

# Salaam

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Quarterly to Promote Understanding



*Ambition, Magnanimity, and nourishing Fraternity*

*Document on Human Fraternity:*

*A Contextualization for a suitable understanding*

*A Personal Response to the Document on Human Fraternity*

*A Reflection on the Document on Human Fraternity –  
For World Peace and Living Together*

*Addressing Religion, Peace, and Security: Strategic Takeaways*

*Buddhists and Catholics Shaping a Culture of Encounter*

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**ISLAMIC STUDIES ASSOCIATION**

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**“..... that they.....  
may be one.....”**

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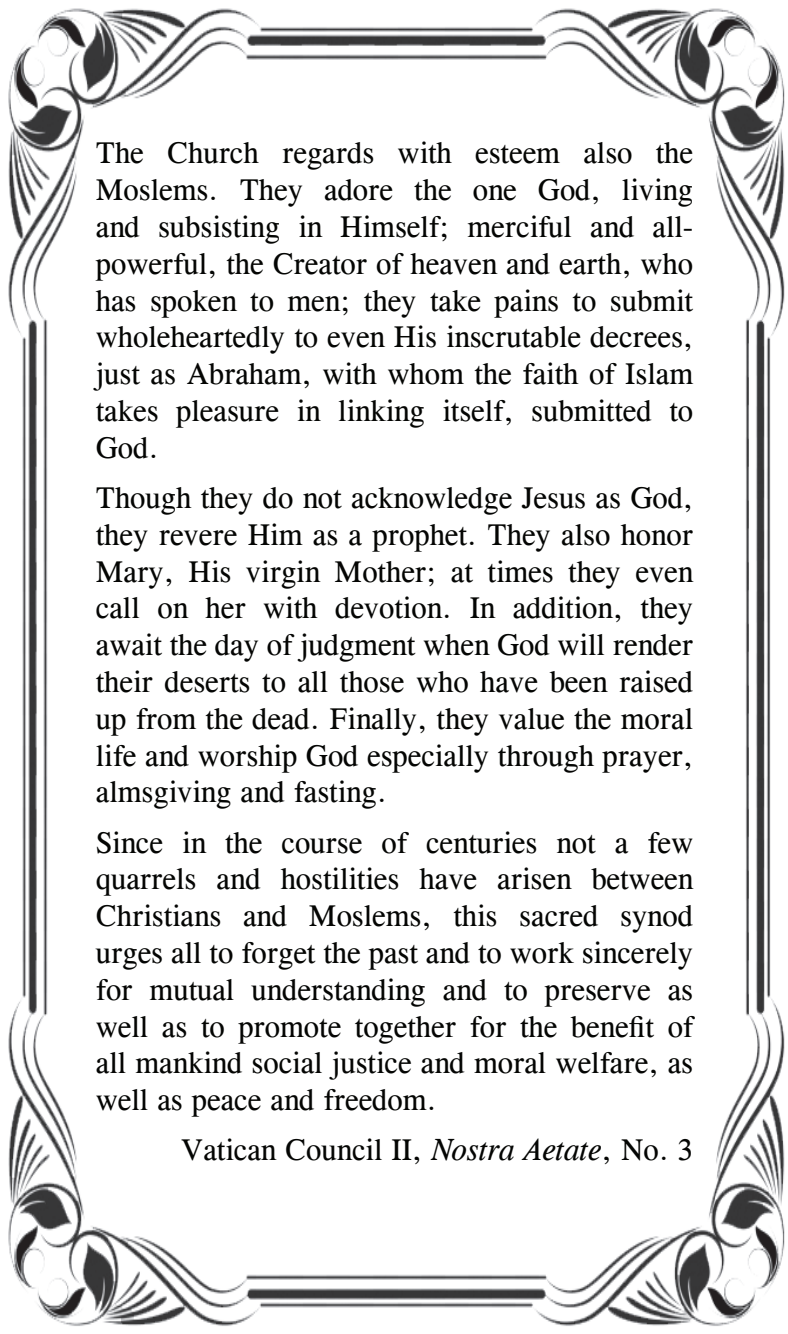
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The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable 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 honor 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.

Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate*, No. 3

# Editorial

## Personal Vocation

During my formation years, I discerned the will of God in my life, as a Jesuit. My spiritual directors taught me that discernment is not an exercise independent of ‘common sense’ but a search in the light of the Spirit of the Lord. It is pondering and noticing interior movements in one’s heart. Discernment involves prayer and weighing of facts and feelings about the several good choices which ultimately leads to a choice about what is the best fit for an individual in the sight of God. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit. St. Paul teaches us: “Whoever does not have the Spirit cannot receive the gifts that come from God’s Spirit” (1 Cor 2: 14-15).

The fact of being trained and ordained and sent among Muslims nourishes my heart and brings energy and consolation. I am grateful to God: for the unmerited gift of life and faith, for a call to Jesuit commitment, and a personal vocation to be a Jesuit among Muslims. Over the years, I have deeply recognised that this gift is given through the Church, as I am a servant of the Church in the *Missio Dei*.

What does it mean to be in the mission of God among people of other faiths? J. M. Gaudeul has noted that the Church, in her mission to the people of other faiths, must imitate Christ: in the hidden life of Nazareth, in the public life of preaching and healing, in his death on the Cross as a priest and victim. He writes: “strangely enough, this message has reached the Church through people who had first an experience of mission life and inter-religious dialogue with Islam.”

## Context: Muslims in India

### *Substantive Muslimness and Discourse Muslimness*

Shahab Ahmed (d. 2015) in his *What is Islam: The Importance of Being Islamic* presented a reconceptualization of ‘historical

and human phenomenon that is Islam’ and invited the reader to recognize “the capaciousness, complexity, and ... outright contradiction that obtains within the historical phenomenon”. He termed this reconceptualised diversity among Muslims as ‘Balkan to Bengal complex’.

Recently, Hilal Ahmed, a social scientist with Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), one of the leading intellectual institutions of the global south, affirms the sociological diversity of Indian Muslims. Ahmed uses the following two terms: *Substantive Muslimness* and *Discourse Muslimness* to drive the point.

He explains the *substantive Muslimness* in the following words: “various survey-based studies conducted by CSDS clearly show that Muslim perceptions, views, opinions, and attitudes do not follow any set pattern. Even we do not find any homogeneous response to the questions related to basic religious practices such as offering Namaz and observing fasts in the month of Ramzan. This Muslim diversity underlines the fact that Indian Islam as a lived religion is practiced by Muslims in a variety of ways. This is what I call *Substantive Muslimness*”.

The *Discourse Muslimness*, on the other hand, underlines a different aspect of Muslim identity. He writes: “classification of Muslims as a religious minority in purely statistical terms, the description of medieval Indian history as Islamic rule and the media debates revolving around Islamic Jihad and terrorism produce a simply and undifferentiated image of a homogeneous Muslim community. Every aspect of Muslim life is seen through the prism of this discourse either to criticise Muslims for being barbaric or to celebrate Muslim culture as a symbol of the royal Islamic past”. Ahmed argues that the interplay between the *Substantive Muslimness* and *Discourse Muslimness* determines the actual manifestations of modern Indian Muslim identity.

