provinces have dedicated a specific section in the Educative Pastoral Plan on the education of Christians and Muslims (in general and separately). It is recommended that we plan, outline and include this theme in the Educative Pastoral Plan.

6. Communication, networking and collaboration

We who are present here must be the first to communicate to our confreres and Sisters our enthusiasm and gratitude to God who has called us to work in this frontier area for the missionary Church. In particular, we will involve and motivate the delegates and those who are responsible for Youth Ministry and Missions.

In this age it is no longer possible to live alone or independently. It is necessary to work together and to network. Our two congregations (FMA and SDB), with their worldwide scope, offer the possibility of networking in the field of migration between the countries of origin and those of arrival (cf. www.sdb.org/AGORA and the *Salesian digital library* [SDL]).

It is also necessary to work in collaboration with local ecclesial organisms, with other congregations, and with other organisms who work in the same field of interest.



Practical Proposals

PRACTICAL PROPOSALS - FMA

The FMA participants in the *Study Days on the Salesian presence among Muslims* have underlined a few points to keep in mind the continuity and deepening of the Study Days:

- To bring its voice in the Provincial Councils, Provincial Assemblies, Interprovincial Conferences;
- To raise awareness of the Provincial Superiors: that they be involved in giving a picture of the reality on the said theme;
- To grow in the knowledge of the reality of Islam at the European level;
- To enhance the presence of the Coordinator for the Mission ad/inter gentes as the significant 'voice' within the Council and Provincial Team;
- To take into account the reality and richness of the diocese, where they work with Muslim immigrants, and find ways to integrate themselves and collaborate therein;
- To incorporate the contents of the Study Days in the initial formation (in Turin, next year, young people from the Middle East will be arriving for their postulancy);
- To encourage the Sisters to become sensitised to the mission and the Islamic context through readings and meetings with witnesses (cf. Louis Massignon);
- To enhance local literature that helps dialogue with Muslims;
- To make known the phenomenon of migration and Islam as an emerging 'pastoral ministry';
- To organise other similar meetings;
- To plan meetings of FMA and SDB working in Europe and think on how to face the reality of Islam that migration brings;
- In preparation for the 23rd FMA General Chapter, to include the topic on Islam.



PRACTICAL PROPOSALS - SDB

These suggestions take into account the reality of each participant of the Study Days.

1. What can we bring into our provinces at the operational level?

- Educative Pastoral Project (PEPSI) and Directory of the Province: let the Provinces take into account the conclusions, let them draw up projects and give directions to the directory during the Provincial Chapter 2012-2013.
- Dedicate time in the Provinces to contextualise the conclusions of the Study Days.
- Take advantage of the next Provincial Chapter to talk about the issue of new frontiers.
- Seek ways to participate in the commission for Interreligious Dialogue of the Bishops Conferences (A sub-Saharan Africa ...) to be in direct contact with the experience and resources of the local Church, and also by sharing our experience.
- Organise similar meetings among the Provinces (as was already made the 'AFO-AFW in 2010).
- Collect everything that has been shared in the various groups, especially the good practices and facts, concrete inspirations.
- Give opportunity to the participants to share in the Provinces (council, directors, committee PG, local communities, retreats or quarterly).
- Have some young SDB specialise in dialogue with Muslims, who can guide the path of dialogue in the Provinces.
- Share the conclusions of these Study Days during the course of the new missionaries.
- At the local level invite local leaders and Muslim scholars to share with us.
- Integrate ministry among Muslims in youth ministry of the 30 provinces, It is important to work with Province youth ministry delegates and commissions.
- What importance do we give to the formation of missionary confreres? Emergencies create these situations. We should be more

informed about the possibilities of formation centres in the regions, countries - not only PISAI in Rome (e.g. Hyderabad-India...).

- Introduce 'an introduction to Islam' in the initial formation of the confreres.
- Aim at collecting of positive experiences that encourage, inspire or motivate the confreres for a Salesian presence among Muslims.
- The importance of the bulletin of missionary animation 'Cagliero 11': take advantage of it especially for the topic of our presence among Muslims. An special invitation to verbalise our example experiences of missionary life, good concrete practices.
- We must be careful not to just be 'politically correct' according to the expectations of the media to be 'prophetically correct' as Jesus wants.

2. How can we strengthen our work through networking (among the participants, among the Provinces, in the Congregation)?

- To ensure continuity of reflection on the presence of Muslims, we need a reference point.
- Attach to the documents of the Study Days also a personal record of the Salesians who work among Muslims (personal profile, specific evidence) to facilitate a further journey which bears fruit.
- Submit a more specific request: exchange of people and experiences, not just digital. (For examples or Project Europe our mission to / with migrants is in the pipeline. In this light, we need to have a platform for information (*see www.sdb.org / AGORA* – reserved area or the Salesian Digital Library SDL - open space).
- Exchange and possible regular meetings between the Provinces, neighbouring and more homogeneous zones.

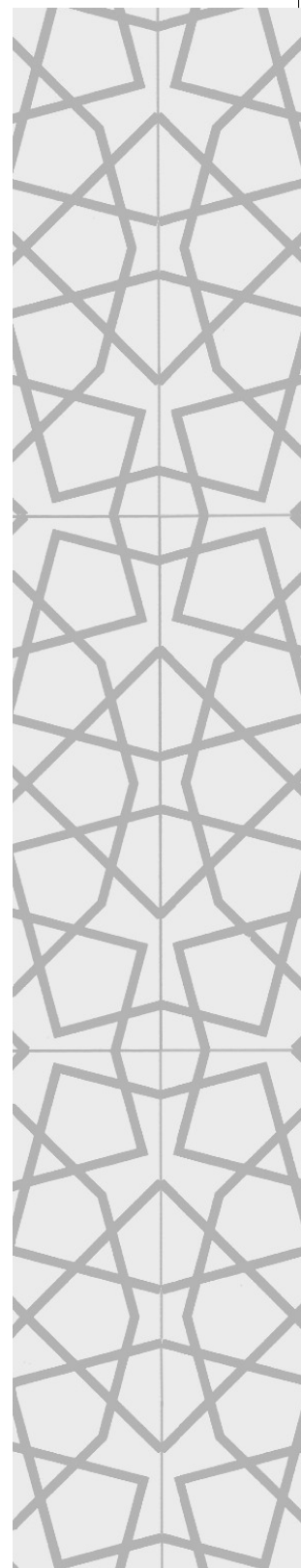
3. Varia - concrete suggestions for some Provinces

- AFW - Nigeria: Involve the confreres and the community in having experiences in zones of the North, where we are not present (only certain camps in summer).
- MOR - Don't just expect great fruits of our presence among Muslims. Sometimes we are limited in some cases only to have large number of baptisms, as the sole satisfaction of the mission.

- INK - Promote devotion to Mary and to the Saints (popular devotion) as a method for first evangelisation. An example of the Shrine in Bangalore, India.
- SLK - Azerbaijan: Necessity to send non-Slovak confreres for the inculturation of the Gospel and charism, to be more effective in pastoral work (languages, English).
- ITM - Indonesia: Important help Indonesians confreres to deepen their missionary zeal.
- FIS - Mindanao: These Study Days could help the confreres to be open to missionary work among Muslims (increase the present two communities with 9 confreres, only 10% of the Province).
- AFE - Delegation of Sudan: mentalise or sensiblise the Confreres of the South for the presence among Muslims in the Sudan (North).



Closing Remarks







Dialogue without Conditions

Sr. Alaíde Deretti FMA

At the end of this wonderful experience of mutual understanding, listening, sharing, reflection, desire to dialogue with our Muslim brothers and sisters, I would like to express my, our BIG thank you to all those who have helped us to put through these days. A special THANKS to all of you who from the beginning have accepted the invitation to participate, and you made yourselves available to experience this particular time of study and research. Then, I would like to say a particular thank you to the people who collaborated most closely, sharing the gift of their own life and the gift of their knowledge.

Thanks to the speakers: Fr. Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot, Prof. Francesco Zannini, Fr. Maurice Borrmans, Fr. Maria Arokiam Kanaga. Their experience, their words and their knowledge helped us to open the horizons of encounter, dialogue and acceptance. We were immersed in the Muslim world to know it more and prepare us to live in reciprocity, removing suspicions and fears, and grow in harmony and respect.

Thanks to Fr. Juan José Bartolomé who made us enjoy the Word every day, helping us to find in it the source of dialogue with the Lord and learn from him how to dialogue with our brothers and sisters. Thanks to those who guided us to receive the word of the speakers as a seed of hope and openness to the other, making us glimpse the possibility of living together in harmony and peace, strengthening that which unites us: Fr. Julio Palmieri, Sr. Ibtissam Kassis, Fr. Erando Vacca and Sr. Nadia Aidjian.

Thanks to our facilitators, Sr. Runita Borja and Fr. Piergiorgio Gianazza, who were ready to gather the challenges and opportunities emerging from our work every day, and guided us to discover some insights and emerging perspectives. The final synthesis will accompany us on this path of dialogue and closeness to the Muslim world.

My heartfelt thanks to Sr. Paola Pignatelli and Fr. Placido Labila who



‘photographed’ their reality, their presence among the Muslims and made us look with hope and trust, both the present and the future.

Thanks to Archbishop Savio Hon Tai-fai who is not with us today, but as Secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, in the meeting we had with him, he made us feel more Church; a Church reaching out to dialogue.

Thanks to Sr. Josephine Teruggi and Fr. Pietro Zago who, with wisdom, after the example of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello, gave us the ‘good night’. It was like ‘the word in the ear’ which, as the Salesian Family, we need to recover and believe in its strength.

And after this list ... not because they are less important, but because most important: our thanks to the Rector Major, Fr Pascual Chávez, and to our Mother, Sister Yvonne Reungoat, who were present through the Eucharistic Celebration and the initial greeting, encouraging, confirming our initiatives and inviting us to adopt the ways of dialogue with the world, with the situation and with the needs of our time, as congregations and as Church.

And now, a final word as a Church, taking a few thoughts from Blessed John Paul II:

“The Church regards with esteem the Muslims who along with us adore the one, merciful God”, convinced that their faith in the transcendent God contributes to the construction of a new human family, based on the highest aspirations of the human heart.

We Christians [today we, Salesian Family] joyfully recognise the religious values we have in common with Islam ... recognise the religious values we have in common with Islam. We believe in the same God, the one God, the living God, the God who created the world and brings his creatures to their perfection.

Great sign of hope [for all of us] is the interreligious dialogue that leads to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the other (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Message to Muslims at the end of Ramadan 1418/1998). The two traditions, Christian and Muslim, have a long history of study, philosophical and theological reflection, art, literature and science, which has left its footprints in the Eastern and Western cultures. The worship of the one God, Creator of all, encourages us to increase our mutual understanding in the future. In today’s world, tragically marked by

forgetfulness of God, Christians and Muslims are called to defend and promote always in a spirit of love, human dignity, moral values and freedom. The common pilgrimage towards eternity must be expressed through prayer, fasting and charity, but also in a joint commitment to peace and justice, human development and environmental protection. Walking together along the path of reconciliation and giving up, in humble submission to the divine will, to all forms of violence as a means of solving the differences, the two religions can offer a sign of hope, radiating in the world the wisdom and mercy of the one God who created and governs the human family". (cf. General Audience, May 5, 1999 - Dialogue with Islam)

I conclude with a small Sufi story: "The stranger came to Abraham and asked for hospitality.

The Friend of God asked on condition to abandon the idols and embraced Islam [Author's note: Islam means here the original and universal monotheism, from Abraham until the end of the world,]. The other went on his way finding that condition unbearable. Then God asked Abraham, "Are you wiser than me? It is seventy years that I nurture and take care of him without asking for anything in return and you impose conditions. "Abraham ran everywhere in search of the guest and when he found knelt down begging him to accept the hospitality without any conditions, telling him of the divine rebuke. The stranger said, "Truly your God is worthy to be worshiped". And he converted to Islam". (Paolo Dall'Oglio, *La sete di Ismaele. Siria, Diario Monastico Islamo-Cristiano. San Pietro in Cariano, Verona: Gabrielli Editori*, 2011).

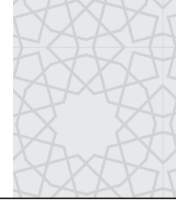
We continue on our journey and return to our daily lives, without imposing any condition to those who are close to us. We offer our hospitality, the hospitality that comes from the heart; let us offer it without setting any condition to enter into dialogue with our Muslim brothers and sisters.

The only condition to dialogue is the attitude of dialogue. With a more open heart and mind, let us go back to our reality from the perspective of dialogue, trusting and hoping that something new is being born. The call is only one: to respect people in their diversity. Be a witness to the Word with our life. Creating a world where peace and harmony are our daily language. "If we do not understand the language, we try to understand each other with love" (Raymond Lull, *Libro del Amigo y del Amado*).

We entrust to the intercession of the Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus, who is invoked with devotion, even by Muslims, the way to new horizons of dialogue, harmony, peaceful coexistence, and hospitality. From her, whom we invoke every day with the title 'Help of Christians', we implore the blessing upon the Salesian presence among the Muslims.

Mother of all humanity, pray for us!





Reasons of our Presence Among Muslims

Fr. Václav Klement SDB

Thanks to all those who contributed to the Study Days who have already been mentioned by Sr. Alaide as well as to all those whom we have forgotten, like the various translators of the presentation of our speakers in the three official languages (Italian, English and French). I would like to mention especially Fr. Vittorio Pozzo, who accompanied us during these last three years with his expertise and long experience in the field of Islamic studies. Without him we would not have been able to prepare so well for these Study Days.

The Study Days have brought us into the heart of the Church of Christ. By coincidence we were able to listen and dialogue with the newly appointed Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, former Dean of PISAI, Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot MCCJ and Secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, Archbishop Savio Hon Tai Fai, SDB. So we've been in contact with two Mission departments of the Catholic Church. Just yesterday we read the message from the Holy See to Muslims before the end of Ramadan, 2012, signed by Cardinal Tauran: *Educating young Christians and Muslims to justice and peace*. As educators of young Muslims and Christians in over thirty Provinces, we feel united with of Don Bosco by being in the heart of the Church today.

The reason, or motivation of our presence among Muslims.

No doubt you are among those who are committed in a more difficult field of mission. When I dialogue with a prospective missionary to ask him to consider the mission in China or in some countries where the majority are Muslims as a possible destination, I very rarely hear a positive response. Precisely today I give thanks to God for the availability of a Cameroonian lay Brother to be sent in Tunisia. Thank God we still have confreres who respond to the appeal of the Rector Major with admirable generosity.



The reason of our presence among young Muslims, was already outlined to us by the Rector Major in his homily this morning. He took up again the three points of his homily at the conclusion of the GC26 (2008). The three deep motivations of our mission are (1) the command of Jesus to go to the whole world and proclaim his Gospel to all nations (Mt 28, 18-20), (2) our faith in the Gospel which purifies, perfects and transforms all cultures without exception – hence, also the Islamic cultures, (3) the pastoral heart of Don Bosco which opens to young people around the world.

Yes, these reasons are valid for all contexts of the mission where the majority of young people are followers of the world's great religions, but in a special way these apply to our presence among Muslims. This is the fourth reason that I would like to share with you. The dialogue of life and the initial proclamation among Muslims is at the forefront of interreligious dialogue and of the inculturation of the Preventive System in different cultures and religions. I thank you from my heart for your daily witness in a very challenging educative and pastoral work.

I want to share some specific points that have not been highlighted:

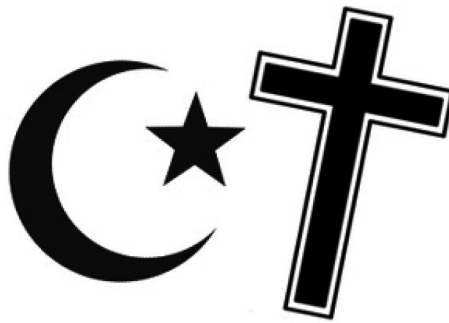
1. The overwhelming evidence of the importance of the Salesian community which lives its consecration and mission among Muslims. Yes, we need to strengthen our small communities and dream at least of a second community in Tunisia, Morocco or Turkey, or two more communities in Pakistan, Sudan or any other country where the challenges are greatest.
2. During these Study Days some of you have seen for the first time the film "Of Gods and men", an icon of the presence of the religious community among Muslims. Its most important message for us is the beautiful dialogue of life lived in Algeria and a real community discernment that touches the motivations of our presence.
3. Besides sharing our experiences during these Study Days with the Provincials and their Councils, obviously we are called to share our experiences also with the Delegate and youth ministry team of our Provinces. I hope that our enthusiasm and reflections may reach especially the pastoral animators.

And I end with a look into the future. The next 27th SDB General Chapter has as its theme **Witnesses to the radical approach of the Gospel**, as a response to the signs of the times, which makes us understand the lack

of credibility, visibility and coherence of our life and mission. The three icons of the Chapter is the invitation of the Rector Major to become more and more (1) mystics and seekers of God with all our heart, (2) authentic prophets especially through our fraternal life in communities, and (3) servants of the young especially the poorest in our mission as educators and pastors.

I hope that your courageous, patient, and genuine witness, deeply rooted in the missionary spirituality may help the whole Salesian Congregation to embark on the path specified in the letter of convocation GC27 (Letter of RM, AGC 413).

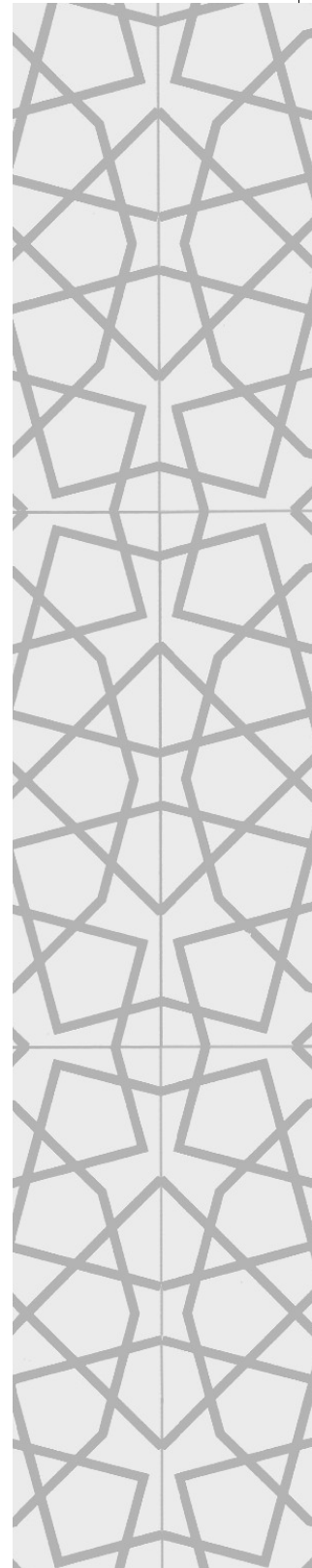
I commend the whole journey to Mary Help of Christians and Mother of all the children of God who inspires, guides and protects us every day.

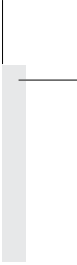




The Study Days in the Light of the Word of God

*Every session opened with a lectio divina
by Fr. Juan José Bartolomé SDB*





An Introduction to Lectio Divina

Fr. Juan José Bartolomé SDB*



*“The ‘door of faith’ (Acts 14:27) is always open for us, ushering us into the **life of communion with God** and offering **entry into his Church**. It is possible to cross that threshold when the word of God is proclaimed and the heart allows itself to be shaped by transforming grace. To enter through that door is to set out on a journey that lasts a lifetime” (Benedict XVI).*

In times of the new evangelisation, like the present, we do not have too many models that serves as inspiration for a renewed missionary activity and there are also few methods and perhaps even motivations that give us the momentum for this task. Today we hear a lot about how to do evangelisation but lesser about those who must carry it out; it seems that problems focus on “the ardour, the method, the expressions” of new evangelization, when, in fact, the **crucial question** continues to be that of the evangelisers, whether or not they are sufficiently evangelised.

To remember the Apostle Paul may be a journey of apostolic recovery. The choice of Paul as stimulus and an inspiration to evangelisers is more than justified. The Christian community, which has always had a gospel to proclaim, Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor 2,2), considered **Paul as the Apostle** par excellence.

It must be noted, as well, that on the level of his personal experiences Paul becomes our contemporary, the most contemporary among the first witnesses of the Lord Jesus. Like all of us, Paul was not personally invited by Jesus to follow him, nor was he beside him in Galilee as he preached the

* Biblist, author of many books and president of the Salesian Biblical Association.

kingdom of God, nor was he 'educated' on the road to Jerusalem. Like all of us, Paul was not present at the death of Jesus on the cross, nor was he found among the first witnesses of his resurrection on the third day. Like all of us, Paul, was born to the faith in an abnormal time and manner, 'like an abortion' (1 Cor 15,8), and although he proclaimed to be 'the least of the apostles' (1 Cor 15,9), he clearly acknowledged that he "laboured more abundantly than all of them"; grace in him had not been vain. In fact, "by God's grace I am what I am" (1 Cor 15,10).

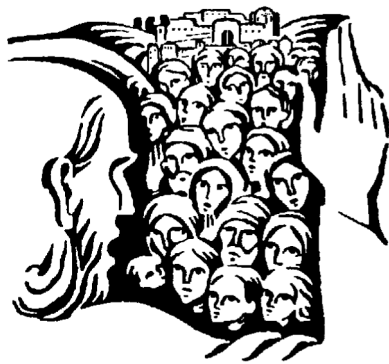
If the grace of God, not his ability or his relentless dedication, has made him the apostle, his action is within our reach. As fruit of grace, the evangeliser should not bear witness to anything but that grace: an **evangelisation through witness** requires the evangeliser to become a living embodiment of what one announces, having the audacity to present oneself as a clear model of the gospel one preaches.

To place our work during these Study Days under the Word of God, leaving it to enlighten and guide our reflection, we will let the four essential elements to the apostolic existence of Paul, the source of our prayerful reading:

- the **grace of the encounter with the risen Jesus** as the *cause and beginning* of his ministry (Gal 1,13-17),
- the **awareness of being sent**, as *unavoidable consequence* (1 Cor 1,4-9),
- **prayer for his own and the praise to God**, as the first *apostolic work* (Phil 3,4-16),
- **Christian freedom and the weakest brethren**, as gift and limitation of Christian work (1 Cor 8,1-13).

‘To Reveal his Son to Me’, Source and Cause of Paul’s Mission

Lectio on Gal 1,13-17



Writing to the Galatians, 20 years after his conversion, Paul recalls, still one more time, his ‘conversion’ on the way to Damascus. But now he does not recount his reminiscences as a boast but as an argument. And he is not speaking to his neophytes (as in Philippians 3, 6-1), but to “foolish

men” who are ‘hastily’ abandoning the grace of Christ and passing over to another gospel (Gal 3,1; 1,6).

Unlike Philippians 3, which focuses on the subjective meaning of the fall, Gal 1 uncovers a new data, more objective and fundamental: God was the author of his change of life. This conversion does not consist in a change of behaviour, not even in a change in one’s belief, but in an authentic revelation that has a precise aim: (God) was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach (announce) him among the Gentiles (Gal 1, 16). Paul became an apostle at the very moment God made him a Christian.

The event, confirmed by the author of the Acts (9, 18-20: *And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptised, and took food and was strengthened. For several days he was with the disciples at Damascus. And in the synagogues immediately he proclaimed Jesus, saying, ‘He is the Son of God’*) is so decisive for Paul that when he recounts the fall he gives more importance to his change of work / vocation (from persecutor to missionary) than to the unexpected intervention of God in his life (Gal 1, 15-16).

1. Understand the text

Founded a little before by the apostle (Acts 16, 6; 18, 23), the communities of Galatia had received him “as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus” (Gal 4, 14) and had believed his preaching receiving the Spirit and accompanied by miracles (Gal 3, 2. 5). Unfortunately, the first fervour did not last long (Gal 1, 6): the visit of some preachers who presented “another gospel” (Gal 1, 7) questioned the truth of the gospel preached by Paul and, even, to the point of doubting his legitimacy as an apostle. The ‘Galatian crisis’ unleashed in Paul the most unpleasant and immeasurable reaction ever recounted in all his epistles (Gal 7-9; 4, 17-20; 5, 7-12; 6, 12-14).

The Immediate context

To defend his ministry, therefore, Paul presented himself as “an apostle – not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father” (Gal 1, 1); and in defence of the gospel preached in Galatia he does not hesitate to affirm “I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal 1, 12). The apostle could bring as proof the facts which the Galatians knew very well (Gal 1, 13. 22): what – and how he says it – focuses their attention on a matter which is decisive for Paul: God is the initiator of his apostolate; the Son of God is the only subject of his preaching (cfr. Gal 1, 11-12); consequently, he felt sent to the Gentiles. What he declares, and the emphatic way he does it, shows as much his apostolic independence from men or churches as the divine origin of his preaching.

The text

To give force to both assertions, he starts narrating things that had happened *before* and *after* the encounter with the Risen Lord, without going into chronological details of the event. It is the way he does also in Philippians 3: he distinguishes well his pre-Christian period from the first steps he took after his acceptance of Jesus as the Lord, and his past life as a merciless persecutor (Gal 1, 13-14) from his present life as an untiring missionary (Gal 1, 15-24).

Both parts of the account are credible, but on the whole they are centred

on his “ways of behaving” as a Jew and as a Christian. The apostle presents the fact without embellishing them or seeking any sympathy from his listeners. From wishing nothing but the destruction of the Church before, he is now completely dedicated to its diffusion. More than as a conversion, Paul tends to think about it as a change of activity: from being a furious persecutor to being a straightforward (immediate) propagator.

Paul does not seem to be ashamed of his past, when, as a well-known apostle by now, he speaks of it to the Galatians. He need not regret his having been an observant Jew, a zealous promoter of the traditions of his people and being intransigent with those who are not observant. Never did he show embarrassment or guilt. Precisely because of this, the stand he takes will be more sincere and authoritative: to inherit a faith and traditions which do not lead to Christ is useless, and is not worthy of ‘his’ life.

¹³For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it; ¹⁴and I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers

I point out to the readers, Paul does not hide his past, which was well known to his listeners. Rather, and to focus on what he will say later, he mentions the Jewish period of his life – almost half his life – culminating in a ruthless persecution directed towards the community of Jerusalem. He seems to avow he had done nothing else than this from his youth up, as Luke recounts in the Acts (7, 59; 8, 1; 22, 20; 26, 10). In fact, he is the only one among the first persecutors of the church ever mentioned by name: “*But Saul laid waste the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison*” (Acts 8, 3).

Not even here Paul discloses the reasons for such a brutal anti-Christian behaviour. He does not feel the need to justify it. He just let this affirmation – his decision (*to destroy the church of God*), the efficacy of his action (*excelling above many of my own age*), and the more personal motive (*passionate zeal for the traditions of the fathers*). If he persecuted fiercely the followers of Christ it was not because he was thirsty for blood or evil, but because, being a convinced observer, he could not bear defections or deviations from the traditional faith. And it was God himself who freed him from this extreme fidelity to the law.

¹⁵But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased ¹⁶to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, ¹⁷I did not confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia; and again I returned to Damascus.

Neither in the Pauline epistles nor even in the whole of the N.T. do we find a description of the fall at Damascus that can excel or is comparable with this biographical sketch. Not even the three long accounts found in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 9, 1-25; 22, 1-24; 26, 1-32). Precisely for this it appears somewhat foolish that Paul puts into more limelight **what he did** 'immediately' after being called, *to go away into Arabia and return to Damascus*, than **what God had done to him**, *choosing him, calling him, showing him his Son and converting him to be his apostle*.

If not more, at the level of syntax, **the accent falls more on the consequences**, *the immediate evangelisation*, rather than on the same fact, *the benevolence of God* that made him know Jesus as his Son. Paul does not present himself as an active subject, but as the beneficiary of an intervention, as much gratuitous as unexpected, of God *in* him. If the action (acting) of God is something objective, it comes from outside one's self, the actualisation takes place within one's intimacy, and becomes an entirely private experience: it can be documented only through the results it produces. Paul proposes it as *one experiencing God* whom he now knows as the Father of the Risen one, or better, as one, being given on the part of God, to know – revealed in a definite way – God's Fatherhood of Jesus. To this knowledge 'taught' by God – he did not arrive through his own capacity or by his fidelity, but it has been given by Him. This is **the motivation of his immediate apostolate**: God has acted in him in an unforeseen way, and he has at once worked among the Gentiles. God is identified with the Father of Jesus and Paul saw himself as the one sent by Him among the Gentiles.

Paul did not become a less evil man, nor a more convinced and zealous Jew. In him there was no change of conduct or the abandonment of the Jewish faith. God has given him a new 'knowledge': he came to know the true identity of God (Father of Jesus) and in that he found the true identity of Jesus (Son of God). And this knowledge, so novel that it became definitive ('apocalyptic', as he called it), he experienced it as a divine

benevolence toward him. He sees it as *the call which fills God with satisfaction and complacency*. God felt good when He called him and revealed to him as being the Father of Jesus. The encounter with the Risen Lord – Paul recalls to the Galatians – is realised as conversion, it was a **double** and a simultaneous **(re)learning**: to know that the God of Israel was in fact the Father of Jesus (Gal 1, 16), and to be aware of himself as the one sent by Him to preach to the Gentiles (Gal 1, 17).

Such confession, important to understand the event of his fall, is preceded by two clauses, participles in the original, which integrate the concept of God Paul had received: He is “*The one who had set me apart before I was born*” and “*The one who had called me through his grace*” (Gal 1, 15). To choose, setting him *apart* for himself, even before he was born and to call him to life from his mother’s womb are expressions that are used to describe the vocation of the prophets (Jer 1, 5; Is 49, 1); Paul considers them as appropriate to describe his own experience and, therefore, he too presents himself as prophet, chosen by God. More than that, he recognises now (while writing to the Galatians), that God had always, even before he was born, chosen and destined him to be the evangeliser of the Gentiles; calling him to life, He chose him for the apostolate.

His whole life, including the long period as a zealous Jew and a merciless persecutor, had been under God’s benevolence and destined for evangelisation. He gave an account of it, it is true, only when he knew Christ, when he felt sent to evangelise the Gentiles. Discovery of Jesus the Son of God *in* himself and discovery of his being sent by God are the two consequences wrought by divine benevolence.

God being pleased with Paul, ‘educates’ him to gratuitousness in the mission, freeing him from the service of the law in order to serve the Lord Jesus, the Son of God. Since his life as a persecutor did not hinder God to make him become ‘the apostle of the Gentiles’ (Rm 11, 13), Paul understood that from now on his life would not have any other duty or any other meaning than to announce Christ, and him crucified (1 Cor 2, 2): “For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Cor 9, 16).

2. Enlighten life

The 'conversion' of Paul, beyond that of a sudden change of 'work' (from a persecutor to propagator), was *first & foremost and in itself (per se) an experience of God*. Paul's apostolic consciousness was born from, and was rooted in, that experience.

Is there behind my vocation a previous and unmerited personal experience of God? Could I too 'justify' my apostolate by a discovery of Jesus, the son of God? On what do I base my call, and where do I find confirmation and energy for my vocation?

Paul pictures the God who called him as a God who *is pleased* for calling him: God has 'found' satisfaction, complacency, and contentment when he made Paul find Jesus and accept him as His Son.

To know Jesus and to recognise him as the Son of God makes God the Father 'happy'. Does this make me 'happy' too? Am I aware that to know Christ is always a grace that God gives me and a 'pleasure' that He concedes to me? Why then do I eagerly crave for other things rather than "the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil 3, 8)?

After a period of apostolic work, when he wrote to the Galatians, Paul 'saw' the whole of his life – even the period in which he was persecuting the church of God – as part and process of a unique project of God.

Why do I, if I am an apostle of Christ, not succeed to understand my whole life as a wonderful history of salvation, even when I am not aware of it or even though I am not at my best in the mission? Call to life and call to the apostolate are one and the same in God's heart; how shall I make these two compatible, nay inseparable, in my heart?

Paul was conscious of being sent by God at the moment in which he heard God; the change in his life was, as he perceived it, the result of a change in God himself: from the God of Israel to the God of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In order to become the apostle God expects of me, to materialise the grace given to me, should I not 'change' the idea – the personal rapport – which I have with God? Is the motivation of my apostolate in God, the God who is gratified and pleased?

Thank God for a Community that is not so Good, Mission of the Apostolic Life

Lectio on 1 Cor 1, 4-9



Paul sees himself more as the founder of the community and as their guardian, as the first preacher, rather than its permanent catechist (1 Cor 1,17; 3,6). As founder, Paul was aware of being the father of the community (Corinth: 1 Cor 4,15; 2 Cor 6,12; 12,14. Philippi: Phil 2,22. Thessalonica: 1 Th 2,11) and of individual believers (Onesimus: Phil 10. Timothy: 1 Cor 4,17; Phil 2,22; 1 Tm 1,2.18. Tito: Tt 1,4). He felt for his deep love (2 Cor 2,4; 6,11-13); their fate troubled him (1 Th 2,17; 2 Cor 11,28-29); their crises shook him (Gal 1,6-9; 4,16-20; 2 Cor 1,13-14); their fidelity gave him joy (Phil 4,1). His affection was so great that he could declare himself willing to spend his life for those whom he knew did not love him as much (2 Cor 12,15). His prayer for them was constant, with joy (Phil 1,4) or preoccupation (1 Th 3,10).

Although not all communities he founded were always faithful, none of them remained indifferent. The letters that he left us bear witness to this and, at the same time, they prove the interest of the apostle to remain informed about their ordeal and his preoccupation about their continuing education. The fact of having to create new communities did not release him from the responsibility to continue to accompany the growth of existing ones which he founded. It is this responsibility that made them a writer.

Well, in his letters, immediately after the usual greeting, the first thing that Paul writes to his community is invariably a prayer. The fact usually goes unnoticed, but it is a characteristic feature of the way that Paul exercised his apostolic authority. It is only in the letter to the Galatians, that the apostle has given up the opening prayer, and at that time he did not lack

good reasons (cf. Gal 1.6 to 10). The exception proves the rule. Paul began his letter by praying for – and before – his community. This feature of the Pauline letters reveals a **fundamental detail of his apostolic vocation**.

The apostle, writing to be in communication with his community, is put in communication with his God. Thinking of his people led him to think of God who had given them to him: talking to them as sent by God required him to speak with God who sent him, to face those whom he is addressing meant for him to face the God who had given them, wanting to know something of his own meant that he knew to be of God. One who knows to be called by God with a mission entrusted to him, will respond to his God by responding to one's own mission: *the responsibility towards the community is the prayer of the chosen apostle. And this response needs to be said to God before the community.*

1. Understand the text

⁴ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge ⁶ even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Paul gives thanks to God for what He has done among the Corinthians (1,4-7a: *enriched in everything .. do not miss any gift*) and which becomes the best guarantee to meet the long-awaited day of the Lord without fear or failures (1,7 b-8). Anyone who is aware of the circumstances of this letter will be surprised by this beginning: it would seem that Paul had discovered nothing but problems in this community. And yet ...

The reason appears at the end: the fidelity of the Corinthians is based on the faithfulness of Him who has called them (1,9). Paul 'bases' his thanks not on what the Corinthians do but on what God has done in them. And it is in recognising the gifts in the community that God is identified as the giver (1,4), one who enriches (1,5) and confirms (1,6), who has called (1,9):

what Christians are is owed to God. The apostles who pray when they think of them, know how to be grateful to their God.

2. Enlighten life

It is difficult to understand the poverty of prayer life in which we apostles live today: the lack of motivation – and of imagination – to express oneself, the scarcity of topics and desires, the terrible superficiality of our personal life of prayer – after all – reveal the fundamental *infidelity of our vocation*. The haste with which we absent ourselves from community prayer and the excuses we accumulate to avoid it are simply the other side, the unfortunate result, of the haste of living with our those to whom we are sent and of the accumulated excuses to avoid their company.

It is becoming more painful for us to speak with God daily, the God who spoke to us to tell us about those to whom we are sent, because it has become painful to talk with those whom God has established to be the mission of our lives. The return to communicate with them, to their problems, to take up their pains and their expectations, bring ourselves closer to their sin and their solitude, would restore to us the ability of communication with God, the joy of prayer. And God would come closer us to go beyond our sins and our loneliness.

Our community, the reason of our prayer

As sent by God we have no other way to force him to pay attention to us if not by paying attention to those to whom we are sent. It is enough for the apostle to know that he was given a community, to feel as the object divine trust: his own community is the irrefutable proof of trust shown to him by God. The community to which we have been sent can never become an obstacle for the prayer of the Christian Apostle: it should be its subject matter, content, and motivation. The apostle cannot exhaust the themes of his prayer: he will be able – should be able – to tell God the life of the community entrusted to him.