### **Towards a theological vision for Mission among Muslims**

The last twenty-five years of engaging in the ministry of Christian-Muslim relations, I tend to believe the voices from the Indian

Catholic Church vis-à-vis Islam and Muslims, not infrequently, reflect the category of what Ahmed calls as *Discourse Muslimness*. The Christian *feel* for Muslims in India is often characterised by ‘indifference’ and also not infrequently ‘hostility’. *Discourse Muslimness* sets the tone for any conversation on Muslims even among the clergy and educated Christians. The impoverishment of Indian Muslims and their marginalisation in economy, politics, and education are never discussed emphatically, except by some Christians who scrutinize the life of Muslims: their expectations and longings, deciphering authentic signs of God’s presence in their lives. A few Christians indeed recognise in their encounter with Muslims a mediation of the reality of God, in other words sacramental dimension in their engagement with Muslims (cf. *Gaudium et spes* 4 and 11). There is a real need to move away from the *Discourse Muslimness* to *Substantive Muslimness* in Christian conversations on Muslims which would facilitate a *real* understanding of Muslims in India.

As I have already mentioned a call to be a Jesuit Among Muslims demands the one who assents to the call, first and foremost, to enter the *silence* of the ‘hidden life of our Lord in Nazareth’. It is this *interior silence* that leads to a *real communion* with the Lord, qualifies one to give witness to our faith among Muslims. The mystery of Nazareth was beautifully lived by Saint Charles de Foucauld (d. 1916). He lived a life of poverty, a silent presence amidst Muslims, expressed his love for Muslims in his daily occupations to be a ‘universal brother’ and adopting the way of life of Muslims as Christ adopted our human nature.

Secondly, the call invites to imitate ‘the public life of preaching and healing’ of Jesus’. Jesuit Father Victor Courtois (d. 1960) is a beautiful model here. Through his life he taught that Christians must learn to esteem the faith of Muslims and cultivate friendships among them. Dialogue, for him, must bear on common themes: God’s majesty, our creatureliness, our need to repent and be forgiven.

Thirdly, the call requires a Christian disciple who is called to live among Muslims, to enter the paschal mystery, ‘death on the Cross

as a priest and victim' of the Lord. It is an invitation to spend life in service often participating in the joys and sorrows of Muslims and at times even enduring persecution from Muslims whom we love and serve. It is recognising that the paschal mystery of the Lord invites the Christian disciple among Muslims to surrender his/her paschal journey into the loving hands of the Father as Jesus did. Blessed Christian de Chergé and other Trappist martyrs who were killed by extremists at the Monastery of Notre Dame of Atlas in Tibhirine, Algeria, in 1996 witness to this dimension of a call for mission among Muslims. They knew that by remaining in Tibhirine in solidarity with their Muslim neighbours who also faced terrorism and violence, they might be called upon to offer their lives. These three aspects are integral components of the foundation for a theological vision for dialogue with Muslims.

**Joseph Victor Edwin SJ**

The image shows the Arabic word 'الْقُدُّوسُ' (Al-Quddus) written in a highly stylized, bold, black calligraphic font. The letters are thick and interconnected, with prominent serifs and decorative flourishes. The word is centered on the page.

AL QUDDUS



# Ambition, Magnanimity, and nourishing Fraternity

*By Stanislaus Alla SJ*

Manifestly, Pope Francis has made fraternity into a global topic of conversation: by writing the encyclical *Fratelli tutti* and by making frequent references to the notion of fraternity at various forums, he promoted it in an extraordinary way. It has come for discussions -be it, at the United Nations or in the Parliaments of different countries or in social, cultural, economic, political and other platforms. Religious leaders are particularly invited to discuss fraternity so that people can shun violence -that sadly is promoted and perpetuated in the name of religion in many contexts.

The Pope's call for fraternity is not only to focus on what is wrong with us (selfishness, self-centeredness or our propensity for violence) but also to envisage how we can be artisans of peace and participants in the integral development of all. It is grounded on the foundational recognition that we all are brothers and sisters and that human dignity and rights are innate and inalienable, and that we ought to promote and defend them. These goals are realizable when fraternity goes into conversations in our dining rooms as well as in public spaces.

Even though humanity, as a civilization, continues to advance in marvellous ways, old ills such as poverty and ignorance and underdevelopment still persist. And, ironically, if the poor were oppressed and exploited in the past (they continue to suffer in many ways still in many places), they are ignored and bypassed more and more, as there is hardly any place for them in the current developmental model. Consequently, radical independence is setting in and gaining momentum. Heavily relying on wealth and power, many imagine that they can manage their lives, living behind the gated-walls -be they real or imaginary.

Pope Francis joins the other theologians and thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who emphatically remind us that God made us to be

relational and responsible. We cannot live isolated lives, independent of who the others are, what is happening to them, and how the earth continues to be wounded. We are reminded again and again that not only we are relational but, equally and more importantly, we are responsible for each other. For instance, those of us who have migrant-workers in our homes or on our streets, how often are we able to recognize that they are our brothers and sisters! Pope's call to discover our brotherhood or sisterhood, in a word, fraternity, is crucial and indispensable for the wellbeing of all in the world.

In this context, I shall briefly and informally discuss two themes, ambition and magnanimity (demerits of ambition and merits of magnanimity) with a view to suggest that cultivating the virtue of magnanimity is significant to foster fraternity. A proper self-understanding, grounded on an appropriate comprehension of virtues and values, is required so that we are able to appreciate what fraternity is and why we must cultivate it.

The word 'ambition' gained currency today more than in the past. Parents and teachers, managers and organizers, even priests and spiritual gurus use the word ambition, more or less, indiscriminately. Regular and frequent usage has given it momentum and newer meaning. The *Webster's New World Dictionary* describes ambition as a 'strong desire to gain a particular objective, specifically, the drive to succeed or to gain fame, power, wealth etc.'

The Latin root *ambitio* means going around: it means go and seek votes, which our politicians do even now. As a word, ambition has come to mean many things. Depending on the context, it has acquired both positive and negative connotations, whether it is applied to individuals or groups or institutions. Many families ask their kids to be ambitious. Ambition is clearly seen as the driving force behind many stories of success in the contemporary world.

After this short review of the word ambition, let us see how magnanimity came to be preferred as a virtue and, how, ultimately, what matters is a virtue or set of virtues that will be able to nourish fraternity. In order to develop this, in an informal way, I rely on the

explanations and understandings of these virtues/concepts provided by Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas.

‘Who is a great person’ can appear to be a simple question, even naïve, but the way it is answered varies from time to time and from context to context. For centuries, even for millennia, soldiers have been the models to be emulated. They have been and still are the heroes because of their willingness to fight for and defend the country and for their readiness to sacrifice their lives for the good of others. While eventually people from several other walks of life also got attention (that their lives are heroic as well), a soldier still remains as a person who embodies the virtue of courage and sacrifice.

From time immemorial people have been longing for honour and glory and soldiers often got glory -in most cases posthumously. Looking beyond food, drink and pleasure, it is natural that people long for glory and honour and the topic has taken much attention of the philosophers and theologians. Starting with Aristotle, several explored the topic of ambition. Thomas Aquinas brings this into the treatise on virtues. He asserts that while it is proper to seek honour and glory, what matters is how one acquires it.

He says that things can go wrong in three ways: first, when one seeks honour and glory when it is not his or her due (you have not worked for it); second, when one desires honour without any reference to God (God is out of the picture); and third, one desires honour and glory without any reference to the others (others are unimportant or working for their wellbeing is not seen as value). Simply put, an ambitious person is self-centric, and God, others, and their well-being is not a value that is prized and pursued.

Before going to make a comment on this, I shall describe what magnanimity is, and why it is acknowledged as a virtue (those who prefer to view ambition in a good sense, considering it as a virtue, may hold a different view). Two Latin words -*magnus* (great) and *animus* (mind, soul) – combined, it means noble in mind,

high souled, generous in overlooking injury or insult, rising above pettiness and meanness. Mahatma, attributed to Gandhiji and a few others, aptly illustrates it. Simply put, magnanimity signifies a person's nobility or generosity. In contrast, ambition, built solely on one's own self-worth is dangerous.

If ambition has to play a constructive role in a person's life, it needs to include the good characteristics of magnanimity, even though the best option still would be to recover magnanimity and present it as a virtue that is most relevant and urgently needed. Though originally magnanimity was a pagan virtue, Thomas Aquinas adapted and reconstructed it, bringing 'God,' 'the virtue of humility' and 'the good of the others' into the discourse.

The drives that motivate people today include success, power, recognition and wealth. Magnanimity, if properly understood, can accommodate all of them, provided it includes the necessary dimensions that Thomas Aquinas mentions – the role God has in one's life, humility to counter ambitious tendencies, and the need to think of others and their wellbeing.

Delving deeper, scholars point out that the description of a magnanimous person, according to Aristotle, is modelled after the typical Greek hero who is self-centred, individualistic, self-sufficient and proud. Considering honour – recognition of one's excellence – as the most important of all external goods, Aristotle held that the magnanimous person must undertake such things and claim due honour. The 'great-souled' person (*megalopsychos* in Greek) excels in all the virtues and hence magnanimity is the preeminent virtue. Magnanimity makes a person to be concerned about things that merit and win great honour. When truly deserving, not only must a person look for highest recognition but demand it and should not give up easily in weakness or out of humility.

Interestingly, in Aristotle's view, a magnanimous person does not set his heart on wealth and power, but makes use of them to gain honour. The rich and the powerful, unless they also accrue honour, are inferior to the magnanimous person. It may appear odd that

Aristotle portrays someone who is so much obsessed with personal honour, fame and recognition as an ideal person, but it makes sense when seen in the backdrop of a culture that had little to promise in the life-after. All that a magnanimous person can and must do in this life is to engage in those things that bring highest honour and fame.

One can easily notice that the element of religion is missing in Aristotle's account of the virtue of magnanimity. He does not see any role for God, whom many religious traditions consider as the author of life and the giver of all gifts, and to whom honour is due. For Aristotle it is the individual person who aspires for and gets honour. It is not explicitly clear if honour also brings happiness to a person and how honour and happiness are related. In contrast to Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas presents an integrated view of magnanimity.

Why are references to God and others important in one's life? Whether one prefers the word ambition or magnanimity, what matters is how one understands himself/herself and how one relates to the others. Two important theological and spiritual presuppositions are 1) God made us and we are made for God's glory, and 2) As God's children we are brothers and sisters, and, consequently responsible for the wellbeing of all. These foundational principles are often forgotten or ignored in the contemporary world. People often want to work for and gain glory and honour. Seeking them is justifiable provided people try to understand who God is, who the others are, and how to live a meaningful life, that finds fulfilment in the service of others.

Pope Francis challenges us to realize the significance of Fraternity and how to promote it. False understandings about ourselves and the goals of life can mislead us but true virtues such as magnanimity can enlighten our paths. By growing up to be magnanimous persons, we will know the true value of fraternity and how to nurture it.



# Document on Human Fraternity

## A Contextualization for a suitable understanding

By Robert Catalano

### Introduction

The joint declaration, signed on 4 February 2019 in Abu Dhabi, by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Ahmad al-Tayyib, represented an event with a profoundly innovative significance.<sup>1</sup> It was, in fact, something that went beyond expectations, raising questions, addressing deep-rooted stereotypes and prejudices from a religious and even more so from a cultural point of view.<sup>2</sup> We found ourselves, once again, in front of an ‘absolute first-time ever’ by the present pope, often defined as the ‘pope of the first times’.<sup>3</sup> Never before in Church history had it happened that a pope signed a joint document with a leader of another religion. The great significance of the Abu Dhabi document lies in the fact that it is a shared text, a single word that the two leaders address together to their faithful and to the entire world in order to provide an answer to some fundamental questions.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, it is not only experts and religious leaders who are being addressed, but all believers and inhabitants of the world.<sup>5</sup>

All this cannot be improvised. It is part of a journey that must be understood and valued. An adequate contextualization is,

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<sup>1</sup> See G. Costa, “Le religioni ed il coraggio dell’alterità: la Dichiarazione congiunta di Abu Dhabi” in *Aggiornamenti Sociali*, n.3/70 (2019), 181-188, 182.

<sup>2</sup> See *Ibidem*, 182.

<sup>3</sup> See G. Fazzini e S. Femminis, *Francesco. Il papa delle prime volte*, Edizioni San Paolo 2018.

This book presents all initiatives taken by pope Francis which may appear as the ‘first time’ they were taken in and by the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, it is crucial to underline that all these ‘first times ever’ accomplished by the present pope would have been impossible without the Second Vatican Council and historical decisions or action taken by previous popes, starting from John XXIII.

<sup>4</sup> See G. Costa, “Le religioni ed il coraggio dell’alterità”, 183.

<sup>5</sup> See *Ibidem*, 182.

therefore, necessary on three levels: the geographical environment and geopolitical significance of the place - Abu Dhabi - where the signing took place, its characteristics from a religious point of view and the path that led to the signing of this Document.

## **2. A varied and complex contextualization**

### **2.1 UAE - heart of Islam and unexpected presence of the Church**

The document on brotherhood was signed in Abu Dhabi, the capital city of the United Arab Emirates, an area which, geographically speaking, is the last offshoot of the Arabian Peninsula. It is a region which today plays a crucial role on the international chessboard at the economical and geo-political levels. In just a few decades, the possession of oil has allowed this part of the world staggering progress and these states have gone from a nomadic and Bedouin society to the image of unbridled globalization.<sup>6</sup> Above all, however, this region is at the heart of history of Islam which today presents in this area a truly variegated mosaic. Absolutely primary and dominant is the presence of the Saudi Kingdom, the monolithic representative of Sunni Islam that for several centuries has identified itself with Wahhabism, ensuring, even internationally, support to Salafism and even to its most violent fringes. In the extreme offshoot of the peninsula is the ultra-capitalist and ‘atheist’ or ‘secular’ model adopted by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which, however, are also Saudi Arabia’s first allies in the anti-Shia front. Qatar, on the other hand, has long been ostracized by Saudi Arabia and its allies because of its moving closer to Iran, the monolithic representative of Shia Islam.<sup>7</sup> Added to all this is the dramatic situation in Yemen where Shiites and Sunnis clash in a bloody and merciless conflict. In the face of this complex mosaic of Islamic reality, a new

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<sup>6</sup> This amazing leap-forward was possible thanks to a massive labour force imported from poorer countries and often dramatically underpaid and humanly exploited.

<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless in a highly controversial context, there had been recent signs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia coming closer to the Islamic Republic of Iran.

phenomenon is taking shape: the Emirates area is being populated by a new Christian presence. And this at a time in history when the traditional and apostolic Christian Churches in the Middle East are experiencing dramatic moments that often force Christians to flee. The majority of the new Catholics in the Emirates are Asians, especially Filipinos and Indians, but also from the Middle East, and they bring both the freshness of young churches and the thousand-year history of the apostolic ones.<sup>8</sup> Obviously they are not native of the Arabic Peninsula, yet they bring into it a new and significant Christian presence.