Those to whom we are sent should know that *they are the reason of our prayer* as apostles, that thinking about them leads us to pray, that to meet them means to God. What better proof of preference can we give them than

to allow them to notice that they are the cause and the subject of our conversation with God! It will be easier for them to confide to us, when they know that we have entrusted them to God. Our people need praying apostles, who would speak to them about God with whom they had spoken to. Only those who are prayerful could become convincing witnesses; we are moving God from our world by not speaking about him; and we are silent about him not because we do not speak much about him, but because we do not speak to him anymore.

To pray, the priority activity of the Apostle

Prayer for the community is a priority in the life of the apostle, not because it is the most important thing to do, but because it is the first thing that comes to mind to the true apostle, when he connects with his people.

The life of the apostle cannot be fun, rest, and an escape from the world. And mission in obedience, the apostolate cannot be an excuse to avoid personal prayer; today our communities are entitled to our prayer, because it is the only subject that can convince among them that we freely stay with them, expressing and living the love of God has for them

Is it perhaps a coincidence that our apostolic life lacks so many reasons for thanksgiving to God who has made his apostles? Not to know or not able to thank God for the gift given (a call as a presupposition and a community as a destination) reveals our ingratitude towards God. Return to thanksgiving means to recover the ability to admire God and our community, *to feel grateful will fill us of that esteem for our things*, for our calling and our communities, that we are missing.

A good reason to live gratefully

There is no need for many reasons to be grateful apostles: no need to wait until our community does not leave much to be desired, nor that our vocation has given us everything we expected from it. None of the gifts we received have been asked or merited, they have not been tailor made for us nor meant to satisfy our needs. Whoever sees, like Paul, one's own community as fruit of divine grace one cannot but live gratefully. *The gift received is sufficient* to nurture a eucharistic life; we should examine ourselves on our ability to live with gratitude to God, since it has its roots here, probably one of the deeper causes of our apostolic poverty: one who does not recognise the object

of the mandate with gratitude is a poor messenger; one who does not recognise in one's own community the grace given to him by God, which was given in Christ Jesus, will celebrate a poor Eucharist.

We, chosen by God, have no right to deny him day after day, the recognition of his gift. Just like the Corinthians, our communities have a right to see that we are grateful to God because we have been entrusted as the recipients of our existence as believers. The Christian apostle is a *minister of the Eucharist* not only when it is celebrated sacramentally, but also when it is *lived normally*; to see in this light our community, with the heart of an apostle, i.e. grateful, will give us reasons for our Eucharist.

3. From life to prayer

I ask God, who sent me to the community where I offer my service in his name and where I represent him, that he may increase the 'desire' to put myself in communication with it, not to forget it when I'm away and not forget Him when I'm with it.

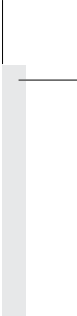
I ask God to give me the ability to contemplate my community as He sees it, that I may discover his action, his presence in it. That He may show me the gifts of grace – footsteps of his action – that he given through my ministry, That he may help me to recognise how He works through me, elbow to elbow at my side, sharing successes and distributing failures, fatigue and expectations.

I ask God that he may transform me to be a Eucharistic person, an apostle that recognises in his community the presence of God and gives thanks to him in prayer.

4. Contemplate God in life

I contemplate my community with the 'eyes' of God. I see it as God sees it, I esteem it as God esteems it, I love it as God loves it. Up to give up life for the community, in the same way that God surrendered the life of his Son.

I contemplate God in my community. I discover God's work, quiet but steady, hopeful and patient. Beyond the obvious shortcomings, and even through them, I see God and celebrate His proven loyalty to my people.



To feel Oneself Conquered by Christ, the Core of Paul's Christian Experience

Lectio on Phil 3,4-16



Paul has not left us a complete account of his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus. There are hints to it in his letters – few but dense as to its consequences, but never a report of the fall. Surely he would not present it in any case as a ‘conversion’: neither did he think of ‘changing’ faith, nor did he wish to better his ‘conduct’; he remained a fiery Jew and began to be a ‘messianic’ Jew, namely *a Christian* (Acts 11,26).

Every time he speaks of it – this is truly noteworthy – he felt compelled by circumstances of a polemic with his detractors to defend the apostolic mission and ‘his’ gospel (1 Cor 9, 1; Gal 1, 13-16; Phil 3, 7-11). Paul refers not to *what had happened*, when suddenly he found the Lord, but *what happened to him*. He does not make a chronicle of facts, but a testimony of his experience: in that encounter he became an apostle. Among the texts where he hints at the event, Philippians 3, 4-14 is most personal and intimate.

1. Understand the text - The immediate context

After having complained of his loneliness and the nostalgia he feels for the Philippians, Paul promised them to send Timothy and to send back Epaphroditus (Phil 2, 19-3, 1a). In an unexpected way, and without an explicit reason, the apostle abandons his friendly tone and becomes bitter and hard: he warns his dear brethren of a danger present among them caused

by a group that insists upon circumcision as necessary for a Christian (Phil 3,1a-2).

He discredits the adversaries with sarcasm; the insults are strong (*dogs*, unclean animals, cf. Mt 7, 6; *evil doer*, false apostle, cf. 2 Cor 11, 13). There is little logic in the argumentation, but one can imagine Paul's polemics depriving his opponents of any authority they claim; he claims for himself the very same titles, if not greater, which they boast of.

The text

Defending the Philippians, he defends his own work. He appeals to his own intimate life, his experience altogether personal and non transferable. Thus he puts forward **his very self**, the life he led, as **the principal argument**.

He speaks of his encounter with the Risen Lord, without intending a chronicle of the events which, besides, could be well known by his listeners. He puts in relief **the results** which were produced in his life. He attests to how he lived when – and because – he happened to meet the Risen Jesus. He does so by speaking of a *period before* (Phil 3, 4-6) and the *period after* (Phil 3, 7-16) that encounter, tracing the events before and the consequences.

⁴ *If any other man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more:*

⁵ *circumcised on the eight day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, 'as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless.*

It seems likely that the opponents of the apostle had hinted at their impeccable 'credentials' in Judaism in order to argue for circumcision. Paul too has his reasons for 'confidence in the flesh' (Phil 3, 4). He does not therefore deny his Jewish past. More than that, he confronts the challenges of his adversaries and declares having more 'titles' than what they could flaunt against him: *a Hebrew by birth and at heart*. In what he affirms there is not the slightest hint of uncertainty in his personal integrity of faith, or any shadow of moral weakness or a trace of a troubled conscience.

⁷ *But whatever gain I had,
I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.*

^{8A} *Indeed I count everything as loss
because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord...*

If taken compressed (standing by itself), the affirmation could result, even today, as unacceptable to any fervent Jew; it establishes a clean break (tearing away) from the preceding situation. That which *before* he considered his 'capital' or asset (i.e., race, stock, culture, faith, religious duty, moral perfection...) is now taken as loss (ruin, damage, pain). He does not say there are no more privileges of the Jews, emerging as they are in a long history of salvation! He simply affirms that *they are not that for him*. Things are not changed, what is different now is his way of considering and looking at them.

But how come the change in him? Not for having reflected better or because he became 'good', but 'because of one person'. Something has happened – the concrete event is not described – that gave him a new sublime vision: 'he has known' Jesus the Messiah recognising him as Lord. *Knowing*, here, does not have the usual sense according to the Greek way of understanding it, that is, grasping a reality, indentifying & distinguishing it from all others, comprehending and defining it, possessing it in some way and succeeding to handle it. In the Biblical sense, it implies entering into communion with it and, if that is a person, to strike an intimate relationship and to allow that person to shape the destiny of one's very life; it is a knowledge – sublime – which comprises love, or better, which requires you to be loved ["If any one imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if one loves God, one is known by him" (1 Cor 8, 2-3)]. The one who knows Jesus in truth is the one who feels loved by Him and who lives enamoured of Him. And the fruit of this 're-knowing' is the radical change of values in which he now lives: that which was before a gain – he does not forget: a life not in accord with God's will is lost. There is no place for light & shade or mixed colours.

The 'discovery' of Jesus as Messiah and Lord is, therefore, a basic and determining factor of his Christian experience: he need not recognise himself as a sinner, he could only confess Jesus as Christ and Lord. To what he already knew he adds a new knowledge - knowing himself as saved by Christ Jesus. To recognise oneself – i.e., to comprehend and accept oneself – as saved is the 'sublime' knowledge acquired, which leads him to consider all things as surpassed and useless, nay as disadvantage and loss. And this not because it was so in the past or even today, but because these could never bring one to the knowledge of Christ Jesus.

For this sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own based on law.

¹⁰but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith; that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Phil 3, 8b-10).

Affirming the core of the Paschal experience – a new knowledge that has become higher through the personal encounter – Paul explicitly puts forth the consequences, disclosing his most intimate life. His testimony, enriched with theology, breathes authenticity and confidentiality: Paul depicts himself as one profoundly touched by Christ Jesus in such a radical and permanent way as to change his mode of ‘seeing’ reality, even more, his mode of ‘seeing’ himself in front of God. The encounter with Jesus, his acknowledgement of Him as his Lord, touches completely his relationship with God: there could never be a more radical change than this for a faithful Jew.

What gave a meaning to his life before, that which – we might say today – made him happy (satisfied, ‘counted’) has now become – all of a sudden and without any apparent motive – *rubbish* (refuse, dirt, disgusting thing), something to discard, to throw away. But not because it was such but **because it is (was) not the way or the means to find Christ**. Paul does not reject anything (a life according to the law, the privileges of the people of God), he only prefers something better (Christ). Appropriating a *better thing* makes one to detach from just a *good thing*: the law, God’s gift to Israel, a proof of his predilection and guarantee of fidelity.

We don’t succeed to know *what* made such a profound change possible. Paul says only *that* he changed; he spoke of a before and an after, not how. But he explains what he felt when he was transformed: he does not understand himself apart from Christ, doesn’t find himself without Christ, he doesn’t feel right with God if not with or through faith *in* Christ. The transformation cannot be less radical, nor explainable. In fact, Paul does not explain well, he gets entangled in a good deal of subtle implications.

Through faith in Christ and not by obedience to the law: living in and through grace, not by one’s own effort or merit, allowing oneself to be gifted by God, accepting Christ as the only saviour, refusing to obligate God to

show Himself propitious. The objective, therefore, of the life of a believer is 'to gain' Christ, to hold him as a 'gain', in order to 'be considered just' by God. Paul came to realise that he would not succeed to maintain a 'just' relationship with his God without accepting Jesus as Lord of his life and Messiah of his people. Paul was 'converted' when, and because, Jesus (was considered) cursed under the law (Gal 3, 13); he was 'converted' in Christ and Lord when he *consented to let himself to* (this is the meaning of faith) become His servant and evangelist.

To know Christ is not an intellectual undertaking (enterprise): he cannot be comprehended; it is rather a **form of immersing in, or of making oneself like to Him**, through participating in his Paschal experience, knowing the power which made him rise and the grief (evil) that made him die. Knowing Christ goes beyond knowing about him, being informed about his life and his miracles, knowing the news of his end and his resurrection. The knowledge one ought to have of Christ is not a knowledge about Him, external to Him, but a knowing (getting acquainted) in Him and with Him: *to know through sharing of life and death*, by a repeat of his life 'journey' or, as Paul said a little before, 'having the mind of Christ' (Phil 2, 5).

A word of caution: Paul does not detach the resurrection from the death, Easter from Good Friday (Rm 4, 25; 1 Cor 15, 3-5), but lives these two phases in this precise order; death is not the necessary path to life, but it is the resurrection that makes death possible! The apostle who 'carries the wounds of Jesus in his body' – a tattoo that is a sign of belonging to a group, the penalties of his apostolic work –, knows that he is the property of Christ because he has appropriated his sufferings. In as much as for those, in contrast with Paul, who have not met the Risen Lord, the sufferings are like sign of God's abandonment, for Paul, instead, they are a proof of belonging to Christ: 'to be con-formed' to his death assures adherence (being joined) to Him. In shared suffering there is realised an adhesion, an experience which runs counter to those "many among us who behave as the enemies of the cross of Christ"; so Paul writes 'with tears in his eyes'; their end however is perdition (Phil 3,18-19).

¹²*Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.*

¹³*Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,*

¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵Let those of us who are mature be thus minded; and if in anything you are otherwise minded, God will reveal that also to you. ¹⁶Only let us hold true to what we have attained. ¹⁷Brethren, join in imitating me.

What follows sounds like a true confession. Paul relativises what he has just affirmed. He makes himself more ‘human’, less perfect, more accessible and close to the experience of Christians in general. That which is given as an acquisition is not yet assured: it has already *been given, but not validated*. The ‘call’ verified in the encounter is not conclusive; the possession of it is still held in hope.

The fact that Paul must wait for the consummation of his ‘conversion’ hides insecurity and doubts – and precisely for this, a life of ‘proven’ faith – in view of arriving at the destiny. But the confidence, on which faith is placed, is founded on the gift received, on the call, not on one’s desire or good will. Being won by Christ, he must exert himself to win him in his turn. ‘Caught’ (seized \ taken hold of) by Christ, Paul does not as yet succeed to take hold of Him, totally, without fear of losing Him. The grace of God, therefore, does not exempt him from effort but asks it of him in order to be confirmed in grace.

2. Enlighten life

Am I, in truth, a ‘convert’? Do I feel myself more of a ‘good’ person rather than a servant of Jesus? Can I say that I also have found the Risen One? What are its consequences?

Free from All ... Never, however, Against the Weak Brethren

Lectio on 1Cor 8,1-23



The community of Corinth, like every other Christian community which is the fruit of missionary effort in the Greco-Roman world, encountered difficulties in its internal coexistence, because of the influence of the beliefs and customs of its pagan context which still affected its members.

The case of meat sacrificed to idols constituted, undoubtedly, a source of tension since the early days. It was not the worst, but

it is a clear example of the difficulties that **a preliminary inculturation of the gospel** produced in the new communities. Today we can scarcely imagine the supposed danger to the fledgling Christian community life of the new issue of “meat sacrificed to idols”. A large portion of meat that is sold in the markets had been the object of worship in pagan temples, the origin of sacrificial meat that put believers in the dilemma of accepting invitations of pagan friends and relatives, without renouncing social relations, nor shy away from a familiarity with them, which inevitably leads to social marginalisation.

The solutions proposed on such situations, on a personal level, created tensions and scandals in the community: the very life of brotherhood ran danger. The objection to eating meat sacrificed to a pagan idol come from a diluted idolatrous paganism, not yet overcome by some Christians; and others, in return, based on their monotheistic faith, had managed to free themselves from that repugnance and to concretely bear witness in front of the idols that freedom that the Christian faith gives to the believer.

1. Understanding the text

“Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that ‘all of us possess knowledge.’ ‘Knowledge’ puffs up, but love builds up. ² If any one imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. ³ But if one loves God, one is known by him. ⁴ Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.” ⁵ For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth – as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’ – yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. ⁷ However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through being hitherto accustomed to idols, eat food as really offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. ⁸ Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. ⁹ Only take care lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰ For if any one sees you, a man of knowledge, at table in an idol’s temple, might he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? ¹¹ And so by your knowledge this weak man is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. ¹² Thus, sinning against your brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if food is a cause of my brother’s falling, I will never eat meat, lest I cause my brother to fall!”

Paul begins by saying that everyone should know what to do, since everyone has been given the capacity to know what the faith says: being afraid to get in touch with the divinity through something that was consecrated to is an unfounded fear for one who confesses the only God, Father of our Lord Jesus.

But states, almost inadvertently, another principle which will be the key solution: love is superior to knowledge, since only love builds up. Whoever loves knows to be known by the beloved. It is this principle that he will apply to a concrete case.

The fact that in a community not all have reached the same level of Christian maturity, obliges more ‘wise’ to recognise their responsibility for the weaker. Who, not yet entirely won over by his or her faith, finds it scandalous to use the freedom granted, must be respected in his or her

conscience; the freedom from ancient slavery cannot become a scandal to the weaker.

2. Enlighten life

If there is something that abounds among the Corinthians – Paul acknowledges – it is their capacity for spiritual discernment and experience of their Christian freedom. But before giving reason to the group who was living with her most consistent faith in God, he reminded them of a principle even more fundamental, more decisive than that of knowing that one is free from the gods: the love for the brethren, knowing of being servant of the believer with whom one shares the faith and life, a knowledge of Christ that does not lead to recognition of the neighbour cannot be authenticated as Christian, wisdom that does not build up the community, it is human pride.

Knowing God does not mean succeeding to understand him, but know that on is understood by him, knowing him implies recognising him as God, to feel grateful because one feels being blessed. In fact, to know God does not come from intellectual effort of the believer, but from the amazing and wonderful action of the one God, who is Father because he thought of us before we thought of him and has conceived us long before we were conceived; we were in his heart before He was on our lips, before loving him, we have been loved by Him. We are the product of divine love: the knowledge of the Christian believer is simple recognition.

How many times have we gained knowledge of God without being able to recognise being loved by Him! We believe we are better trained because we are a little more informed; given that we know how to talk about God, we think that God should speak to us. Knowing God does not imply knowing many things about Him, but to know as being loved by Him; this recognition of oneself as the subject of the divine will is the foundation of Christian knowledge and only this knowledge builds up community.

It would be necessary check if our difficulties in creating community and to live in common the faith possibly not come from his inability to feel understood by God. It is striking that among us we hardly talk about our personal experience with God, we do not trust those who share our lives

and our dedication. We should not wonder if our communities are not able to give a convincing witness of God's love, if one does arrive at an interpersonal dialogue, if you do not have the courage to confide with those, like us, who share knowledge and experience of the same God.

The only knowledge that builds up community, is the love God has for us: it would be easy to live together if we recognised each and every as the object of the personal love of God! And this is Christian 'knowledge' which is at the basis of freedom of the believer; to know that one's origin and purpose is found in God the Father, who has created and recreated through the intervention of one Lord, free from fear of any higher power and from the subjection of any master who demands obedience.