## **2.2 The historical path: from Francis of Assisi to Pope Francis**

A second key element to be kept into account for a right contextualization of the document is the historical perspective. The year 2019 was a moment of great significance for Muslim-Christian relations. It celebrated the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the meeting between Francis of Assisi and Sultan Malik al-Kamil, which took place in Damietta, a few kilometres away from Cairo. A moment that has

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<sup>8</sup> From the point of view of freedom of religious practice, in Saudi Arabia only public manifestations of Muslim worship are permitted, although celebrations of other religions inside private homes are tolerated. In the Emirates, on the other hand, celebrations are permitted inside parishes, which are limited in number and overcrowded, while in neighbouring Bahrain new churches have recently been built. Kuwait has a general situation very close to that of the Emirates: there are more controls and several parishes are housed in the basements of some buildings. Oman allows greater freedom of worship for Christians and, to some extent, even public manifestation of religion, given al-Qaboosh's open policy. That leaves Yemen, where the war has blown away a freedom of worship that was applied until the outbreak of the conflict in a very contradictory manner. The morning after the signing, in fact, Pope Francis celebrated Mass for almost one hundred thousand people, about 10% of the Catholic presence in the Emirates. What Bergoglio called "a choir that includes a variety of nations, languages and rites; a diversity that the Holy Spirit loves and wants to harmonize more and more, to make it a symphony" constitutes another essential dimension in which to place the document on brotherhood.



been described as ‘one of the most extraordinary gestures of peace in the history of dialogue between Islam and Christianity’. In this context, Pope Francis was keen to present his trip as a sign of his desire to be brothers who seek peace with their brothers in order to truly be instruments of peace.<sup>9</sup> Despite the fact that “in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems”, the Council had already exhorted “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”. (NA 3) This invitation has been taken up several times in recent decades by the pontiffs.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, we cannot ignore that in Regensburg in 2006, an academic quotation from Benedict XVI caused a painful and complex dispute between the Catholic Church and much of the Muslim world. A rather stormy season opened up. Al-Azhar University, which had long good relations with the Holy See, broke off contact with the Vatican. Relations became even more complicated in January 2011, when following an attack on a Coptic church in Alexandria, Egypt, that claimed many victims, Benedict XVI asked for protection for Christians in the Middle East. This request was interpreted by both the al-

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<sup>9</sup> See Pope Francis, *Address to the Interfaith Conference*, Abu Dhabi, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2019.

([http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2019/february/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190204\\_emiratarabi-incontrointerreligioso.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2019/february/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_emiratarabi-incontrointerreligioso.html))

<sup>10</sup> A special reference has to be made to the meeting of Pope John Paul II with several thousand Muslim youth in Morocco. It was 1985 and, among other things, the Polish pope stated: “Christians and Muslims, in general we have badly understood each other, and sometimes, in the past, we have opposed and even exhausted each other in polemics and in wars. I believe that, today, God invites us *to change our old practices*. We must respect each other, and also we must stimulate each other in good works on the path of God”. (Pope John Paul II, *Address to Muslim Youth*, Casablanca (Marocco), 19 August 1985.

([https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1985/august/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19850819\\_giovani-stadio-casablanca.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1985/august/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19850819_giovani-stadio-casablanca.html))

Azhar authorities and the Egyptian government as interference in the country's internal affairs.<sup>11</sup> However, in the following years, slowly, with great diplomatic patience, important relations were re-established.<sup>12</sup> This commitment was also inspired by the underlying attitude of Pope Francis who, already in 2013, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, after defining interreligious dialogue as a “duty for Christians, as for other religious communities” (EG 250), had affirmed the relevance of the relationship between Christians and Muslims, emphasizing the not a few points of contact between the two religious traditions. In particular, he had underlined how “our relationship with the followers of Islam has taken on great importance, since they are now significantly present in many traditionally Christian countries, where they can freely worship and become fully a part of society” (EG 252).

This renewed effort for fruitful dialogue culminated, in May 2016, in the visit of Grand Imam al-Tayyib<sup>13</sup> to the Vatican. Significant, at

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<sup>11</sup> The Cairo government had even recalled the ambassador, Aly Hamada Mekhemar (who returned at the end of February), and accused the Holy See of “unacceptable interference”.

<sup>12</sup> This was thanks to the valuable work of Card. Jean-Louis Tauran and Bishop Miguel Ayuso, respectively President and Secretary of the then Pontifical Council (now Dicastery) for Interreligious Dialogue.

<sup>13</sup> Appointed at the head of Al-Azhar in 2010 by President Mubarak, who had availed himself of the political control over the office established by President Nasser, the grand imam worked to free the appointment of his successor from state influence and strengthen the institution's international authority. In recent years, Al-Azhar has regained pre-eminence in the Sunni world, which, after the abolition of the caliphate in 1924 by Atatürk, no longer had a centre or figurehead. Al-Tayyib enjoys authority among Muslims, as head of the most prestigious Islamic university, while leading a cautious reformist line. On the external side, he leads the dialogue with the West and Christianity. (See A. Riccardi, ‘Francis and the meeting with the imam opponent of terrorism’ in “*SanFrancesco online*”).

Available on line at (<http://www.sanfrancescopatronoditalia.it/notizie/religione/francesco-e-l%E2%80%99incontro-con-l%E2%80%99imam-oppositore-del-terrorismo-44835#.XIViTCJKjZ4>). Accessed on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2023.

the end of the meeting, was the comment of the Grand Imam: “We are resuming the path of dialogue and hope that it will be better than it was before. I am happy to be the first sheikh of al-Azhar to visit the Vatican and participate with the pope in a session of discussion and understanding”.<sup>14</sup> In 2017, the imam welcomed Pope Francis to Cairo, inviting him to an important International Peace Conference. On that occasion, the Pope urged religious leaders “to unmask the violence that masquerades as purported sanctity and is based more on the “absolutizing” of selfishness than on authentic openness to the Absolute”.<sup>15</sup> In fact, he strongly affirmed, “the incompatibility of violence and faith, belief and hatred”. Fundamental was his affirmation that “only peace is holy and no violence can be perpetrated in the name of God, because it would profane his Name”.<sup>16</sup> In addition in order to encourage the great value for interreligious dialogue of the work of the so-called *Joint Committee for Dialogue between the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Al-Azhar Committee for Dialogue*, he offered a fundamental road-map for such dialogue between people of different faiths, particularly between Christians and Muslims. He suggested three guidelines that, “if well combined, can help dialogue: the duty of respecting one’s own identity and the one of the others, the courage of accepting differences and sincerity of intentions”.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The first meeting, which was very cordial, focused on the common commitment to world peace and the rejection of violence and terrorism, as well as the situation of Christians in the context of the conflicts and tensions in the Middle East and their protection. (See “Papa Francesco riceve il Grand Imam di al-Azhar” in *Vatican News*, 23.05.2016 Available online at <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2016/05/23/0369/00861.html> Accessed on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Pope Francis, *Address to the Conference on Peace*, Il Cairo 28.04.2017. Available on line at: ([http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2017/april/documents/papa-francesco\\_20170428\\_egitto-conferenza-pace.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2017/april/documents/papa-francesco_20170428_egitto-conferenza-pace.html)). Accessed on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2023.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*..

The charter therefore has an important past history without which it cannot be appreciated or grasped in its historical, religious and social significance. But this historical excursus is still not sufficient for an adequate appreciation of the value of the document.

### 2.3 The Abu Dhabi speeches

A final element necessary for an adequate framing of the text of the Declaration are the two speeches delivered, respectively by Grand Imam al-Tayyib and Pope Francis, immediately before the signing of the Charter. They represent both a presentation of the text and a commentary on it, but, one might venture, constitute an integral part of it. They must, therefore, be given due consideration for a complete analysis of the document.

First of all, it is worth noting that both religious leaders, in their speeches, referred to each other in a typically fraternal tone. Al-Tayyib immediately addressed Bergoglio, describing him as “my dear and merciful friend”<sup>18</sup>, and the pope, for his part, although he simply addressed official words of thanks, did so in a warm and friendly tone, having shown affection and esteem towards the Muslim leader with a gesture of hugs and kisses and deep listening. Furthermore, the Muslim authority addressed the Christians of the region forcefully, declaring: “You are citizens, you are not a minority. You are children of this land”.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, as he had already done in the past both in Florence and Paris, at conferences to which he had been invited, he addressed a clear warning to Muslims in Europe. “Insert yourselves in societies, insert yourselves in a positive way to protect your religious identity, as well as respect the laws of these societies. Know that the security of society is also your responsibility”<sup>20</sup>.