This Christian 'knowledge' manifest the world as a creature and people as servants of Christ, having been created by him. There is no power in creation that may ask or expect worship from a believer. The desecration of what is in heaven and on earth is not God, it is the consequence. *Such a liberating faith should console us*; one who believes in God the Father, source and goal of our existence, may not be afraid of anything or anybody, except his God, who is the Father who has made us in his own image and thinks of recreating us. The servant of the Lord Jesus, intermediary by his very being and through his rebirth, not is not bound by obedience to any other lord; *neither the world nor people, invisible powers or concrete powers, are worthy of our respect or of our fear*. This is the liberating force, also as gods or as masters, whose reality is undeniable that comes from the faithful to recognize themselves only one God and servants of one Lord. But a liberating faith should also instil fear; the believer does not rely on any place in the world nor on any power amongst people, capable of misdirecting from his destiny, who is God the Father, nor from his or her Lord, who is Jesus Christ: *disobedience is paid not through a new form of slavery, but from a loss of a Father and a Saviour*.

Yet, *Christian freedom has its frontier in one's brethren less prepared to live it*: for how many reasons we may have, in as much as we feel free, in as much as we believe ourselves to be experts, the validity of our motivations, the legitimacy of our freedom, the authenticity of our knowledge is in respect and attention to our less strong, less free, less wise brother and sisters, in as much as we feel free.

The fact that Paul is setting the limits of freedom of one who is

conscious of being in the truth must be taken seriously; which does not prevent those who are obstructing the development of a legitimate freedom, born of faith in God and in service to the Lord, may be a person who is not yet mature, still attached to one's own erroneous past and its idols; it is sufficient to know that this is about a brother or sister who may fall, precisely because he or she envies our true freedom.. There is neither liberation nor knowledge which could authorise us to ignore the reasons of those who are not able to come to our level of Christian maturity and to free us from his scruples.

A Christian cannot use personal freedom as a reason to scandal; *whoever loves his freedom so as to endanger the salvation of others ceases to be a brother*: a liberation that came from the death of Christ must not lead to the death of a Christian. And since this freedom was not the result of personal endeavour, having been given freely, it may be sacrificed for free to get the freedom of his brother. Experiencing oneself to be free against or in front of brother who was still enslaved by his own prejudices, means acting against the same freedom that we have been rewarded; it is better to renounce the freedom that we have a right to than condemn the brother for whom Christ died. The salvation of the weak may require the renunciation of the strong to its own individual salvation, although legitimate.

In our community life and in our apostolic activity, how many times we sin against a brother, holding ourselves stronger, wiser, freer! *We consider ourselves better, freeing us from respecting the consciences of those who live with us*; Sometimes we had recourse to 'scandal' a tactical impact in the evangelization; in order to show that we are strong, we have instigated the weakness and slavery to false gods; not paying attention to the objections of the brother, his doubts and his immaturity, regardless of his unfounded fears and without realizing its inability to be as free as us, we pushed him to go against his conscience and his God. The believer in Christ, the apostle of God, *is always willing to be a little less free just to be a little more fraternal*, not to crush the brother with the weight of one's own knowledge and freedoms, if this can save him from betrayal of his conscience and of the common the Lord. *Christ has set us free from everyone and everything, except from the weak brother or sister*; his conscience, even if erroneous, defines and marks the limits of Christian freedom. God has made us free to respect the scrupulous brethren.

3. From life to prayer

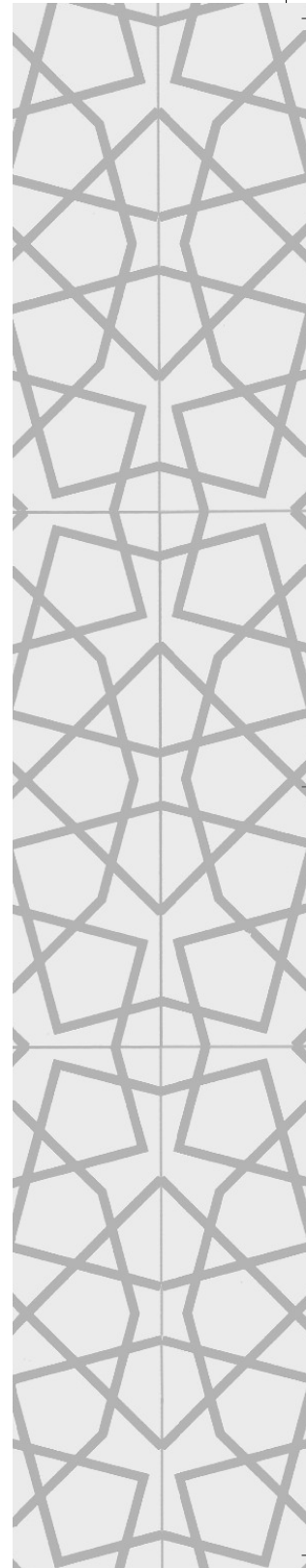
I ask God to lead me to the knowledge of his love, that makes me aware that I am loved by Him and that based on this is the recognition of the way of seeing things and brothers and sisters and how to treat them.

I ask God to give me the consciousness of freedom that he gives me to serve Him exclusively. That I may know how to enjoy the freedom of having no other gods besides Him.

I ask God to give me the courage to give up such freedom rather than renounce my brothers. What set me free, if necessary, from my independence and maybe even my life in order not to feel free from life and the good of my brothers.

Activity Sheets for Community Meetings of Ongoing Formation

*These 10 activity sheets
are intended for the local community
so that these Acts of the Study Days
may be used for its ongoing formation*





Sharing the Word

Introduction

From *An Introduction to Lectio Divina*

*"The 'door of faith' (Acts 14:27) is always open for us, ushering us into the **life of communion with God** and offering **entry into his Church**. It is possible to cross that threshold when the word of God is proclaimed and the heart allows itself to be shaped by transforming grace. To enter through that door is to set out on a journey that lasts a lifetime"* (Benedict XVI).

In times of the new evangelisation, like the present, we do not have too many models that serves as inspiration for a renewed missionary activity and there are also few methods and perhaps even motivations that give us the momentum for this task. Today we hear a lot about how to do evangelisation but lesser about those who must carry it out; it seems that problems focus on 'the ardour, the method, the expressions' of new evangelisation, when, in fact, the **crucial question** continues to be that of the evangelisers, whether or not they are sufficiently evangelised.

To remember the Apostle Paul may be a journey of apostolic recovery. The choice of Paul as stimulus and an

Seven Steps Bible Sharing

FIRST STEP: We invite the Lord

We "invite the Lord" through song or prayer to send us his Spirit to help us understand his Word

SECOND STEP: We read the text

The guide invites someone to volunteer to read the text. A moment of silence follows.

THIRD STEP: We dwell on the text

Each participant reads aloud the word or words (only short phrases or individual words) that have impressed them three or four times.

FOURTH STEP: We are quiet

Personal reflection for around three minutes.

FIFTH STEP: We share what we have heard in our hearts

After the time of quiet we share briefly with one another what we have heard in our hearts or our faith experience in order to help each other to grow in the faith.

SIXTH STEP: We search together

What does this Scripture mean to us Salesian missionaries today

SEVENTH STEP: We pray together

The facilitator now invites everyone to say a personal prayer.

inspiration to evangelisers is more than justified. The Christian community, which has always had a gospel to proclaim, Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor 2,2), considered **Paul as the Apostle** par excellence.

It must be noted, as well, that on the level of his personal experiences Paul becomes our contemporary, the most contemporary among the first witnesses of the Lord Jesus. Like all of us, Paul was not personally invited by Jesus to follow him, nor was he beside him in Galilee as he preached the kingdom of God, nor was he 'educated' on the road to Jerusalem. Like all of us, Paul was not present at the death of Jesus on the cross, nor was he found among the first witnesses of his resurrection on the third day. Like all of us, Paul, was born to the faith in an abnormal time and manner, "like an abortion" (1 Cor 15,8), and although he proclaimed to be "the least of the apostles" (1 Cor 15,9), he clearly acknowledged that he "laboured more abundantly than all of them"; grace in him had not been vain. In fact, "by God's grace I am what I am" (1 Cor 15,10).

If the grace of God, not his ability or his relentless dedication, has made him the apostle, his action is within our reach. As fruit of grace, the evangeliser should not bear witness to anything but that grace: an **evangelisation through witness** requires the evangeliser to become a living embodiment of what one announces, having the audacity to present oneself as a clear model of the gospel one preaches.

The Word of God

Choose from the scripture texts below and follow the *Seven Steps Bible Sharing*

- 1 Cor 1, 4-9
- 1 Cor 8,1-13
- Phil 3,4-16
- Gal 1,13-17

Reflection

For Step 3 read an excerpt from the *Lectio Divina* of Fr. Juan-José Bartolomé:

A Significant Presence, a Prophetic Presence

“Ours is a necessary presence. God calls us to be where we are. We cannot exclude a fifth of humanity from the action of our Salesian charism. More than 40% of the Islamic world is made up of young people” (*Fr. Maria Arokiam Kanaga SDB*)

Introduction

According to the Rector Major, Fr. Pascual Chávez, there are three strong reasons for maintaining a presence among Muslims, which may not be easy, but is significant: “we want to be obedient to the command of the Lord Jesus in witnessing to the ends of the earth; we believe that the Gospel yeast purifies and transforms all cultures; we want to be faithful to Don Bosco, who longed to reach all the youth of the world through education”.

Let us invoke the Holy Spirit that we may grow in the courage to meet, witness, dialogue and serve others, that we may be daring disciples of the first hour!

The Spirit of hope is at work in the world.

– ***Come Holy Spirit!***

The Spirit is present in the selfless service of those who care for suffering and marginalised people, in those who welcome migrants and refugees.

– ***Come Holy Spirit!***

The Spirit is present in those who bravely refuse to reject individuals or groups for ethnic, cultural or religious motives.

– ***Come Holy Spirit!***

The Spirit is present especially in the generous action of those who patiently and constantly continue to promote peace and reconciliation among those who were onetime hostile enemies,

– ***Come Holy Spirit!***

These are some of the signs of hope that encourage us to seek the justice that leads to peace,

– ***Come Holy Spirit!***

Christ is the heart of the gospel message of peace and reconciliation for all peoples,

– ***Come Holy Spirit!***

May the face of Christ illumine the whole of humanity,

– ***Come Holy Spirit!***

May Christ's justice and peace be the gift to all peoples without distinction,

– ***Come Holy Spirit!***

Word of God

- *“People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it”. (Mk 10, 13–15)*
- *“Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven”. (Mt 18, 10)*
- *“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me”. (Mt 25,40)*
- *“When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, ‘Do not weep.’ Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, “Young man, I say to you, rise!” The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother”. (Lk 7, 13–15)*

Personal Reflection

Words of a speaker

“The Salesian presence among Muslims dates back 120 years. Today, we are working among them in 50 countries. Despite this we are still seeking to understand the meaning of our presence and we do not know how to be more effective. Naturally for us Salesians (FMA), it is a question of understanding what God wants from us in this regard. We firmly believe that He is calling us to be present among the Muslims in an effective way because the charism of Don Bosco is for all his children. The search for meaning is therefore, the search for God’s will. This faith vision will help us to grasp the challenges, opportunities and strategies that God offers us. This is a faith vision.

‘Presence’ is a Salesian concept, rich in significance and central to the preventive system. It is not just a physical presence among others. ‘Presence’ means ‘being alive’ to others in dialogue, in a one to one relationship. This means that our very being reaches out to others to make a difference to their lives. ‘Presence’ is also a call and an invitation to love. We cannot love people at a distance. Love at a distance did not work for God either. He had to come and plant his tent among us, becoming flesh and blood. The prophet must go to the people.

A truly loving presence excludes superiority or inferiority complexes but implies a sense of brotherhood. We are not among them first and foremost to convert nor proselytise and correct them. We are there to live our lives as authentic sons and daughters of God; we are fortunate to know Jesus, the Son of God, who came mainly to love people and not only create a religion.

We are not for any advantage to ourselves but “to be signs and bearers of God’s love to young people, especially the poorest”.

Often we do not have a clear concept of incarnate Presence. We are not present in a place to do things and get results. We are very action oriented; Salesians always in a hurry. As soon as we arrive in a place we look for results. Great projects rise immediately and we set about running them. A loving presence is meaningful even when the works we engage in, seem useless or even a failure. The Incarnation of the Lord Jesus is a case in point. We are not called to the Muslim world to be successful in some enterprise,

but to witness faithfully to God's radical love for all humanity. From this point of view 'failure' can produce more fruit than any external and commercial success that may derive from our institutions or works.

We need a non-menacing and understandable presence. Muslims look with suspicion on the Christian presence among them. Therefore it is not showy, flourishing activities that will win them over, but a constant presence of service, goodness and avoidance of the so-called 'superiority complex of Christians'". (*Fr. Maria Arokiam Kanaga SDB*)

For Sharing

1. In the Muslim context (our own particular context) how can we live the basic concepts of the spirituality of the Preventive System: reason, religion, loving kindness, pastoral charity, preference for youth, family spirit, optimism and joy, work and temperance, presence, assistance, honest citizens, prevention...?

Intercessions

Aware that our Salesian presence is not always effective in the Muslim context, let us ask the Lord to free us from all fear, arrogance or prejudice.

- From ignorance regarding Islam, the Qur'an and Islamic history and culture, **Deliver us, Lord!**
- From a fearful and prejudicial vision, **Deliver us, Lord!**
- From an irresolute presence. **Deliver us, Lord!**
- From a lack of formation, **Deliver us, Lord!**
- From the lack of people, prepared and available to work among Muslims, **Deliver us, Lord!**
- From the lack of a well-planned strategy or project for our presence among Muslims at the level of Congregation and Province, **Deliver us, Lord!**

Freed from all that prevents an effective evangelical presence, let us thank the Lord for the many opportunities we hold in our hands, to help us proclaim Jesus with our lives.

- For fidelity to our religious consecration. **We thank you, Lord!**
- For the openness of our brother Muslims who seek quality instruction in our schools so as to form a new mentality in the younger generations. **We thank you, Lord!**

- For the emigration of Christians to Muslim countries, **We thank you, Lord!**
- For the emigration of Muslims to countries with a Christian majority, **We thank you, Lord!**
- For moderate Muslims with whom we can join hands to build up peace and inter-religious dialogue. **We thank you, Lord!**
- For the emancipation of women as one of the most important ways of entering the mysterious fortress of Muslim culture. The emancipation of women through instruction. **We thank you, Lord!**
- For the possibility of working together with our Muslim brothers for values we hold in common such as peace in the world, human rights, protection of the environment, respect for life, equality, the rooting out of corruption and the just distribution of world resources. **We thank you, Lord!**
- For all that is good in Islam. **We thank you, Lord!**
- For education and dialogue. **We thank you, Lord!**
- For the formation of the SDB and FMA. **We thank you, Lord!**

Final Prayer

“Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me..., so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. ... I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. ... Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth”. (Jn 17)

Let us pray for fidelity, enthusiasm and health for all the Salesians and FMA who live and work in Muslim contexts. **Our Father...**

Remember

“The core of every human heart is love and what cannot be reached by a loving presence and service, cannot be reached by any other means. We must be faithful to the Preventive System. Islam and its vast youth population ... this is an opportunity for courageous disciples of Christ”.
(Fr. Maria Arokiam Kanaga, SDB)



Dialogue, Credible Witness

“I assure you that the Church intends to continue building bridges of friendship with the followers of all religions” (*Benedict XVI - 25 April 2005*)

Introduction

“[...] you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” (At 1, 8). Jesus assures his disciples of the presence and strength of the Spirit and encourages them to carry his name throughout the world. This means living with Jesus and for Jesus and going beyond frontiers, in every age and in every place!

Let us implore the strength of the Spirit. Let us invoke his presence and the gift of living our Christian identity wherever we are, together with our brothers and sisters to whom God sends us.

Hymn to Holy Spirit

The Word of God

The God of Jesus is a God of dialogue and relationship. He is the incarnate God who has come to dwell among men. His love is universal. He came not to judge the world, but to save it (Jn 3, 17). In Jesus, God becomes all things to all people!

- “I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness. I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world but to save the world”. (Jn 12, 46 – 47).
- “*For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him*” (Jn 3, 17).

- *“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice’. For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mt 9, 12-13).*
- *“There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink”. For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water”. The woman said to him, “Sir, you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep; where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, and his sons, and his cattle?” Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw”. Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.” The woman answered him, “I have no husband”. Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband; this you said truly”. The woman said to him, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Just then his disciples came. They marvelled that he was talking with a woman, but none said, “What do you wish?” or, “Why are you talking with her?”” (Jn 4, 7-19.27).*

Personal Reflection

Words of a speaker

“The second Vatican Council marked a new period of understanding in the relationship between Christianity and Islam: from a situation of ‘separate frontiers’, to inter-religious encounter. Islam, scientifically and

theologically appreciated as a monotheism that is connected to the promises made to Abraham, is now seen in a new way by the Church. And so, with Vatican II's Declaration on the relationship of the Church with non-Christian religions, the stage of Islam-Christian dialogue began. Thus, after experiencing centuries of theological and political wrangling and having suffered periods of inopportune proselytism, relations between Christians and Muslims seem to have entered a new phase of respect and understanding, in which Christians are inclined to value Muslims according to the positive elements of their religious experience". The development of inter-religious dialogue promoted by Vatican II has borne numerous fruits, not only at the level of inter-religious meetings and the on-going activities of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, but also and above all, at the level of theological reflection that goes beyond the traditional view of *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*, placing other religious traditions within God's divine plan of Christ, Saviour and Mediator between God and men".
(Fr. Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot MCCJ)

For Sharing

1. *How do I understand dialogue?*
2. *What was dialogue for Jesus?*
3. *What is the meaning for me personally of dialogue with men and women of a different religion? With Muslims who are day by day affirming their faith more strongly?*
4. *As a Christian, how can I grow in my ability to dialogue with others, who profess a different faith to mine?*

Intercessions (adapt to local situation)

Dialogue presupposes an attitude of listening and sharing. In our daily dialogue with God, let us implore the gift of living in harmony with each other for all Christians and Muslims.

- That inter-religious dialogue may be perceived by Christians and Muslims as an instrument that brings us closer together, allowing us to transform a clouded past into a present rich in sharing and overcoming barriers and in promoting encounter, let us pray: **God, Father of all peoples, hear our prayer!**

- Mahmut Aydin, an expert on Islam affirms: “Islam / Christian dialogue is no longer a luxury but a theological necessity so as to build a world in which Christians and Muslims may live peacefully together”. For peace among all peoples and religions; for persecuted Christians; for those who are closest to us in terms of dialogue and mutual understanding, let us pray: **God, Father of all peoples, hear our prayer!**
- That we may be ready to live the dialogue of daily life, welcoming and respecting those who profess a different religion, sharing in their sufferings and their joys, let us pray: **God, Father of all peoples, hear our prayer!**
- Faithful to the Gospel and our Salesian charism, we ask the grace of living our Christian/religious identity, helping young people, families and all those in contact with us to live their faith and build positive, healthy relationships between Christians and Muslims, let us pray; **God, Father of all peoples, hear our prayer!**

(spontaneous intercessions)

Final Prayer

Together: O God, Father of all peoples, united in your name and for your love, we implore the grace of living our faith in an attitude of openness and welcome, ready for dialogue, because “*only through mutual acceptance of each other, in respect deepened by love, can the secret for finally reconciling humanity be found*”. Amen.

Remember

“The aim of inter-religious dialogue is not some kind of agreement about the creeds of the different religious traditions, but rather a common search for shared values to favour meeting each other in spirit and respect, trust and friendship”. (Fr. Miguel Angel Ayuso Guixot MCCJ)

Know My Brother

Live

- Share your experience in small groups
- What is my experience in sharing the faith with young Muslims?
- What is my experience in sharing the faith with young people who are followers of other religions who frequent our school or oratory?

Read

Read and discuss the extract from the emerging perspectives of the Study Days:

“Obviously, those who work in these contexts need to have adequate knowledge (deeper knowledge is even better) of Islam: what do they believe in, what are their practices, what do they say about Christianity and Christians.

For this necessary foundation we rely not only on reading good manuals and studies written by Christians who are experts in theory and praxis but also on original texts of Islam (Qur'an, hadith...), at least for those who have the necessary skills to do so.

We emphasise the importance of learning the language of the place, with its various nuances, terminologies, expressions and meaning, with both their ordinary and deeper senses. Certain words and expressions that seem to be the same may have different meanings according to the religious, social and cultural tradition ... Certain concepts and doctrines that may seem the same for Christians and Muslim may be totally different. For example, our concept of God, His characteristics and especially our relationship with God, our understanding of Jesus and of Mary are quite different. This requires due care so as not to stir up negative feelings, misunderstandings or misconceptions.

To this effect we try to go deeper in order to understand how Muslims see reality and history. This will enable us to cultivate empathy that leads us to be non-judgmental while remaining clear of our own stand and of a Christian understanding of history. As a general rule it is important to use

clear, understandable and common language, especially when engaged in theological dialogue”.

Discuss

What has the Church said about this topic?

Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente* (2012)

23. “The Catholic Church, in fidelity to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, looks with esteem to Muslims, who worship God above all by prayer, almsgiving and fasting, revere Jesus as a prophet while not acknowledging his divinity, and honour Mary, his Virgin Mother. We know that the encounter of Islam and Christianity has often taken the form of doctrinal controversy. Sadly, both sides have used doctrinal differences as a pretext for justifying, in the name of religion, acts of intolerance, discrimination, marginalisation and even of persecution”.

28. “... For some time now, bilateral and trilateral dialogues have taken place between Jewish, Muslim and Christian intellectuals or theologians. These offer fruitful opportunities for encounter and the study of various issues, and they ought to be supported. An effective contribution in this regard is made by all those Catholic institutions or centres for the study of philosophy, theology and other disciplines ... I express my appreciation to them and I encourage them to continue their work as peacemakers, in the knowledge that every effort made to overcome ignorance and to promote knowledge deserves to be supported. God willing, the happy union of the dialogue of everyday life and the dialogue of intellectuals or theologians will slowly but surely contribute to improving relations between Jews and Christians, Jews and Muslims and Muslims and Christians. This is my hope and the intention for which I pray”.

Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World. Recommendations for Conduct*

Principles

10. Renouncing false witness. Christians are to speak sincerely and respectfully; they are to listen in order to learn about and understand others’ beliefs and practices, and are encouraged to acknowledge and appreciate

what is true and good in them. Any comment or critical approach should be made in a spirit of mutual respect, making sure not to bear false witness concerning other religions.

Recommendations

3. encourage Christians to strengthen their own religious identity and faith while deepening their knowledge and understanding of different religions, and to do so also taking into account the perspectives of the adherents of those religions. Christians should avoid misrepresenting the beliefs and practices of people of different religions.

- What has our Bishops Conference said about this topic?
(If a document exists read an excerpt)
- What has our Congregation said about this topic?

Share

- Share in small groups
- How can we foster a deeper knowledge of Islam in our community?
- What are the challenges and opportunities that we find in our context?
- What are the challenges and opportunities for our own Salesian community?

Celebrate

(Make a circle together with all the participants)

- Hymn
- Opening Prayer
- Gospel: *Mt 28, 19-20*
- Intercessions (participants express their own intentions)
- Our Father (sung)
- Conclusion



Witness, First Form of Mission

“A witness is one who first lives the way he proposes to others”. (*Benedict XVI*)

Introduction

“It is a gift of the Holy Spirit that prepares us for mission and strengthens our witness, making it honest and courageous” (*Porta Fidei* n. 10). In communion with all people of good will, let us invoke the gift of the Holy Spirit to purify our minds and our hearts and transform us into authentic witnesses of Jesus, ready to respond with our lives to those who challenge our faith. “However this should be done gently and with respect” (cf. 1 Pt 3,15).

Hymn to the Holy Spirit

The Word of God

Let us welcome into our hearts the Word of life in all its newness. Jesus teaches us that to live in communion with the Father, we must do what pleases Him, and we must live His project. “The glory of God is man fully alive” (*St. Irenaeus*). The will of the Father, His project of love, is that we should have eternal life, life in abundance!

- “... *By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me*”. (Jn 5, 30)
- ““*Who are my mother and my brothers?*” he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “*Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother*””. (Mk 3, 33-35)

- ““My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work”. (Jn 4, 34)
- “I and the Father are one”. (Jn 10, 30)

Personal Reflection

Words of a speaker

“The respect and love Muslims have for Christians are expressed in the Qur’an: *“And you will find that those who are closest in affection to believers are the ones who say: Look! We are Christians! This is so, because among them are priests and monks, and because they are not proud!”* (Qur’an 5:81). Here Christians are esteemed for the witness offered by such spiritual figures as priests and monks and for the fact that they are humble people. This could be the basis for reflection on how Christians should behave in the company of Muslims so as to render witness to Jesus who, as St. Paul tells us: “being in the very nature of God, Jesus did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross! (Phil 2, 5-11). This humble attitude can also help to overcome past and present hostilities and, despite the many theological differences and prejudices, allow Christians and Muslims to become partners in facing the challenges of globalisation, of our modern and post modern world; problems caused by the growing financial crisis, new colonialism, wars, terrorism, social injustice, exploitation and poverty, as Vatican II affirms in *Nostra Aetate*.

“If in the course of time there have been many disagreements and hostilities between Christians and Muslims, the Sacred Council exhorts everyone to put the past behind us and exercise sincere mutual understanding, so as to defend and promote together, social justice, moral values and peace and freedom for everyone” (NA 3).

This openness and participation demands however, a deep consciousness of the relevance of the structures of Christian faith, as shown in the

Sacred Scriptures and formulated throughout the history of the Church. Our witness must be clear. In fact, dialogue is not relativism, but rather an essential vision of theological epistemology: the Church confesses the coming of divine life into history, something which is not immediately obvious and therefore needs to be witnessed.” This does not mean we have to have a static attitude. On the contrary, we must act in such a way that Christian witness is renewed through a process of dialogue, as confirmed in the document of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue: *“In the context of religious pluralism, dialogue signifies ‘every positive and constructive inter-religious relationship with individuals and communities of other faiths that are directed toward mutual understanding and enrichment, in obedience to the truth and with respect for liberty. It includes witness as well as exploring the respective religious convictions’”*.

The need for witnessing to the Gospel, like that of manifesting the prophetic attitude of Christian community, appears in other declarations and documents that followed after Vatican II: the witness of life and experiences of many Christians among people of other cultures and religions have characterised the life of the Church in recent years”.
(*Francesco Zannini*)

For Sharing

1. Share a real life story, a fact or an encounter of someone who was truly a witness for you and made an impression on your personal life.

Intercessions

As sons and daughters, we turn to God our Father, asking the strength to witness Jesus Christ in our lives together, in our encounters with others.

- That through an attitude open to meeting others and dialogue, we may proclaim that Jesus is “Good News” for man today: for the people of our society, Christians and non-Christians. Let us pray: **Lord, listen to our prayer.**
- “Witness is linked to the concrete reality of our lives, to our love and our hope; it is not just a matter of words”. That our lives may speak to young Christians and Muslims; that it may speak of peace, solidarity, reciprocity. Let us pray: **Lord, listen to our prayer.**

- The meaning and centre of our faith is Jesus Christ. May our faith spur us on to fight doggedly for humanity, for every person and for the construction of a truly human society; may we fight together with all people of good will, respecting differences and searching for what unites us. Let us pray: **Lord, listen to our prayer.**
- May our Christian and consecrated lives as well as our words, show that faith is at the origin of a love that is close and neighbourly; it is the source of our respect for others and their ‘otherness’, and it urges us to own the drama of our experience and of our society; it moves us to become little, poor for others and to love those who hate us. Let us pray: **Lord, listen to our prayer.**

(spontaneous intercessions)

Final Prayer

Together: O God, Father of goodness, sustain our faith so that we may confess with our lives that You have spoken to humanity and that the Word to whom we belong, to whom we surrender ourselves, is the supreme revelation of You and your Love in the person of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Remember

“Christians live the great commandment of love of God above all things and love of neighbour (of every nationality) as oneself. For those who welcome the commandment of Christ to love our Muslim neighbours and bear witness to the Good News, the kingdom of God has already arrived in the person of Jesus”. *(Lyle Vander Werff)*

Dialogue and Truth

Introduction

It came out clearly during the Study Days that dialogue and truth go hand in hand. The conclusion pointing out the emerging perspectives underline: “when we dialogue, we come in sincerity and truth. Therefore, it is essential to know, to be clear and firm on non-negotiable points of our Christian faith, particularly the truths that we profess in the Creed. In fact, dialogue does not mean negotiation, bargaining, mutual concession for the sake of peace, or silence on points of differences. Today one of the recurring reflections is that true dialogue requires that both sides are clear of their own identity since dialogue must be done in truth and in complete openness and trust. When this is present, dialogue can become the place where the Spirit will speak to us and make us grow in our faith. Our Muslim brothers and sisters may become dialogue partners that are open to the values preached and lived by Jesus, according to our Christian vision. On our part as Christians, as we listen to them, we can clarify and also correct our vision of Islam. This can lead to a mutual enlightenment, overcoming prejudices and stereotypes on both sides”.

Instruction for Sharing:

Some reads the text aloud for everyone. This is followed by a brief moment of silent reflection.

Our Text

Vatican II affirmed that “the truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth, as it makes its entrance into the mind at once quietly and with power” (*Dignitas Humanae*, 1). Thus, interreligious (and ecumenical) dialogue need to be rooted in the common search for truth. In this light it is

helpful to recall the words of Pope Benedict XVI on Saint Augustine's search for truth: "his thirst, his restless and constant thirst for the Truth is one of the basic characteristics of his existence; not however for 'pseudo-truths', incapable of giving the heart lasting peace, but of that Truth that gives meaning to life and is the 'dwelling-place' in which the heart finds serenity and joy. ... He was able to look into the depths of his being and realised, as he wrote in *Confessions*, that the Truth, the God whom he sought with his own efforts was closer to him than he himself, that God had always been beside him, had never abandoned him, was waiting to be able to enter his life once and for all" (*Benedict XVI - General Audience, August 25, 2010*).

"Our Salesian presence cannot be but a prophetic witness and dialogue which is precisely the contrary of a 'tasteless' (*Mt 5, 13*) presence. The determining ingredient which fosters prophetic dialogue is the *diakonia of truth*. By this I mean that the dialogue partners are stirred to seek and confront the truth by helping human reason to widen its horizons through the use of a more existential logic and search for the ultimate meaning of life. This human search for truth is intrinsically linked with the human search for happiness and the endeavour to live according to the demands of one's own conscience. This, in turn, is open to the religious dimension and to others. With respect for human dignity and the freedom of conscience, and avoiding any tinge of proselytism, our prophetic dialogue with Muslims should trigger in them the search for truth and ask existential questions. When our Salesian witness of life and action among Muslims triggers in them the desire to ask existential questions that lead to search for the truth, then our presence becomes truly light and salt (*Mt 5, 13-16*)" (*Fr. Alfred Maravilla SDB*).

Understand the Text

- 1) In your own opinion, why is the search for truth indispensable in dialogue?
- 4) What is the link between the search for truth and existential question?
- 2) Why do you think prophetic dialogue is indispensable in interreligious dialogue?
- 3) How could our presence among Muslims become light and salt?

Deepening the Text

- 1) What is the link between dialogue and truth?
- 2) How is Saint Augustine's search for that Truth which gives meaning to life related to interreligious dialogue?
- 3) How could we foster the *diakonia of Truth*?

Our Experiences

- Share examples which you might have heard or read about of positive and fruitful prophetic dialogue between Christians and Muslims.
- Among the positive experiences we have heard in this group which of these could be useful in our present context? How could we adapt these in our context?

Conclusion

Each one is invited to say a thanksgiving prayer. The activity concludes with a song.





Encounter, the Way to Dialogue

“It is extremely important to commit ourselves to sincere, authentic dialogue, built on respect for the dignity of every human person, created, as we Christians firmly believe, in the image and likeness of God”. (*Benedict XVI - 25 April 2005*)

Introduction

God created man in his image and likeness: this is the faith that we profess. Man is always the image and likeness of God, no matter what his culture or religion may be. Let us invoke the Spirit of the Lord to be freed from all prejudice and may have an open heart, able to recognise Him in every human being, even in our Muslim brothers and sisters.

Hymn to the Holy Spirit

The Word of God

Jesus does not look at outward appearance. His glance is fixed on the heart, on the essential, on the deep secret that each person holds within. It is in a person's heart that the hopes, joys, expectations, desires and search for the meaning of life and faith dwell.

- “*So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality*”. (Mt 22, 16)
- “*When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her”. And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing*

before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir". And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again". (Jn 8, 7 – 11)

- *"Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength', and 'to love one's neighbour as oneself', – this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices". When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God". After that no one dared to ask him any question". (Mk 12, 32-34)*

Personal Reflection

Word of the Church

"The plan of salvation also embraces those who recognise the Creator, and in particular among these, Muslims, who profess the faith of Abram, adore with us the one and only God, who is merciful and will judge all people on the last day". (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 16)

"The Church looks with favour on the Muslims who adore the one, living, self-existing, merciful and omnipotent, Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to humanity. They try to obey God's decrees even those hidden, just as Abram obeyed; the Islamic faith freely refers to him. Although they do not recognise Jesus as God, they venerate him as a prophet; they honour his virgin Mother, Mary, and even pray to her with devotion. They also await the day of justice when God will give all those who rise their due. They too, value the moral life and render cult to God above all in prayer, almsgiving and fasting. During the course of history, there have been many disagreements and hostility between Christians and Muslims and the Sacred Council exhorts everyone to forget the past and exercise sincere, mutual understanding, so as to defend and promote together, social justice, moral values, peace and freedom for all people". (*Nostra Aetate*, n. 3).

For Sharing

We have read about the Church's thinking with regard to Muslims: how she considers them. Let us now reflect on the following, and then share our views: Do I look at Muslims with esteem? How do I see them?

1. How do I measure my obedience to God's decrees?
2. How do I live up to prayer, fasting, almsgiving?
3. How do I measure my commitment to social justice, moral values, peace and freedom?

Intercessions

To God who is merciful and omnipotent, Creator of heaven and earth, let us now offer our common prayer: **Merciful God, hear our prayer.**

- For young Christians and Muslims, that in line with their own faith, they may cultivate attitudes of peace, solidarity and responsibility towards each other. Let us pray: **Merciful God, hear our prayer.**
- For the adults, parents and educators, that they may help children and youth to develop and discover the resources that the Creator has entrusted to them, to help form responsible human relationships. Let us pray: **Merciful God, hear our prayer.**
- “Justice has its origin in the fact that all people are created by God and are called to form one single family”. May all believers, men and women of good will, learn to unite in harmony their rights and duties. Let us pray: **Merciful God, hear our prayer.**
- For all of us present here, that we may have the courage to live authentic justice that, because of our friendship with God, deepens our relationship with self, other people and the whole of creation. Let us pray: **Merciful God, hear our prayer.**
- For all peoples of every culture and religion, that practising compassion, solidarity, collaboration and fraternity, they may contribute effectively in responding to the great challenges of the present time: harmonious growth, integral development, prevention and resolution of conflicts. Let us pray: **Merciful God, hear our prayer.**

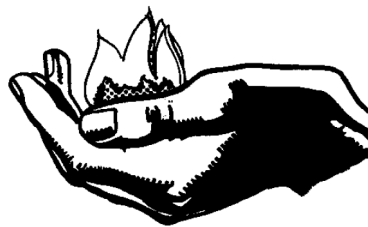
- “Lord God, fill the hearts of all those individuals, families and communities who nourish the desire of being ‘instruments of Peace’”. Let us pray: **Merciful God, hear our prayer.**

Final Prayer

Together: Merciful God, you know the heart of every human being, whom you made in your own image and likeness, grant us to look with favour and trust on all situations where Christians and Muslims are called to build up justice, peace and cooperation, in their daily living together. Amen.

Remember

“Dear friends, I think that a fruitful collaboration between Christians and Muslims is possible. And in this way we contribute to the construction of a society, that will be different in many respects, to the one we brought with us from the past. In so far as we are religious people, starting from our respective convictions, we can give important witness in many crucial sectors of our social life. I think for example of: regard for the family founded on matrimony, respect for life in all its natural phases, promotion of a more widespread social justice”. (*Benedict XVI, 23 September 2011*)



Our Presence Among Muslims as Christian Witness

Introduction

The final report on merging perspectives reminds us: “called in a special way to discipleship, Don Bosco has learned from Jesus to have a pastoral heart for all young people of the whole world. With Don Bosco we are invited to realise our Salesian and missionary vocation in one of the most difficult educative-pastoral contexts in the world. We are called to become “priestly mediators”, to be “Eucharistic presence”, presenting to God the prayers and aspirations of our Muslim brothers and sisters. We are to be contemplative spirits (even in action) that rely more on “being” than on “doing” and “being successful”. We shall then become living gospels. We shall be a tree on which they can build their nests.

Our witnessing must be given above all as community, more than as individual persons. To be men and women of God is the most beautiful gift we can offer to our neighbours... This dialogue happens above all in everyday life. In this way, common values do not remain as abstract generalisations; rather, they become the fruit of a sincere and serious common reflection on the events of our shared history.