Pope Francis, for his part, addressed not only Muslims, but the entire world, involving all religions in a universal appeal: “Religions [...]

<sup>18</sup> Quotation reported by A. Spadaro, «Il viaggio apostolico di papa Francesco ad Abu Dhabi», in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, n.4049, 170 (2/16 marzo 2019), 467-477, 470.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

cannot renounce the urgent task of building bridges between peoples and cultures. The time has come for religions to devote themselves more actively, courageously and boldly, without pretense, to helping the human family mature the capacity for reconciliation, the vision of hope and the concrete paths of peace”.<sup>21</sup> And he issued a universal warning: ‘There is no alternative: either we build the future together or there will be no future’. Dialogue, therefore, which in *Evangelii Gaudium* he had defined as a duty for all believers, becomes here a real social responsibility and religions are called to be “sentinels of fraternity in the night of conflicts”.<sup>22</sup> Francis’ project, explaining the Charter he would sign shortly thereafter, is to “enter together, as one family, into an ark that can sail the stormy seas of the world: the ark of brotherhood”.<sup>23</sup> This is the locus that gives meaning to the joint signing of the Document on Brotherhood, which followed the speeches of the two leaders.



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<sup>21</sup> Pope Francis, Pope Francis, *Address to the Interfaith Conference*, Abu Dhabi.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*.

# **A Personal Response to the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together**

*By Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes*

The document on *Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* was signed on February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2019, by Pope Francis and the Grand-Imam of Al-Azhar, Dr. Ahmed Al-Tayyeb (also known as Ahmed El-Tayeb) in Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates. This is why it is also known as the Abu Dhabi declaration. The historical context of this joint statement signed by the spiritual leader of the Catholic Church and one of the highest authorities in the Sunni world from Egypt lies precisely on the importance of promoting interfaith and interreligious dialogues between Catholics and Muslims in the light of recent and past histories of violence, wars, persecutions, and terrorism. The title of this document is uniquely suited to the interfaith meetings that took place between these two religious leaders before they met in Abu Dhabi. As a matter of fact, a spiritual friendship developed after Sheik Al-Tayyeb visited the Vatican (May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2016) and Pope Francis visited Cairo (April 28<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup>, 2017).

Out of the ongoing dialogues that took place between these two religious leaders and their team delegations, this document based on human fraternity and mutual respect came into existence. The goal of this document was not only to be more tolerant and respectful of each other religious tradition but more importantly, it is a call to collaborate and to support one another on promoting common causes born out of their mutual dialogue between Pope Francis and Sheik Al-Tayyeb.

There is, of course, a historical precedence. Pope Francis had learned an important lesson from the meeting that took place in 1219 between St. Francis of Assisi and the Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil in Damietta, Egypt. Similarly, Pope Francis' meeting in Abu Dhabi with Grand Imam Al-Tayyeb stresses the idea of promoting human

fraternity and mutual respect, as it is shared by both Abrahamic faith traditions in their common belief in one God, the creator of all life, who wants all their children to be loving, caring, merciful, compassionate, and respectful to each other in the best spirit of spiritual hospitality found and well rooted in the Middle East.

Let me start addressing possible critiques of the usage of language in this document. First, the chosen phrase “human fraternity” may sound too patriarchal for our times. This is a feminist critique in need of a more inclusive language that encompasses both brotherhood and sisterhood, as we find in some Catholic and Muslim communities of learning. As a matter of fact, we find in the Introduction of this document the words brother and sister. Therefore, this more inclusive language addresses both male and female believers and supporters of these two largest world religions in the world.

Now, there is a historical context that takes precedence between two spiritual men as leaders of their respective communities. The fact is that they are both men coming from two patriarchal religious institutions. Second, this document emphasizes the theistic language of faith in one God who is the creator of the universe and of all creatures. In this particular context it makes sense to address the other as a spiritual brother and as people of the Abrahamic faiths since the two of them shared the ancestral lineage to Abraham as the father of the three great monotheistic religions in the West (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). Yet, the potential problem we may encounter in this document is that if we want to make it a universal declaration of faith it will not be well received among people of other faith traditions that do not believe in one God or they don't proclaim God to be the creator of the universe. For instance, Hindus don't believe in one God nor Buddhists believe in a personal creator of the universe. Therefore, this document can only be seen as an effective declaration of faith between two specific religious traditions that of Catholics and Sunni Muslims within the scope of a historical meeting that took place in the Middle East.

One of the greatest contributions of this interfaith dialogue between Catholics and Muslims is that it avoids discussing the

major points of theological disagreements between the two faith traditions. Instead, their shared common goal is to focus on what they can do to work together so that they can prevent more hostility and violence exercised towards Muslims and minority groups of Catholics (*dhimmi*) living in the Middle East and around the globe. I believe this is an honorable goal to have “. . . where we shared the joys, sorrows and problems of our contemporary world. We did this by considering scientific and technical progress, therapeutic achievements, the digital era, the mass media and communications. We reflected also on the level of poverty, conflict and suffering of so many brothers and sisters in different parts of the world as a consequence of the arms race, social injustice, corruption, inequality, moral decline, terrorism, discrimination, extremism and many other causes” (second paragraph in the Introduction of this document).

Additionally, this document reflects the idea of bringing a sense of hope stated so well by the religious leaders of these two large faith traditions in their shared attempt to promote a “culture of mutual respect” firmly rooted in the “great divine grace that makes all human beings brothers and sisters” (third paragraph in the Introduction of this document). By virtue of their divine grace, these two leaders see the need to cooperate and to work together as spiritual brothers hoping that this document will be carried out by their followers and be taught in schools, colleges, universities, and seminaries around the globe. The document explicitly says: “We call upon intellectuals, philosophers, religious figures, artists, media professionals and men and women of culture in every part of the world, to rediscover the values of peace, justice, goodness, beauty, human fraternity, and coexistence in order to confirm the importance of these values as anchors of salvation for all, and to promote them everywhere.”

Also, these words of wisdom should apply to all believers who in the name of God or Allah (“the one and true God”) and in the name of human fraternity “declare the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard.” As a matter of fact, this mutual declaration responds to the polarizing forces found in the



world that are trying to divide and not to unite people of good will and in good faith as a testament of their love for their neighbor as children of the same God. Their critique of rugged individualism and crude materialism is a common view shared by both spiritual leaders who see the threat being posed to their transcendental values and moral principles, although they both acknowledged “the positive steps taken by our modern civilization in the fields of science, technology, medicine, industry and welfare, especially in developed countries.”

While recognizing these positive steps of secular and modern nations, the declaration specifically addresses the “moral deterioration . . . and a weakening of spiritual values and responsibility” that possibly leads to the frustrations and sentiments of anger found by atheists and religious fundamentalists who have turned to fanatic extremism, violence, intolerance, and destruction of these transcendental and spiritual values mentioned earlier. The real and present danger of a third world war through the usage of nuclear war is in their minds, hearts, and souls knowing how destructive the weapons of mass destruction in the hands of national extremists and intolerant nations are. The root causes of these global conflicts and tensions lie in a “global context overshadowed by uncertainty, disillusionment, fear of the future, and controlled by narrow-minded economic interests.” This leads to international and ecological crises that create more poverty, higher unemployment, and real hunger which in turn allow extremist groups to recruit young people to their causes. Instead, the spirit of this document calls us to work together for the common good of humanity and for our common home which is God’s good creation.