To promote deeper personal relationships is the key to dialogue. This opens us to new perspectives and makes us closer as “believers”. Thanks to such personal relationships, distances are bridged, barriers crumble, common spiritual, moral and religious values emerge, and we come to recognise our shared humanity. This should not be considered as a mere strategy; rather, it is an expression of our fidelity to Christ, man-for-all, a universal person. One of the good ways of establishing personal relationships is that of sharing the events of our everyday life. This enables our relationships to go beyond functional rapport, as what happens between an employer and an employee”.

Instruction for Sharing

Read and discuss the extract from the presentation of Francesco Zannini, *Christian Witness as Prophetic Presence*.

Our Text

“It is through our spiritual encounter with believers of other religions that we can discover deeper dimensions of our Christian faith and broaden our vision of God’s salvific presence in the world. Consequently, “dialogue is a new way of being Church”, where there is not any kind of ‘relativising’ our faith in Jesus Christ or dispensing with a critical evaluation of religious experiences, we are called upon to grasp the deeper truth and meaning of the mystery of Christ in relation to the universal history of God’s self-revelation”. This leads us to recognise that ‘it is the same Spirit, who has been active in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus and in the Church, who was active amongst all peoples before the Incarnation and is active amongst the nations, religions and peoples today’.

“Our prophetic presence in the Muslim world should be based on the fact that we have Good News for our Muslim friends and neighbours. By our faith and life we confess that there is One God who has spoken to mankind and that the Word to which we are subject, to which we surrender is the supreme revelation of God himself in the person of Jesus Christ... Christians are responsible then for bearing witness to this mystery, being aware that the concept of “History of Salvation” accomplished in Christ, bears a different meaning from the one that appears in the Muslim statements about God and that, at the same time, there is a larger capacity for sharing many religious beliefs and practices. This makes believers in interreligious dialogue aware that they are in the presence of God and that they work under God’s impulse, bearing witness to one another, taking into account what unites Muslims and Christians as well as what divides them”.

Understand the Text

- 1) What links the witness of the Christian community and of individual Christians?

- 2) In your own opinion why is fostering of interpersonal relationship the key to dialogue?
- 3) What is prophetic witness?
- 4) Why do you think Christian fitness is the responsibility of every Christian?

Deepening the Text

- 1) What is the link between Christian community and the life of every Christian?
- 2) What is the link between Christian fitness and personal relationship?
- 3) How can we bear witness as Christians and Salesians to Muslims who come to our centres?

Our Experiences

- Share personal experiences and historical events regarding Christian fitness among Muslims.
- Among the positive examples we have heard which of these could be useful in our present situation? What lessons can we draw out from these?

Our Conclusion

Each one is invited to say a thanksgiving prayer. The activity concludes with a song.





The Dialogue of Gratuitous Service

“Our little Church is known as the Church of Meeting. During the meeting there is spontaneous sincere and constructive dialogue, expressed simply by presence and sharing. This is then translated into gratuitous service aroused by nothing other than the love of neighbour” (*Mons. Ghaleb Bader – Archbishop of Algiers*)

Introduction

The breath of God created life. It is this same “breath” that urges us to approach those who are in need of our help, our presence, our care. Let us ask the Holy Spirit to open our hearts so that our hands may be flexible in helping, our feet swift to care for the suffering, our smile spontaneous and open to everyone, like a ray of light that warms, enlightens and gives life!

Hymn to the Holy Spirit

The Word of God

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son “ (Jn 3, 16). The Son does what the Father wills (cf. Jn 5, 19). He is among us as one who serves!

- *“Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So*

if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you". (Jn 13, 3–5. 12–15)

- *"Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many". (Mk 10, 43–45)*

Personal Reflection

Words of a speaker

"We must take into account present obstacles: we need to know and forget past injustices, free ourselves from prejudice, know what others think about Christianity. **We must commit ourselves to much needed collaboration:** we need to work for the development of the world, to serve humanity, to organise society better, to imitate in our human way, God's divine action. **We need to consider possible spiritual convergences:** like the mystery of God, the gift of the Word, the role of the prophets, the presence of the community, the secrets of prayer, the lives saints. It is a matter of "competing with each other in doing good" as the Qur'an suggests (5, 48) and of growing in the service of God in the name of "a competitive spirit" which aims at "promoting faith". In this way any form of wrongful proselytism that presents the faith as merchandise and seeks to accumulate numbers, is avoided. The Christian's commitment to spiritual witness implies: welcoming others, mutual understanding and dialogue, collaboration and sharing, daring to take risks, becoming for each other witnesses of God, exacting and merciful as He is, involving oneself in the dialogue of daily life, in the dialogue of work (school, hospital, other work), in the dialogue among experts (intellectuals, theologians), in the dialogue with spiritual leaders". Such a commitment will gradually pave the way, through a four-way conversion: to the values of the kingdom (the Beatitudes), to the proposal of God (his Paternity), to attraction for Christ (his brotherhood) and communion with the Church (Family of God)". (Fr. Maurice Borrmans M. Afr.)

For Sharing

1. At personal level, what do we mean by service? What space is there for gratuitous service in my life? Who do I serve?
2. Is our presence (work) a presence of evangelical service? To what extent?

Intercessions *(adapt to local situation)*

Let us turn to the God who became one of us and from whom we learn that the greatest joy is to serve. To Him we pray: **Lord, You who came to serve, hear our prayer!**

- For all the works through which the Church carries on the dialogue of service to Muslims, that they may be places of encounter, friendship and occasions for communication and mutual understanding. Let us pray: **Lord, You who came to serve, hear our prayer!**
- For those places where Muslims are the majority, where the Church runs schools, hospitals, Homes for children and for the aged... that these works may question the hearts of the citizens and be the starting point for a spontaneous, serene, honest dialogue. Let us pray: **Lord, You who came to serve, hear our prayer!**
- For all Christians living in countries where the proclamation of the Gospel is forbidden or where the faith can be lived only within the home. Let us pray: **You who came to serve, hear our prayer!**
- May our service to believers of other religions be marked by the witness of gratuitousness, joy and friendliness. Let us pray: **Lord, You who came to serve, hear our prayer!**

(spontaneous intercessions)

Final Prayer

Together: O God, our gracious and merciful Father, because we believe in your Word, we implore the grace to live in the service of our brothers

and sisters whom you have entrusted to us, certain that every time we have done something for even one of the least of your children, we have done it for You. AMEN!

Remember

“I believe that the witness of our lives is the most eloquent Gospel and that even without our knowledge, some people will be attracted” (*Sr. Ibtissam Kassis FMA*).



Dialogue and Proclamation

Introduction

The final text of the Study Days underline: “In regions or areas where there is religious freedom, it is necessary to have the courage to propose a journey to know Christ that could lead to Baptism and discipleship, using wisdom and discernment according to the Gospel. Jesus Christ has given this mission to all His disciples. It is universal since the call and Jesus Christ’s teachings are addressed to all peoples and all times (cf. Mt 28:18-20). Instead, in areas where religious freedom is threatened or even repressed, we accompany the journey of the people to live human values inspired by the Gospel. The Church assures us that this is already Baptism of desire that opens one to salvation: ‘we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery’ (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22). It will be useful to know and to analyse the different journeys of conversion towards Jesus. This will keep alive our hope and enable us to learn valuable lessons in the accompaniment of others”.

Instruction for Sharing

Some reads the text aloud for everyone. This is followed by a brief moment of silent reflection.

Our Text

Redemptoris Missio reminds us that the Church promotes interreligious dialogue because it is an essential part of its mission. It fosters interreligious dialogue not out of tactical concern nor of personal interest but out of profound respect, openness to the truth, humility and frankness, in order to

discover and recognise the work of the Holy Spirit and the different forms God has revealed himself in religions and cultures. The interlocutors, faithful to their own traditional and religious convictions, spur us not only to discover the “seeds of the Word” and the “ray of that truth which enlightens all”, but also to deepen one’s own identity. Through dialogue the Church also bears fitness to the fullness of revelation, which it has received for the good of all. In this light, dialogue is intimately connected with, even if it is distinct, from proclamation. Therefore, the Church continues in this difficult and often misunderstood journey with a profound conviction that it is the path towards the Kingdom which surely will fruit, even if now we do not know yet the “how” and the “when” (*Redemptoris missio* 45, 55, 56, 57).

Understand the Text

- 1) Why do you think dialogue and proclamation are indispensable?
- 4) What are the fundamental reasons for interreligious dialogue?
- 2) What is the importance of dialogue and evangelical witness in our dialogue with Muslims?
- 3) According to you why is listening and mutual esteem indispensable in interreligious dialogue?

Deepen the Text

- 1) What links dialogue and proclamation?
- 2) What is the link between interreligious dialogue and fitness of life?
- 3) How can we “keep our hope burning” while working among Muslims?

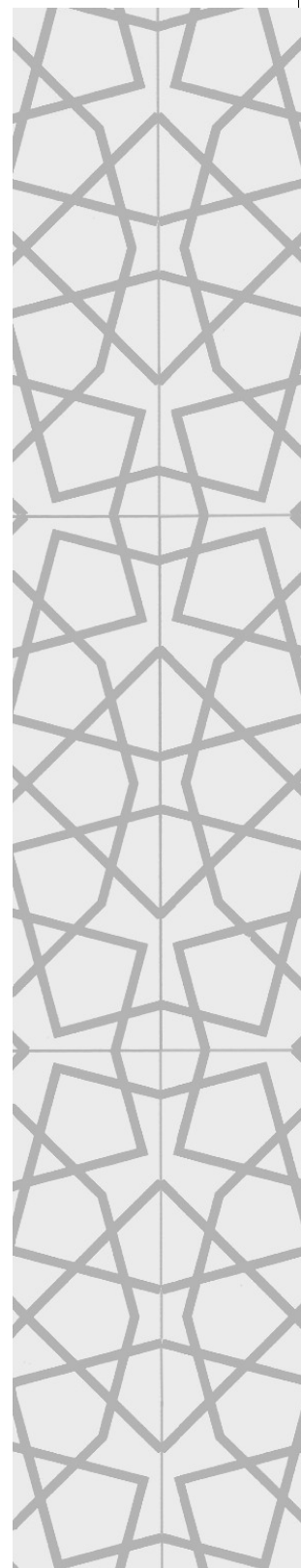
Our Experiences

- Share positive examples of dialogue and proclamation among Muslims.
- Among the positive examples we have heard which of these could be useful in our present context? How could we adapt these in our own context?

Conclusion

The activity concludes with a hymn.

Appendices





Salesian Pastoral Ministry in Islamic Context

Practical Proposals for FMA and SDB in Islamic Context

(Cairo, Egypt December 12, 1988 – January 3, 1989)

Introduction

At the end of the *Seminar on Salesian Pastoral Ministry in Islamic Context*, the participants wished to express some practical guidelines regarding our work in these lands, which will serve as concrete reflection for the communities. They do not express all the richness of what one would wish to say, but these place important emphasis on and indicate paths for planning. These would have to be considered by keeping in mind the various syntheses of the work of different groups on varied topics.

Proposals

1. Community and personal assumption of the values of society in which we are inserted:
 - language, culture, religions
 - knowledge of the area and the needs of the recipients
 - local vocation promotion and initial formation.
2. Commitment at all levels of mentalisation and openness in our pastoral activities in the world of Islamic youth.
3. Live the value of hospitality by opening hearts and doors to all young people without distinction.
4. Care for the identity of the recipients by rooting them in the Gospel and in the values of their own Church so as to help them live as leaven in the dough who are also open to non-Christians.
5. Rediscover the oratory as a typically Salesian proposal which is expressed in a variety of structures and situations.

6. Cultivate progressively religious values in all recipients.
7. Where the socio-political and religious context limits us to a particular type of presence, we try to reach the 'excluded' through a variety of activities and interventions.
8. Foster the promotion of women, by making them aware of their possibilities and their specific role in the family and in society, promoting their education and helping them to enter the world of work.
9. Collaboration between SDB and FMA in the stages of planning, implementation, evaluation of the pastoral plan in the area.

translated from the original text in Italian

Missionary Animation and Formation Seminar: SDB - FMA in Islamic Context Conclusions

(Pisana-Roma, February 25 – March 2, 2001)

At the end of the *Seminar on Missionary Animation and Formation SDB-FMA in Islamic Context* (Rome-Pisana, February 25 - March 2, 2001), we the SDBs and the FMAs converging from North Africa, Sub Sahara Africa, the Middle East, South East Asia and from the Balkans, have gathered together in order to get to know each other, to evaluate the situation, and to prepare ourselves by sharing our experiences. Together we have deepened our convictions that will now accompany us and which we would like to promote as we return to our countries.

We have reflected on the socio-cultural-religious elements which are prevalent in countries where the Muslims are the majority, while becoming aware of Islam as one and plural, which has its own demands with regard to approach, dialogue and mutual questioning.

It is our way of being Christians, and consecrated persons which will be put to test and it is in such situations we manifest our faith, give meaning to our hope and bear witness to our charity.

The participants of the Seminar are convinced that the following strategic points are to be stressed in order to foster dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

- Genuine identity and witness (personal and communitarian) of the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians as believers and as consecrated persons;
- Explaining and sharing the reasons of our faith (where it is possible);
- Competent knowledge of Islam, of the culture and of the area where we work;
- Special emphasis on education as the “place” of dialogue and inculturation;

- The spirituality of the presence understood in the light of Salesian pedagogy as consisting in Reason, Religion and Loving Kindness.

The Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians suggest the following practical guidelines for the Educative dimension:

- To give importance to the competent and updated formation of educators
- To foster the pedagogical “presence” of the educators within their setting;
- To give priority to the promotion of human rights and values in view of fostering fellowship;
- To start from the conviction that the educators and those being educated share one common Father, therefore, it is proposed to foster:
 - common educative and social activities which involve especially girls and women;
 - openness to all underlining especially a welcoming attitude shown to those who are coming from different background;
 - education which develops corresponsibility, right judgement and a spiritual sensitivity.

translated from the original text in Italian

Christian Witness in a Multireligious World Recommendations for Conduct

Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue
World Council of Churches, World Evangelical Alliance

Preamble

Mission belongs to the very being of the church. Proclaiming the word of God and witnessing to the world is essential for every Christian. At the same time, it is necessary to do so according to gospel principles, with full respect and love for all human beings.

Aware of the tensions between people and communities of different religious convictions and the varied interpretations of Christian witness, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID), the World Council of Churches (WCC) and, at the invitation of the WCC, the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), met during a period of 5 years to reflect and produce this document to serve as a set of recommendations for conduct on Christian witness around the world. This document does not intend to be a theological statement on mission but to address practical issues associated with Christian witness in a multi-religious world.

The purpose of this document is to encourage churches, church councils and mission agencies to reflect on their current practices and to use the recommendations in this document to prepare, where appropriate, their own guidelines for their witness and mission among those of different religions and among those who do not profess any particular religion. It is hoped that Christians across the world will study this document in the light of their own practices in witnessing to their faith in Christ, both by word and deed.

A basis for Christian witness

1. For Christians it is a privilege and joy to give an accounting for the hope that is within them and to do so with gentleness and respect (cf. 1 Peter 3:15).

2. Jesus Christ is the supreme witness (cf. John 18:37). Christian witness is always a sharing in his witness, which takes the form of proclamation of the kingdom, service to neighbour and the total gift of self even if that act of giving leads to the cross. Just as the Father sent the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit, so believers are sent in mission to witness in word and action to the love of the triune God.
3. The example and teaching of Jesus Christ and of the early church must be the guides for Christian mission. For two millennia Christians have sought to follow Christ's way by sharing the good news of God's kingdom (cf. Luke 4:16-20).
4. Christian witness in a pluralistic world includes engaging in dialogue with people of different religions and cultures (cf. Acts 17:22-28).
5. In some contexts, living and proclaiming the gospel is difficult, hindered or even prohibited, yet Christians are commissioned by Christ to continue faithfully in solidarity with one another in their witness to him (cf. Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:14-18; Luke 24:44-48; John 20:21; Acts 1:8).
6. If Christians engage in inappropriate methods of exercising mission by resorting to deception and coercive means, they betray the gospel and may cause suffering to others. Such departures call for repentance and remind us of our need for God's continuing grace (cf. Romans 3:23).
7. Christians affirm that while it is their responsibility to witness to Christ, conversion is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 16:7-9; Acts 10:44-47). They recognise that the Spirit blows where the Spirit wills in ways over which no human being has control (cf. John 3:8).

Principles

Christians are called to adhere to the following principles as they seek to fulfil Christ's commission in an appropriate manner, particularly within interreligious contexts.

1. **Acting in God's love.** Christians believe that God is the source of all love and, accordingly, in their witness they are called to live lives of

love and to love their neighbour as themselves (cf. Matthew 22:34-40; John 14:15).

2. **Imitating Jesus Christ.** In all aspects of life, and especially in their witness, Christians are called to follow the example and teachings of Jesus Christ, sharing his love, giving glory and honour to God the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 20:21-23).
3. **Christian virtues.** Christians are called to conduct themselves with integrity, charity, compassion and humility, and to overcome all arrogance, condescension and disparagement (cf. Galatians 5:22).
4. **Acts of service and justice.** Christians are called to act justly and to love tenderly (cf. Micah 6:8). They are further called to serve others and in so doing to recognise Christ in the least of their sisters and brothers (cf. Matthew 25:45). Acts of service, such as providing education, health care, relief services and acts of justice and advocacy are an integral part of witnessing to the gospel. The exploitation of situations of poverty and need has no place in Christian outreach. Christians should denounce and refrain from offering all forms of allurements, including financial incentives and rewards, in their acts of service.
5. **Discernment in ministries of healing.** As an integral part of their witness to the gospel, Christians exercise ministries of healing. They are called to exercise discernment as they carry out these ministries, fully respecting human dignity and ensuring that the vulnerability of people and their need for healing are not exploited.
6. **Rejection of violence.** Christians are called to reject all forms of violence, even psychological or social, including the abuse of power in their witness. They also reject violence, unjust discrimination or repression by any religious or secular authority, including the violation or destruction of places of worship, sacred symbols or texts.
7. **Freedom of religion and belief.** Religious freedom including the right to publicly profess, practice, propagate and change one's religion flows from the very dignity of the human person which is grounded in the creation of all human beings in the image and likeness of God (cf. Genesis 1:26). Thus, all human beings have equal rights and

responsibilities. Where any religion is instrumentalised for political ends, or where religious persecution occurs, Christians are called to engage in a prophetic witness denouncing such actions.

8. **Mutual respect and solidarity.** Christians are called to commit themselves to work with all people in mutual respect, promoting together justice, peace and the common good. Interreligious cooperation is an essential dimension of such commitment.
9. **Respect for all people.** Christians recognise that the gospel both challenges and enriches cultures. Even when the gospel challenges certain aspects of cultures, Christians are called to respect all people. Christians are also called to discern elements in their own cultures that are challenged by the gospel.
10. **Renouncing false witness.** Christians are to speak sincerely and respectfully; they are to listen in order to learn about and understand others' beliefs and practices, and are encouraged to acknowledge and appreciate what is true and good in them. Any comment or critical approach should be made in a spirit of mutual respect, making sure not to bear false witness concerning other religions.
11. **Ensuring personal discernment.** Christians are to acknowledge that changing one's religion is a decisive step that must be accompanied by sufficient time for adequate reflection and preparation, through a process ensuring full personal freedom.
12. **Building interreligious relationships.** Christians should continue to build relationships of respect and trust with people of different religions so as to facilitate deeper mutual understanding, reconciliation and cooperation for the common good.

Recommendations

The Third Consultation organised by the World Council of Churches and the PCID of the Holy See in collaboration with World Evangelical Alliance with participation from the largest Christian families of faith (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Evangelical and Pentecostal), having acted

in a spirit of ecumenical cooperation to prepare this document for consideration by churches, national and regional confessional bodies and mission organisations, and especially those working in interreligious contexts, recommends that these bodies:

1. **study** the issues set out in this document and where appropriate formulate guidelines for conduct regarding Christian witness applicable to their particular contexts. Where possible this should be done ecumenically, and in consultation with representatives of other religions.
2. **build** relationships of respect and trust with people of all religions, in particular at institutional levels between churches and other religious communities, engaging in on-going interreligious dialogue as part of their Christian commitment. In certain contexts, where years of tension and conflict have created deep suspicions and breaches of trust between and among communities, interreligious dialogue can provide new opportunities for resolving conflicts, restoring justice, healing of memories, reconciliation and peace-building.
3. **encourage** Christians to strengthen their own religious identity and faith while deepening their knowledge and understanding of different religions, and to do so also taking into account the perspectives of the adherents of those religions. Christians should avoid misrepresenting the beliefs and practices of people of different religions.
4. **cooperate** with other religious communities engaging in interreligious advocacy towards justice and the common good and, wherever possible, standing together in solidarity with people who are in situations of conflict.
5. **call** on their governments to ensure that freedom of religion is properly and comprehensively respected, recognising that in many countries religious institutions and persons are inhibited from exercising their mission. *pray* for their neighbours and their well-being, recognising that prayer is integral to who we are and what we do, as well as to Christ's mission.
6. **pray** for their neighbours and their well-being, recognising that prayer is integral to who we are and what we do, as well as to Christ's mission.

Appendix: Background to the document

1. In today's world there is increasing collaboration among Christians and between Christians and followers of different religions. The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) of the Holy See and the World Council of Churches' Programme on Interreligious Dialogue and Co-operation (WCCIRDC) have a history of such collaboration. Examples of themes on which the PCID/WCC-IRDC have collaborated in the past are: Interreligious Marriage (1994-1997), Interreligious Prayer (1997-1998) and African Religiosity (2000-2004). This document is a result of their work together.
2. There are increasing interreligious tensions in the world today, including violence and the loss of human life. Politics, economics and other factors play a role in these tensions. Christians too are sometimes involved in these conflicts, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, either as those who are persecuted or as those participating in violence. In response to this the PCID and WCC-IRDC decided to address the issues involved in a joint process towards producing shared recommendations for conduct on Christian witness. The WCC-IRDC invited the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) to participate in this process, and they have gladly done so.
3. Initially two consultations were held: the first, in Lariano, Italy, in May 2006, was entitled "Assessing the Reality" where representatives of different religions shared their views and experiences on the question of conversion. A statement from the consultation reads in part: "We affirm that, while everyone has a right to invite others to an understanding of their faith, it should not be exercised by violating others' rights and religious sensibilities. Freedom of religion enjoins upon all of us the equally non-negotiable responsibility to respect faiths other than our own, and never to denigrate, vilify or misrepresent them for the purpose of affirming superiority of our faith".
4. The second, an inter-Christian consultation, was held in Toulouse, France, in August 2007, to reflect on these same issues. Questions on Family and Community, Respect for Others, Economy, Marketing and Competition, and Violence and Politics were thoroughly discussed. The

pastoral and missionary issues around these topics became the background for theological reflection and for the principles developed in this document. Each issue is important in its own right and deserves more attention that can be given in these recommendations.

5. The participants of the third (inter-Christian) consultation met in Bangkok, Thailand, from 25-28, January, 2011 and finalised this document.



Christian Identity and Muslim Students

Dossier C

Enseignement Catholique Secrétariat Générale, France

CHALLENGE

Responding to its mission by being open to all, nevertheless the Catholic educational institution has to affirm its identity. This balance to maintain vis-à-vis non-Christian religions is made clear in the text of Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*¹⁵⁹:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ “the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14, 6), [...]. She exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognise, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men. (§2)

In practice, many different situations may arise, clarification is necessary to identify them and face them positively.

1. The celebrations

The pastoral animation project must be creative and must offer different types of celebrations to allow greater participation in identifying how the community has or does not have the practice of gathering for moments of sharing and conviviality and in remembering that the Christian celebration is built on encounters that the human communities already live in their daily lives¹⁶⁰.

¹⁵⁹ Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions. 1965.

¹⁶⁰ *Annonce Explicite de l'Évangile dans les Établissements Catholiques d'Enseignement*, p. 10. II A 3.

- In situations centred on a celebration, it appears to us that there are different forms. Thus, whether it is a regular Mass, the feast of the school, the significant events which mark school life, exceptional events for a student or an adult of the education team ... it seems to us that all these situations ought not be treated in the same way.
- Two key elements have emerged from our work:
 - a centre where the community experience is a priority. Here the fact that the entire educative community is present, it is essential so that all, without exclusion, share and “communicate” in this event
 - a centre where participation in the Eucharistic celebration, “source and summit” of Christian life, concern only the baptised risk losing the very meaning of this sacrament. Here the approach cannot but be voluntary, the number matters little.

The Eucharist is “the source and summit” of Christian life, which is why Christians of the institution pray and gather around the table of the Word and of the Eucharistic table, whether the number of participants is significant or not. “Where two or three, are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst”¹⁶¹. (Mt 18,20)

- Whenever a celebration is planned, two questions arise:
 - What kind of celebration are we referring to, knowing that the liturgical celebration is not necessarily the celebration of the Eucharist?

Although the liturgical dimension in an educative community which is deliberately open to all whatever the context in which the institution is located is delicate to fulfil, the project of the pastoral animation must reflect, however, to the place to be given to the celebration¹⁶².

- If there is a Eucharistic celebration, how to organise a time of celebration for all and a Eucharist for those who wish?

2. Cultural input, catechesis

Here, too, further clarification needs to be made.

- Regarding the religious factor in education, teaching must place the

¹⁶¹ *Idem*, p. 9 II A 3.

¹⁶² *Ibidem*.

cultural elements in its didactic approach. This is what was referred to by the Joutard report and more recently by the Debray report.

- A number of Catholic institutions put in place supplementary activities under the terms “religious culture” and “Christian culture”. These cultural type of activities, like all types of education, pose no problem to the extent that they remain objectively well within its scope and aim.
- As the text of the Bishops’ Conference of France invites us, the Catholic school does not have to be silent for its reasons for believing and hoping. It is this act of witness known as “initial proclamation” that Christians in the educative community are called to.

“In an initial proclamation someone reacts to a situation by presenting oneself as a believer”. That is to say that a believer does not present oneself with a ready-made discourse, which interprets in advance the life of the other. It is a matter of having the word which engages the listener in a given situation¹⁶³. This proclamation is addressed to all, to enlighten the freedom of the listener, and whose response will be scrupulously respected: “Whoever receives the proclamation is free to listen, to adhere or not, to allow oneself to be questioned. An initial proclamation does not require that a voluntary request be gathered beforehand from those to whom it is addressed”¹⁶⁴.

These various activities that enter directly in the mission of a Catholic educational institution are open to all students.

- On the other hand, catechesis is part of a diocesan project.

“It is the responsibility of the bishop of each diocese to define a comprehensive catechetical project. The choice of a Catholic educational institution is necessarily inserted in this project”¹⁶⁵.

It is a personal approach based on the freedom of those who undertake it. It is an approach that engages Christians of the community and those who request such a path

“Catechesis [...] develops and brings to maturity the initial conversion by educating the convert to the faith and incorporating him or her into the Christian community”¹⁶⁶.

¹⁶³ *Idem.* P.7 ID 2.

¹⁶⁴ *Idem.* P.8 ID 2.

¹⁶⁵ *Idem.* P.8 ID 2.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibidem.*

In the strict sense of the term, therefore, there cannot be compulsory catechesis.

3. Christian Signs

In a Catholic educational institution a multitude of elements may be signs which call to mind its identity. For example:

- explicit references to the Gospel and the tradition of the Church (openness, reception, meetings, daily life),
- witness of Christians during the examination of students ...,
- stakeholders contribute in a visible and explicit manner to the pastoral activity and the manner they work together,
- places (chapel, oratory, a place of silence ...),
- specific moments and their place in the school timetable,
- proposals for activities (human reflection, Christian culture, catechesis ...),
- objects on display (cross, Christmas crib ...),
- the means of information (newsletter of the institution, bulletin boards, distribution of documents ...).

However, every sign depends on its reception which gives it meaning. Here several factors come into play: how these signs are presented, the quality of relationships in the institution, the receiver's culture and its representations... So certain elements have lost their sign value today, others are perceived as significant but do not provoke any reaction anymore, others can be experienced positively or otherwise be object of tension. This latter category could easily be the case of entering a church or seeing Christ on the cross ... that can elicit reactions from some Muslims.

ITEMS OF THIS DOSSIER

Dossier C. Christian Identity and Muslim students

- C.1. Celebrate the patronal feast with everyone?
- C.2. Celebration in exceptional circumstances
- C.3. Celebration of liturgical seasons
- C.4. Catechesis for everyone?
- C.5. Christian signs in school



DOCUMENTS

Reference texts

- *Annonce Explicite de l'Évangile dans les Établissements Catholiques d'Enseignement*. CNEC, 2009.
- *Texte National pour l'Orientation de la Catéchèse en France*. CEF, 2006.

Texts for Reflection (website <http://ec-ressources.fr>)

- *Apport Culturel et Annonce de l'Évangile*
- *La Première Annonce en Établissement Catholique d'Enseignement*.



Appendix
C.1

Celebrate the Patronal Feast with Everyone?

SITUATION• *Facts*

The institution includes a primary school and a secondary school. In the light of the meeting of the Catholic Education it was expressed the desire to do something together. This resulted in preparing and celebrating with everyone on December 8, Feast of the Immaculate Conception, name of the institution. The celebration takes place in the neighbouring church.

• *Preparation*

- work in language groups prepared during the trimester,
- the head of the school passes in all classes to motivate everyone, especially to stress that *“for those of other religions or without religion, this is an opportunity to reflect”*.

• *Preparation*

- the older students accompany the younger ones

• *During the celebration*

- a Sister explains “in a simple way” the meaning of the various moments of the celebration, the “yes” of Mary
- Each had worked on his or her personal “yes” and places it on the altar
- The kindergarten children leave at the moment of the Eucharist

• *Take Note*

- During the preparation the older ones were proud to lead the younger ones, which constitutes a very significant gesture
- Each class has participated according to its level
- During the celebration, a deep and moving reflection
- Success due to preparatory work in language groups
- Students ask to repeat it

It could be noted by the fact that very few were absent. Various factors contributed to the success of this day like:

- the importance of beauty and of silence, of reflection (cf. John Paul II in Damascus),
- the importance of celebrating something together,
- the relationship between language groups and the celebration.

CHALLENGE

Although everyone was able to participate in the celebration of the patronal feast, however, the fundamental question remains: “*What is the meaning of the participation of Jews or Muslims in the Eucharistic celebration?*”

CLARIFICATION

- Letter to Catholics of France *Proposer la Foi (Une Eglise qui Célèbre)*
- Bishops of France, *Proposer la Foi dans la Société Actuelle. Lettre aux Catholiques de France*. Documents d’Église series (Paris: Cerf, 1996). See the part about the Church which celebrates.
- Vatican II. Declaration *Dignitatis Humanæ* on religious freedom.

PATHS FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

- It is understandable that there be a celebration with everyone occasionally during an important event in the life of an institution and if it offers a strong momentum. There is an emotional and relational dimension during these extraordinary moments.
- This, then, requires the process of preparing ahead and of evaluating it with everyone after the celebration. It is important to explain the meaning of such a celebration with students, teachers, parents (especially in primary and secondary schools), the celebrant.
- Generally, for important moments in the life of the school, it is important to reflect on the choice to be made between the fact of

celebrating an event, of organising a Liturgy of the Word, or of deciding to have a Eucharistic celebration.

- It seems to be an interesting approach to offer these options, so that everyone can participate in the event while respecting individual choice.
- Under no circumstance should the Mass be compulsory for anyone. The Eucharist is an invitation of the Lord to which everyone responds freely.

Celebration in Exceptional Circumstances

Appendix C.2

SITUATION

In the summer, a tragedy touched a family of the school. Three of its members perished in the fire in an apartment. Among the victims was Sarah 4 years old, a student in the class of the lower grade. Her mother and another of her children were also among the victims. The school opening is fast approaching. How can we live the moments of reunion with the children and their parents? It is the entire educative community that is affected by her demise.

Very soon, teachers, staff, parents expressed the need to live a moment of reflection. So the whole educative community met to express its sorrow and at the same time prepare a moment of reflection. But how can this be done since Sarah grew up in a Muslim family.

One Saturday morning in September, the school children gathered in the courtyard, surrounded by their parents and teachers. A Sura of the Qur'an in Arabic was proclaimed by the kindergarten assistant, then a Psalm was read. A candle was lit and flowers are placed before the photo of Sarah. The children then sang the favourite nursery rhyme of their little friend: a green mouse. At this moment what is essential was said, the gesture made.

Beyond this moments of reflection, the teaching staff went all through the way of the accompaniment. The date of the gathering fell on the day of the end of Ramadan, the kindergarten assistant offered to make the dish for the family. Teachers did the shopping and participated in the preparation. While everyone fulfilled her or his task, the time spent with Sarah was recalled.

CHALLENGE

- How can we accompany a grieving family who does not share the same religious beliefs with us? What words? What actions to take to

show our support? How to grieve at the level of entire educative community.

- How to do it in a manner that does not hurt, does not feel abandoned, and not impose? Do we have the right to read a Sura (each chapter of the Qur'an) in a Catholic institution?
- How to express our "hope" ?
- How can we have a celebration, in the context of a Catholic school life, that respects a Muslim family and its faith and the Catholic character of the school?

CLARIFICATION

Vatican II. *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions), n. 3 on "the Muslims". 1965.

- The Muslim vision of death, cf. Information Sheet n. 7. (see extract below).
- Qur'an. Sura 1 (see below).

PATHS FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

- Here the choice was a celebration in the school with the whole educative community. Preparation made by many people, including a staff member of the Muslim faith.
- A celebration of this kind is not a funeral. It is similar to a celebration of the Word.
- The reading of a verse from the Qur'an to respect the Muslim family, in Arabic, by a Muslim, and in French so that it could be understood by the participants. Sura 1 is not a problem. For other Suras check its relevance and avoid the those which are against the Christian faith.
- To respect the faith of the Church read a Gospel text. Make a symbolic gesture (light, flower...) in which all participate.
- The choice of a song whose words do not offend the Muslim faith. Where possible preparation should be done together with the family.
- Contact the delegate for relations with Muslims, if there is one. Do not consistently use the Imam, his role is not that of a Priest.

Celebration of Liturgical Season

Appendix
C.3

SITUATION

A primary school is preparing to celebrate Christmas. The emphasis is on the act of sharing rather than the birth of Jesus out of respect for children of the Muslim faith.

CHALLENGE

- Does respect for Muslim students imply a celebration without explicit Christian references?
- How could there be a celebration of Christmas which respects both Muslim students and the plan of Catholic Education?

CLARIFICATION

- On silence: John-Paul II to the Muslim community, Umayyad Mosque, Damascus, May 6, 2001 (See text below).
- Benedict XVI, Address on the Temple Mount, Jerusalem, May 12, 2009 (See text below).
- Qur'an, Sura 19. Maryam (Mary) (See text below).

PATHS FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

- You cannot miss Christmas: everyone talks about it. It is the responsibility of Christians and, therefore, of Catholic Education to explain the meaning and say how they live it in their daily lives. Christmas, the birth of Jesus is intended for everyone. In the Qur'an, Jesus is recognised as the son of Mary, but he is not recognised as the Son of God.

- It may be envisaged to present the main Christian feasts in order to awaken religious culture: know the celebrations of each other to better encounter the other.
- It is important to think of proposing a gradual approach which allows time for all and allows Christians to celebrate the Eucharist.
- It is opportune to remain on common ground by choosing songs that can be shared by all while paying full attention to the words that you want to sing.
- It is not possible to do the same in the different liturgical seasons. You cannot have a pattern applicable to every feast.
- It should be remembered that not everything takes place in the school. There is a statement which encourages linking with the diocese and the parish.
- It is important that in Catholic educational institutions Christmas and Easter be celebrated, even if the time of these celebrations vary.

Is Catechesis for All?

Appendix
C.4

SITUATION

The institution is a Secondary School city with 12 classes.

Gradual integration of Muslims from the outskirts of the city. Students also with learning difficulties and with behavioural problems.

The institution has included in the schedule the “obligatory Catechesis” for all, 6°/5° in agreement with parents at enrolment. It is optional at the 4°/3°.

Arrangement put in place by the institution

1. In 6°: The students are all together in small groups of eight following a diocesan program.
Program: Old Testament until the discovery of Jesus.
2. En 5°: Discovery of Gospel texts until February. After a choice is proposed:
 - Deepening of faith oriented towards the profession of faith.
 - Ethical issues. daily aspects.
3. En 4° and 3°: The sessions are focused on encounter and sharing.
At the 3° after a quarter, again a choice:
 - Path of confirmation
 - Universal values

What has been observed

Initially, there was a rejection, from Muslims even of the Christian cultural dimension. But thanks to respect and dialogue, the approach was eventually accepted.