So, what are the solutions that these two religious leaders are pointing to in this document? First, we need to rediscover the importance of the family “as the fundamental nucleus of society and humanity” in providing new generations with “solid moral formation and domestic security . . . and through sound education and an adherence to moral values and upright religious teachings.” In my view this sounds great on paper, but it has failed us in the past. The devil is in the detail. We know from the past how educational

systems in the hands of fundamentalists and authoritarian regimes have created the conditions for this rugged individualism and this perverse global extremism. But we cannot ignore the value of healthy practices found within these religious education institutions when they promote the common good, and not just selfish economic or religious policies that cause more harm than good. The document states: “We therefore condemn all those practices that are a threat to life such as genocide, acts of terrorism, forced displacement, human organ trafficking, abortion and euthanasia.” Also, religions should “never incite war . . . nor must they incite violence.” Clearly, we know throughout history from the Crusades until now how different Christian and Muslim rulers have used the name of God in vain to attack others and bring total destruction as a result of their political greed and as “the consequence of a deviation from religious teachings.” And more importantly to lovers of human rights, this document aligns itself with international documents issued by the United Nations and other international agreements “that have emphasized the importance of religions in the construction of world peace.” In doing so, they are both responding to the critiques of secular militant atheists and humanists who tend to see all religions as fundamentalisms and promoters of clash of civilizations and cultural wars.

Yet, one of the most controversial responses to this document has come from some conservative thinkers like Dr. William Kilpatrick who questioned the assertions of fact raised by Pope Francis when he declares: “The pluralism and the diversity of religions, colour, sex, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings. This divine wisdom is the source from which the right to freedom of belief and the freedom to be different derives.” Some Catholic theologians have affirmed that this document cannot justify its assertions with biblical quotes. However, this statement from the Abu Dhabi declaration follows the *Nostra Aetate* declaration that took place during the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) by addressing the relationship between the Catholic Church and the believers of other religious traditions, and the need to abandon the old missionary practice of extreme versions of proselytism. It is not a matter of promoting

pluralism or syncretism. Rather, it follows closely the Catholic tradition of a more inclusive type of Church that leaves behind the exclusivist claims of the past that it had caused so much hostility between Christians and non-Christians alike.

Therefore, nobody should try to impose any religious worldview or culture that others don't want to accept. Like true Muslims believe when they are often quoting from the Holy Qur'an, "there is no compulsion in religion" (2: 256). The dignity of human life is rooted in a firm conviction that dialogue and mutual understanding can lead to the promotion of a culture of tolerance, peace, and religious coexistence by "avoiding unproductive discussions," by protecting their places of worship from possible attacks either by forms of vandalism or by violent assaults on human lives, by correcting harmful interpretations of sacred texts that often lead to deviations from the religious teachings and values held by both faith traditions. "Terrorism is deplorable and threatens the security of people," be it in the Middle East or anywhere else. The rights of minorities must be upheld to the highest degree, especially honoring the international declarations of human rights that are based on the equality of all citizens before the law of the land and by the creator of all life, God. For instance, recognizing "the right of women to education and employment, and to recognize their freedom to exercise their own political rights. . . . It is also necessary to protect women from sexual exploitation and from being treated as merchandise or objects of pleasure or financial gain." Human trafficking on women and children must stop. Moreover, the "protection of the rights of the elderly, the weak, the disabled, and the oppressed is a religious and social obligation" and it must be defended and guaranteed. So, the document ends with a pledge to promote these values discussed here in this summary to reach out to all secular and religious dignitaries and organizations so that the main values can be implemented at all levels of the international community, whenever it is possible.

In short, I strongly recommend anyone to carefully read the whole document and to acknowledge the fact that these two religious leaders are working together to "defend the values of mutual understanding, human fraternity and harmonious coexistence; to

re-establish wisdom, justice and love; and to reawaken religious awareness among young people so that future generations may be protected from the realm of materialistic thinking and from dangerous policies of unbridled greed and indifference that are based on the law of force and not on the force of law.” This declaration signed up by Pope Francis and Grand Imam Ammad Al-Tayyeb is an “invitation to reconciliation and fraternity” to everyone, believers and non-believers alike. It is “an appeal to every upright conscience that rejects deplorable violence and blind extremism,” a “witness to the greatness of faith in God,” and “a sign of the closeness between East and West” as true brothers and sisters “who love one another.” It is no wonder why this declaration is so important because it marks a turning point in the fragile coexistence between Catholics and Muslims in the Middle East and around the globe. Also, it becomes the precursor to the third encyclical of Pope Francis, “Fratelli Tutti” sometimes translated as “on Fraternity and Social Friendship” published October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic era to address the dark clouds covering the world by way of “Admonitions” in the same manner as St. Francis of Assisi did in his time. No human being should live in total isolation. We are all brothers and sisters to each other. This message of love and compassion includes those who we may not agree with, especially coming from other religious faiths or cultures.

The image shows the name 'Al Wahhab' written in a highly stylized, black Arabic calligraphic font. The letters are thick and fluid, with prominent horizontal strokes and elegant curves. The word is centered on the page.

**Al Wahhab**

## **A Reflection on the Document on Human Fraternity – For World Peace and Living Together**

*By James Kulvi SJ*

His Holiness Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb on February 4, 2019, signed the document titled “Human Fraternity - For World Peace and Living Together.” This document holds a great significance for both Christians and Muslims and accentuates the importance of promoting peace and coexistence in our interconnected world through understanding, dialogue and collaboration among individuals, from faiths and cultures. It reinforces the value of dignity regardless of one’s religious, cultural or social background. The document also highlights the significance of acknowledging and respecting the rights and freedoms of all individuals fostering an atmosphere of tolerance and empathy. It resolutely condemns any kind of violence, prejudice, discrimination or enmity justified by religion. The leaders are urged to champion peace, and they should voice out against any actions that undermine the sanctity of life. Within the core message of the document is the essence of dialogue and there is a ringing endorsement for engaging in conversational interchanges amongst varied religious groups, giving each party an open avenue to connect honestly and with candour. The motivation steering these colloquial exchanges is not just to demystify judged presuppositions but also to put incorrect ideas straight, thereby honing a societal mindset entrenched in mutual respect and understanding.

The document firmly acknowledges nourishing peace through education and how vital the provision of education is in paving a harmonious coexistence pathway. There is an underscored plea for inch-perfect curricula with lessons about leniency, admiration for individual differences, and developing comprehension against fixed notions. Implementing such beneficial values right from tender years then becomes catalytic in nurturing not just children with knowledge but fostering global citizens fuelling peace. A striking theme that prominently emerges from within this document

is women's crucial influence on social fabric and their astounding contributions towards creating concordant societies—a notion thoroughly emboldened within the outline serves as reminding material reinforcing inclusivity. Fighting tooth and nail for women empowerment and their indisputable rights springs up as utterly indispensable while eyeing harmonious future visions that gives every community member strings to play their music on without prejudiced distinction.

Emphasizing the essence of “Human Fraternity”, it underlines freedom of worship and that every person is free to believe and profess their faith, safe from any form of intimidation or duress. This assurance forms a cornerstone in fostering societies wherein our differing faiths are recognized as enriching rather than fear-provoking. The exposition within the document draws on our inherent interconnectedness with mother nature. It underlines humankind's guardianship over ecology and the duty to heroically safeguard its vast expanse for both current dwellers and those who will inhabit earth in times to come, thereby balancing out our existence amid the ecosystem at large.

The document's central message stresses the shared ideals and values that apply to humanity, as well as to both Christianity and Islam. It underlines how important it is for believers and followers of many religions and cultural traditions to respect, comprehend, and work together. A sense of belonging to a single human family is fostered by the concept of human brotherhood, which cuts across religious lines and inspires people to recognise their common humanity. The hope is to build a more compassionate and inclusive society.

The emphasis on education as a method to combat extremism and advance tolerance is one of the document's main analyses. The statement urges the development of educational initiatives to convey to the next generation the value of communication, empathy, and acceptance of others. The objective is to strengthen society by combating illiteracy and prejudice through education.

“Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together” presents a positive outlook for a society that values harmony, peace, and collaboration among all people. It serves as a reminder that despite our differences, we all share a common humanity and a shared duty to create a world in which everyone can live in dignity and peace. To overcome the obstacles that separate us and work towards a more inclusive and peaceful international society, we must actively engage together as individuals, communities, and nations in the spirit of fraternity.

The document’s plea to end violence committed in the name of religion is especially pertinent in today’s sphere, when wars and saboteur attacks have been dyed in the wool in the name of religion. The declaration reiterates the peaceful nature of both Christianity and Islam, consistent with the convictions of many of the believers and followers by categorically challenging violence and terrorism.

Furthermore, the document calls on religious authorities to promote peace and use their position to advance communication and understanding. His Holiness Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb working together is an inspiring example of interfaith cooperation and sends a clear message of togetherness to their respective communities and the rest of the world. Therefore, the document is an appeal to spiritual leaders to contribute more significantly to the cause of world peace and understanding. In order to foster compassion and open-mindedness in their communities, it urges religious organisations to act as educational institutions and beacons of light.

I am reminded as I reflect on the relevance of the document that religious leaders do not bear primary duty for fostering peace and harmonious coexistence. Regardless of our beliefs, every one of us has a part to play in developing understanding and bridging gaps. To fill the gaps between other cultures, we must actively engage in conversation, respect one another’s differences, and foster empathy.

The document recognises the problems that the contemporary world

presents, such as social injustice, environmental deterioration, and the refugee crisis. It motivates believers of all religions to cooperate in tackling these problems and looking for answers that are advantageous to all of humanity. The declaration encourages people to go beyond their own interests and contribute to the welfare of others by highlighting the shared duty for the common good.

The document's message has a significant resonance in a time characterised by polarisation, prejudice, and social conflicts. It serves as a reminder that, despite our differences, we are all connected and that it is our shared duty to promote a society marked by compassion, justice, and harmony. We may aim for a more peaceful and harmonious society where diversity is celebrated, and problems are resolved through communication and understanding by recognising our shared ideals and cooperating with one another.

Spiritually and mystically founded, through our faith and belief in God, we all should recognise our neighbours as brothers and sisters. As the crown of God's creation, God has clothed us with dignity and grandeur, and thus, we are obligated to defend and strengthen one another. The society, over the centuries, has grown, evolved and advanced in great measure, but at the same time, globally, there has been an upsurge in dehumanizing and brutalizing experiences of poverty, war, violence and conflicts. These glaring problems which the world is facing lead only to socio-economic and political failure and regression, as well as viciousness and extremism. As a result of dialogues and discussions, between the representatives of both states and the Heads of Government, the document was formed. It is seemingly challenging but an invitation for all believers to collaborate for a respectful and understanding culture.

The document underscores the need for all those with power and authority in global affairs to recognize and understand that humanity is a family; thus, all human-derived harm must be attended *tout de suite*. It is an assessment of the factors that lead to harm inflicted by humans rather than just a list of opportunities. The document's authors consider what is good while also considering how evil came



to be. They do not present a softened or blunt assessment; rather, they highlight the benefits of recent progressions. Even before looking at political difficulties, resource shortages, and the unequal distribution of wealth, their search for the origin of anthropogenic misery ultimately leads to the interior of the human conscience; the loss of sense of accountability is the result of flawed judgements and bad decisions.

In the end, the declaration is intended to be properly and decorously interpreted as an appeal for peace, a test of conscience, a declaration of faith in God, and finally, as a sign of loving connection, or, to put it another way, an embrace of people in their diversity.

Finally, “Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together” is a compelling and relevant appeal for peace and friendship in a world that is confronted with many struggles and disparities. It places a resilient weight on the value of accepting that we are all human, desisting from inhumanity, and promoting communication and mutual respect among those with diverse roots and worldviews. By adhering to the parameters and recommendations set forth in this document and collectively working together, we can seek to create and build a more compassionate, just, and peaceful world for present and future generations.



# Addressing Religion, Peace, and Security: Strategic Takeaways on the role of Interreligious Dialogue

*By Emiliano Stornelli*

While religious-based views and identities are often misused to fuel inter-state warfare and geopolitical rivalries, domestic strife and tensions, radicalization and violent extremism, international strategies are called to pay a greater attention to the potentialities of the “religious factor” as a driver of peace and security in crisis management, conflicts resolution, peace-building, and post-conflict stabilization.

In particular, a strategy based on a truly comprehensive approach needs to take into due consideration the transformational capacities of interreligious dialogue in enabling de-escalation and de-confliction, reconciliation and partnership relations, both in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and other areas of the world.

By engaging the stakeholders from different religious groups, interreligious dialogue can provide a neutral space for the encounter between representatives of the conflicting parties, contributing to:

- Defuse tensions, facilitate mutual understanding, and create bonds based on trust and respect, thus paving the way to peaceful settlements;
- Prevent theological or doctrinal differences, as well as historical and politico-ideological fault lines, from being translated into sectarian postures and violent extremism;
- Further living together and social cohesion, inclusive citizenship and the respect for human rights, mutual aid and cooperation for the common good, also for the benefit of the most vulnerable categories (religious and ethnic minorities, youth, women, refugees and displaced persons).

Given their position and role, religious leaders, especially the local highest authorities, are key players to initiate an interreligious dialogue process and to ensure its sustainability.

At the same time, the process should be extended to all the actors involved in the scenario, such as decision-makers, officials, faith-based and civil society organizations, scholars, practitioners, journalists and media professionals. To support inclusivity, and strengthen the actions implemented, youth and women need to be fully engaged as well. This would allow the benefits of dialogue to spread across the political, cultural, and social fabric in an integrated and synergic fashion.

Religious leaders, along with decision-makers and officials, have the responsibility to act as enablers of the whole process, besides being themselves primary characters thereof.

To enhance the effectiveness of these efforts, direct reference to official declarations or statements issued by prominent religious leaders and organizations would help provide dialogue and exchange with a sound conceptual framework and useful guidelines. Among the most recent initiatives, the Document on “Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together”, signed in Abu Dhabi by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmed Al-Tayyeb, on 4 February 2019, and the outputs of the summit held by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Istanbul on 14-15 April 2016, clearly indicate the path forward.

The “Human Fraternity” Document calls for “the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard”. “Dialogue” is emphasized in the text, and is associated to the “promotion of a culture of tolerance, acceptance of others and of living together peacefully”, as opposed to violent extremism, which is the result of “a political manipulation of religions” and of “incorrect interpretations of

religious texts”. “Terrorists instrumentalize” religion, “this is why it is so necessary to stop supporting terrorist movements fueled by financing, the provision of weapons and strategy, and by attempts to justify these movements even using the media”. Security-wise, particular attention is paid also to the “places of worship”. Their “protection” is defined as a “duty”, while attacks or threats against them is a violation of both “religious teachings” and “international law”. The Document concludes that “these principles [must] be translated into policies, decisions, legislative texts, courses of study and materials to be circulated”, at all regional and international levels.