CHALLENGE

- How to find a satisfactory solution that respects the choice of the institution and freedom which requires an effective catechetical approach?

- How to introduce at the same time a genuine catechetical approach for those who wish and desire to prepare for the sacraments and allow others to discover what gives life to Christians?

CLARIFICATION

- Text of Vatican II on interreligious dialogue
- *Texte National pour l'Orientation de la Catéchèse en France* (TNOCF).
- *Proposer la Foi dans la Société Actuelle*
- Document for Clarification *Apport Culturel et Annonce de l'Évangile*, <http://ecressources.fr>
- *Annonce Explicite de l'Évangile dans les Établissements Catholiques d'Enseignement*. Text of CNEC.

PATHS FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

- As stated in the first of seven points of support for pedagogy of initiation in the TNOCF, catechesis corresponds to an approach in the context of freedom. It requires the adhesion of the person concerned or of the parents of the younger students.
- It is necessary to clarify the different activities. The so-called compulsory catechesis are done – almost in their totality – during moments of “Christian culture”, or even “religious culture”. Thereby making them mandatory, but which completely obscures the proposed catechism in the strict sense.
- The cultural contribution or the proclamation of the Gospel, it is important that these moments or interventions are part of a clear and explicit educational project, and that the institution promotes dialogue in general to make interreligious dialogue possible. Testimonies reveal that the latter has a very positive influence on the atmosphere of the class and of the whole institution

Christian Signs in the School

Appendix
C.5

SITUATION

A primary school has over 200 students. Over 70% of them are Muslim.

It is the season of Advent. The school head places a Christmas crib in the lobby. A Muslim parent demands that the crib be removed because “a Muslim cannot hear that Jesus is the Son of God”.

CHALLENGE

- To welcome and respect the other’s culture and religion, is it necessary to remove every Christian symbol, sign of our Christian identity, and to silence what animates Catholic education?
- How visible should the specific character of a Catholic educational institution that welcomes a strong Muslim population be?

CLARIFICATION

- Qur’an, Sura 4, 157-158

PATHS FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

To facilitate dialogue:

1. Decode the message to highlight the willingness to communicate: in this case, is it a reaction which reveals a form of fundamentalism?
2. Know what Islam says about Jesus. Know for example that for Muslims Jesus could not be crucified (cf. Sura 4, 157) whence the reaction vis-

- à-vis the crucifix. For some, the cross is related to the events of the Crusades, even if this is often unconscious.
3. Faced with the reaction of parents to be clear and refer to the position of the project of Catholic educational institution.
 4. It is important that Christians make visible signs of the identity of the Catholic school. This visibility is a visible aid in the form cultural contribution or initial proclamation.

EXTRACTS FROM CITED DOCUMENTS

Vatican II. *Nostra Aetate* n. 3 about *Muslims*

The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all- powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth,(5) who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honour Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting.

On silence: John-Paul II to the Muslim community, Umayyad Mosque Damascus, May 6, 2001

It is important to teach young people the path of respect and understanding

§ 2. The fact that we are meeting in this renowned place of prayer reminds us that man is a spiritual being, called to acknowledge and respect the absolute priority of God in all things. Christians and Muslims agree that the encounter with God in prayer is the necessary nourishment of our souls, without which our hearts wither and our will no longer strives for good but succumbs to evil.

§ 3. Both Muslims and Christians prize their places of prayer, as oases where they meet the All Merciful God on the journey to eternal life, and where they meet their brothers and sisters in the bond of religion. When, on

the occasion of weddings or funerals or other celebrations, Christians and Muslims remain in silent respect at the other's prayer, they bear witness to what unites them, without disguising or denying the things that separate.

It is in mosques and churches that the Muslim and Christian communities shape their religious identity, and it is there that the young receive a significant part of their religious education. What sense of identity is instilled in young Christians and young Muslims in our churches and mosques? It is my ardent hope that Muslim and Christian religious leaders and teachers will present our two great religious communities as communities in respectful dialogue, never more as communities in conflict. It is crucial for the young to be taught the ways of respect and understanding, so that they will not be led to misuse religion itself to promote or justify hatred and violence. Violence destroys the image of the Creator in his creatures, and should never be considered as the fruit of religious conviction.

Address of Pope Benedict XVI at the Temple Mount Jerusalem, May 12, 2009

Dear Muslim Friends,

As-salámu 'aláikum! Peace upon you!

I cordially thank the Grand Mufti, Muhammad Ahmad Hussein, together with the Director of the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf, Sheikh Mohammed Azzam al-Khatib al-Tamimi, and the Head of the Awquaf Council, Sheikh Abdel Azim Salhab, for the welcome they have extended to me on your behalf. I am deeply grateful for the invitation to visit this sacred place, and I willingly pay my respects to you and the leaders of the Islamic community in Jerusalem.

The Dome of the Rock draws our hearts and minds to reflect upon the mystery of creation and the faith of Abraham. Here the paths of the world's three great monotheistic religions meet, reminding us what they share in common. Each believes in One God, creator and ruler of all. Each recognises Abraham as a forefather, a man of faith upon whom God bestowed a special blessing. Each has gained a large following throughout the centuries and inspired a rich spiritual, intellectual and cultural patrimony.

In a world sadly torn by divisions, this sacred place serves as a stimulus, and also challenges men and women of goodwill to work to overcome misunderstandings and conflicts of the past and to set out on the path of a sincere dialogue aimed at building a world of justice and peace for coming generations.

Since the teachings of religious traditions ultimately concern the reality of God, the meaning of life, and the common destiny of mankind – that is to say, all that is most sacred and dear to us – there may be a temptation to engage in such dialogue with reluctance or ambivalence about its possibilities for success. Yet we can begin with the belief that the One God is the infinite source of justice and mercy, since in him the two exist in perfect unity. Those who confess his name are entrusted with the task of striving tirelessly for righteousness while imitating his forgiveness, for both are intrinsically oriented to the peaceful and harmonious coexistence of the human family.

For this reason, it is paramount that those who adore the One God should show themselves to be both grounded in and directed towards the unity of the entire human family. In other words, fidelity to the One God, the Creator, the Most High, leads to the recognition that human beings are fundamentally interrelated, since all owe their very existence to a single source and are pointed towards a common goal. Imprinted with the indelible image of the divine, they are called to play an active role in mending divisions and promoting human solidarity.

This places a grave responsibility upon us. Those who honour the One God believe that he will hold human beings accountable for their actions. Christians assert that the divine gifts of reason and freedom stand at the basis of this accountability. Reason opens the mind to grasp the shared nature and common destiny of the human family, while freedom moves the heart to accept the other and serve him in charity. Undivided love for the One God and charity towards ones neighbour thus become the fulcrum around which all else turns. This is why we work untiringly to safeguard human hearts from hatred, anger or vengeance.

Dear friends, I have come to Jerusalem on a journey of faith. I thank God for this occasion to meet you as the Bishop of Rome and Successor of the Apostle Peter, but also as a child of Abraham, by whom “all the families of the earth find blessing” (Gen 12:3; cf. Rom 4:16-17). I assure you of the Church’s ardent desire to cooperate for the well-being of the human family. She firmly believes that the fulfilment of the promise made to Abraham is universal in scope, embracing all men and women regardless of provenance or social status. As Muslims and Christians further the respectful dialogue they have already begun, I pray that they will explore how the Oneness of God is inextricably tied to the unity of the human family. In submitting to his loving plan for creation, in studying the law inscribed in the cosmos and implanted in the human heart, in reflecting upon the mysterious gift of God’s self-revelation, may all his followers continue to keep their gaze fixed on his absolute goodness, never losing sight of the way it is reflected in the faces of others.

With these thoughts, I humbly ask the Almighty to grant you peace and to bless all the beloved people of this region. May we strive to live in a spirit of harmony and cooperation, bearing witness to the One God by generously serving one another. Thank you!

Texte National pour l'Orientation de la Catéchèse en France

3.1. The pedagogy of initiation requires personal freedom. One enters a catechetical path by deciding for oneself to go through the process or to enter by accepting the invitation. When it comes to young children, it is clear that this freedom is exercised first by the parents. But this freedom must quickly become that of the children themselves. "In catechesis, the recipient must be able to demonstrate as an active subject, conscious and co-responsible, and not as a silent and passive receiver". This is obviously true for anyone who starts. This is true even for those who have been educated in a Christian manner because "the Christian experience that we propose is that of faith which is intended for personal freedom". At the required triple profession of faith at baptism and at the Easter Vigil, the answer "I believe" is only meaningful if it is enlightened and free. This freedom is a prerequisite for implementing the pedagogy of initiation in catechesis.

Qur'an

Sura 1 – "Al Fatihah"

¹ *In the Name of Allâh, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful.*

² *All the praises and thanks be to Allâh, the Lord of the 'Alamin (humankind, jinns and all that exists).*

³ *The Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful.*

⁴ *The Only Owner (and the Only Ruling Judge) of the Day of Recompense (i.e. the Day of Resurrection).*

⁵ *You (Alone) we worship, and You (Alone) we ask for help (for each and everything).*

⁶ *Guide us to the Straight Way.*

⁷ *The Way of those on whom You have bestowed Your Grace, not (the way) of those who earned Your Anger (such as the Jews), nor of those who went astray (such as the Christians).*

Sura 4 – "An Nisa" (The Women)

¹⁵⁶ *And because of their (Jews) disbelief and uttering against Maryam (Mary) a grave false charge (that she has committed illegal sexual intercourse);*

¹⁵⁷ *And because of their saying (in boast), "We killed Messiah 'Îsâ (Jesus), son of Maryam (Mary), the Messenger of Allâh", - but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but the resemblance of 'Îsâ (Jesus) was put over another man (and they killed that man), and those who differ therein are full of doubts. They have no (certain) knowledge, they follow nothing but conjecture. For surely; they killed him not [i.e. 'Îsâ (Jesus), son of Maryam (Mary)]:*

¹⁵⁸ *But Allâh raised him ['Îsâ (Jesus)] up (with his body and soul) unto Himself (and he is in the heavens). And Allâh is Ever All-Powerful, All-Wise.*

¹⁵⁹ *And there is none of the people of the Scripture (Jews and Christians), but must believe in him ['Îsâ (Jesus), son of Maryam (Mary), as only a Messenger of Allâh and a human being], before his ['Îsâ (Jesus) or a Jew's or a Christian's] death (at the time of the appearance of the angel of death). And on the Day of Resurrection, he ['Îsâ (Jesus)] will be a witness against them.*

Sura 19 – "Mary"

¹⁶ *And mention in the Book (the Qur'an, O Muhammad, the story of) Maryam (Mary), when she withdrew in seclusion from her family to a place facing east.*

¹⁷ *She placed a screen (to screen herself) from them; then We sent to her Our Ruh [angel Jibrael (Gabriel)], and he appeared before her in the form of a man in all respects.*

¹⁸ *She said: "Verily! I seek refuge with the Most Beneficent (Allâh) from you, if you do fear Allâh".*

¹⁹ *(The angel) said: "I am only a Messenger from your Lord, (to announce) to you the gift of a righteous son".*

²⁰ *She said: "How can I have a son, when no man has touched me, nor am I unchaste?"*

²¹ *He said: "So (it will be), your Lord said: 'That is easy for Me (Allâh): And (We wish) to appoint him as a sign to mankind and a mercy from Us (Allâh), and it is a matter (already) decreed, (by Allâh)'".*

²² *So she conceived him, and she withdrew with him to a far place (i.e. Bethlehem valley about 4-6 miles from Jerusalem).*

²³ *And the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a date-palm. She said: "Would that I had died before this, and had been forgotten and out of sight!"*

²⁴ *Then [the babe 'Îsâ (Jesus) or Jibrael (Gabriel)] cried unto her from below her, saying: "Grieve not! Your Lord has provided a water stream under you;*

²⁵ *“And shake the trunk of date-palm towards you, it will let fall fresh ripe-dates upon you”.*

²⁶ *“So eat and drink and be glad, and if you see any human being, say: ‘Verily! I have vowed a fast unto the Most Beneficent (Allâh) so I shall not speak to any human being this day’”.*

²⁷ *Then she brought him (the baby) to her people, carrying him. They said: “O Mary! Indeed you have brought a thing Fariya (an unheard mighty thing).*

²⁸ *“O sister (i.e. the like) of Harun (Aaron) [not the brother of Musa (Moses), but he was another pious man at the time of Maryam (Mary)]! Your father was not a man who used to commit adultery, nor your mother was an unchaste woman”.*

²⁹ *Then she pointed to him. They said: “How can we talk to one who is a child in the cradle?”*

³⁰ *“He [‘Îsâ (Jesus)] said: Verily! I am a slave of Allâh, He has given me the Scripture and made me a Prophet”;*

³¹ *“And He has made me blessed wheresoever I be, and has enjoined on me Salat (prayer), and Zakat, as long as I live”.*

³² *“And dutiful to my mother, and made me not arrogant, unblest.*

³³ *“And Salam (peace) be upon me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I shall be raised alive!”*

³⁴ *Such is ‘Îsâ (Jesus), son of Maryam (Mary). (it is) a statement of truth, about which they doubt (or dispute).*

³⁵ *It befits not (the Majesty of) Allâh that He should beget a son [this refers to the slander of Christians against Allâh, by saying that ‘Îsâ (Jesus) is the son of Allâh]. Glorified (and Exalted be He above all that they associate with Him). When He decrees a thing, He only says to it, “Be!” and it is.*

³⁶ *[‘Îsâ (Jesus) said]: “And verily Allâh is my Lord and your Lord. So worship Him (Alone). That is the Straight Path. (Allâh’s Religion of Islamic Monotheism which He did ordain for all of His Prophets)”. [Tafsir At-Tabari]*

Extracts from the Information Sheet no. 7.

Illness, Death and Resurrection: Muslim Conception

The human person is on earth to be subjected to a test: to submit to the will of God in accepting the Qur’anic revelation. Death is an integral part of life. We do not try to conceal it, even from children. A Muslim cannot revolt against death nor manifest his or her pain or despair in an exaggerated manner. Grief at the loss of a loved one is expressed with dignity, self-control and total trust in God, Master of Life and Death.[...]

The Muslim believes in the Day of Resurrection and of Judgment when God will reward all human beings without exception based on their behaviour on earth and their good will.

“Everyone shall taste death. And only on the Day of Resurrection shall you be paid your wages in full. And whoever is removed away from the Fire and admitted to Paradise, he indeed is successful. The life of this world is only the enjoyment of deception” (Qur’an 3, 185).

This is an important element of the preaching of Muhammad. The Qur’an alludes to it more than 300 times. It is announced through a disruption of elements, a global earthquake. As a prelude to the Day of Resurrection and Judgment at the end of time, each undergoes questioning in the tomb on the acts of one’s life.

The resurrection announced connotes spiritual rebirth. This will be the definitive fulfilment of the spiritual possibilities of human beings, especially if one is a Muslim. This will result for each one either a reward, paradise or punishment, Hell, according to the judgment of God in which Muhammad and Jesus will be witnesses to this judgment.

“The day when He will assemble together for the Day of Gathering will be the day of mutual deception. Whoever has believed in God and has done well, God will forgive him his or her sins, will make him or her enter the gardens beneath the trees where rivers flow. The hosts of these gardens will live forever. This is the great success.

Those who did not believe or who treated our signs of lies those will be the possessors of hell-fire. They will live there forever. What detestable place of arrival (Qur’an 64, 9 et 10).

translated from the original text in French



List of Participants

FMA

Sr. Alaide DERETTI (General Councillor for Mission ad/inter Gentes)
Sr. Runita BORJA (RCG - Sector for Youth Ministry)
Sr. Maike LOES (RCG - Sector for Mission ad/inter Gentes)
Sr. Adoko Carine AKUESON (AFO - Mali)
Sr. Pedro Maria MASSUNGUINE (MOZ - Mozambique)
Sr. Manisha PARMAR (FRC - Tunisia)
Sr. Nadia AIDJIAN (FRC - France)
Sr. Ernesta ROVERSELLI (ILO - Italy)
Sr. María Isabel AGUILAR (IMR - Albania)
Sr. Paola PIGNATELLI (IPI - Italy)
Sr. Ibtissam KASSIS (MOR - Israel)

SDB

Fr. Václav KLEMENT (General Councillor for the Missions)
Fr. Maria Arokiam KANAGA (RMG - Regional Councillor for South Asia)
Fr. Jose ANIKUZHAKATTIL (RMG - Missions Department)
Fr. Stanisław RAFAŁKO (RMG - Missions Department)
Fr. Alfred MARAVILLA (RMG - Missions Department)
Fr. Placide CARAVA (RMG - Social Communications Department)
S. Matthew Olusola AKINYEMI (AFE - Sudan)
Dc. Samuel AMAGLO (FRB - Morocco)
Fr. Alan Ross BANOON (FIS - Philippines)
Fr. Girmay BERHANE (AET - Eritrea)
Fr. Matteo DI FIORE (IME - Albania)
Fr. Vladimir FEKETE (SLK - Azerbaijan)
Fr. Privat Ignace FOUA (ATE - Cameroon)
Fr. Wolfgang GRACHER (AUS - Austria)
Fr. Piergiorgio GIANAZZA (MOR - Palestine)
Fr. Antonio GUTIEREZ (IRL - Tunisia)
Fr. Emilio HERNANDO (AFO - Mali)
Fr. Michael KARIKUNNEL (AFW - Nigeria)
Fr. Placido LABILA (AFE - Sudan)
S. Odise LAZRI (IME - Albania)



L. Roberto LIONELLI (IRL - Tunisia)
Fr. James LUAL (AFE - Sudan)
S. Eric MALIC (FIS - Pakistan)
Fr. Isidore MBOKOLO (FRB - Morocco)
Fr. Mauro MERGOLA (ICP - Italy)
Fr. Alexius MULONGO (AFE - Kenya)
Fr. Julio PALMIERI (FIS - Pakistan)
L. Ephrem SANTOS (ITM - Indonesia)
Fr. Arul SEKAR (INM - United Arab Emirates)
Fr. George THANNICKAL (INB - India)
Fr. Erando VACCA (MOR - Egypt)
Fr. Pietro ZAGO (FIS - Pakistan)

SALESIAN FAMILY

Ms. Birgit LÖW (Jugend eine Welt - Austria)
Ms. Filoreta SHIROKA (ASC - Albania)

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