The “Istanbul Declaration on Unity and Solidarity for Justice and Peace” highlights that OIC Member States “refuse sectarianism and doctrinarism in all its forms and manifestations; and encourage national efforts aimed at combating sectarian and discriminatory policies and practices as well as at enhancing reconciliation among all Muslims”. The Final Communiqué of the summit “underscored the need to shun the sectarian and denominational agenda as it carries destructive impacts and serious repercussions for Member States’ security and stability and for international peace and security”. The Communiqué also “stressed the importance of reinforcing relations of good neighborliness among the Member States”, urging them “to strengthen existing mechanisms for intra-Islam dialogue in order to help avoiding misperceptions and promote better understanding and mutual respect”. The OIC Program of Action 2025, approved during the Istanbul summit as well, includes “intercultural and interfaith dialogue” among its priority interests.

These and other influential documents fully recognize the valuable role that interreligious dialogue can play in achieving and preserving peace and security. The same awareness is making its way also in the broader international

community, where intergovernmental organizations and states are increasingly assessing interreligious dialogue as an area of engagement for their public and cultural diplomacies. As stakeholders themselves, they are now called to step up their support and encouragement to local actors engaged in cooperative and plural interfaith efforts, for which the latter retain ownership and responsibility.



AL-QAHHAR

**Buddhists and Catholics Shaping a  
Culture of Encounter**  
**Grand Opening Ceremony of the Amatavihara  
Meditation Center**  
**Boys, Maryland, April 8, 2023**

*By Leo Lefebure*

My life has long been enriched by my contacts with Buddhist friends, including the Ven. Abbot Dr. Dhammadipa Sak, from whom I have learned so much, and by my study of the Buddhist tradition, in which I have found many riches. I offer my profound congratulations and best wishes on this auspicious occasion of the Grand Opening Ceremony of the Amatavihara Meditation Center. I hope and pray that many persons from all religious traditions will find a warm welcome and many blessings here. On behalf of the Catholic community, I would like to share Pope Francis's warm hopes that together we can shape a culture of encounter in which all persons find respect and in which we honor all forms of creation by realizing an integral ecology (*Fratelli Tutti; Laudato Si'*). Pope Francis invites Buddhists and Catholics, together with all persons of good will to realize a vision of integral ecology based on the recognition long familiar to Buddhists that "everything is interconnected" (*Laudato Si'*, #138). Because the ecological challenge is global, Pope Francis calls all of us to learn from each other in order to inform our concern for the world.

I would like to suggest five areas where Buddhists and Catholics can together form a culture of encounter: Aesthetics, Academic Sharing, Spiritual Encounter, Concern for the World, and Friendship.

**Aesthetics: The Appeal of Beauty**

The Buddhist tradition has a long and venerable tradition of fostering beauty in aesthetic experience. In my visits to East and Southeast Asia I have repeatedly found inspiration in Buddhist temples, paintings, sculptures, and gardens. The magnificent

Buddhist tradition of art resonates deeply with the Catholic tradition's cultivation of beauty as a form of worshipping God and celebrating creation. On my first visit to Nara in Japan I was profoundly impressed by the great Buddha statue and by the wise faces on the sculptures of the Buddhist figures surrounding him. I sensed that there was a wisdom in these faces that went far beyond words.

The Catholic tradition has its own wonderful tradition of religious art and music. There is a communication in aesthetics that is for me one of the most profound encounters between our traditions. Both the Buddhist and the Catholic traditions tell us that ultimate truth is beyond our conceptual grasp; often the most powerful evocations come from art.

### **Academic Sharing**

Another area in which we can shape a culture of encounter involves academic learning and sharing. When I was finishing my doctoral studies at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, the respected Japanese Buddhist Professor Masao Abe came there as a visiting professor, and I went to hear him speak on Zen and Western thought. Later, he graciously agreed to guide me on a post-doctoral research project, and so I went to Kyoto to do research under his guidance on the meaning of wisdom in Buddhism and Christianity.

Professor Abe introduced me to both Buddhist and Christian scholars in Kyoto. As I read more and more Buddhist perspectives that often seemed to contradict each other, I became progressively more and more confused. Then Professor Abe introduced me to the distinguished Professor Gadjin Nagao, who gave me an article he had written on the ascending path of wisdom and the descending path of compassion in Mahayana Buddhism. That essay offered me the key that illuminated the logic underneath the many different forms of Buddhism that I was encountering. Even though Nagao emphasized the differences between our traditions, his perspective nonetheless resonated deeply with my Catholic heritage. For both

traditions, we find ourselves in a situation of ignorance in which we do not know our true identity. Overcoming this requires a process of negation in which we learn wisdom by seeing through illusions. If, however, we grasp at our newly won insights as if they were absolute truth, we assume a posture of prideful superiority which is actually another form of ignorance. Thus the negations must themselves be negated on a path of compassion with all who suffer. Even though the cosmological assumptions of Mahayana Buddhism and Catholicism are very different, there are many points of convergence regarding spiritual wisdom.

Masao Abe was both deeply rooted in the Zen tradition and also very curious about other traditions and open to learning from them. He was extremely knowledgeable about Christian theology, and he would always ask me questions about Catholic perspectives. On the one hand, Abe insisted on the profound differences between our traditions; but having established that, he then went on very creatively to reinterpret both traditions in relation to each other. From him I learned that even though our traditions have very different assumptions about human existence and the cosmos, nonetheless we share many values. Abe's comments on the significance of emptying (*shunyata* in Sanskrit or *kenosis* in Greek) still echo in my mind. Abe's example of creatively reading both Christian and Buddhist texts in relation to each other made a deep impression on me.

### **Spirituality: Buddhist Meditation and Buddhist-Christian Retreats**

Another area in which we can shape a culture of encounter is spiritual practice. Both the Buddhist and the Catholic traditions insist that academic exploration be integrated into the practice of a spiritual path. On my trip to Thailand in 1986, I wanted to learn about Buddhist monastic life, and so I spent five days at the monastery of Wat Rem Poeng near Chiang Mai in the north of Thailand. My hosts initiated me into their form of practice of *vipassana* meditation. I never reached a state of perfect stillness, let



alone of *samadhi*, but I did learn something of how one is initiated into Thai Buddhist meditation practice. I sensed that there was a profound wisdom here, and I had a desire to learn more. Through the years I have participated both in Buddhist retreats and also in Buddhist-Christian retreats, and I have benefited greatly. Some Catholics enter into Buddhist meditation guided by the Catholic figures of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, sixteenth-century Spanish mystics; others invoke the example of Ignatius of Loyola. These retreats have been deeply moving and transformative. The practice of meditation in the Buddhist tradition has been a profound gift in my life.

When I was teaching at the University of Saint Mary of the Lake in Mundelein, Illinois, northwest of Chicago, Thich Nhat Hanh came and led a retreat, in which I participated. I learned much from the wisdom of Thich Nhat Hanh on breathing, on making peace at each moment, at being open to all the wonder and pain of each moment. At the university, the bells in church ring every quarter hour. Thich Nhat Hanh loved this, and he insisted that whenever we heard the bell we stop whatever we were doing and focus on our breathing. Buddhist meditation practice has been a great blessing in my life, teaching me to observe all that is happening.

### **Concern for the World**

The fourth area in which we can shape a culture of encounter is concern for the world, which follows directly from spiritual practice. The Buddhist tradition, especially as interpreted by Socially Engaged Buddhists shares many values and concerns with the tradition of Catholic Social Teaching. Catholics have much to learn from the wisdom and compassion of Shakyamuni Buddha. In hearing the Four Noble Truths, a Catholic can agree that life as usually lived is unsatisfactory, filled with unnecessary suffering. Like the Buddha, Catholics can acknowledge that our cravings and untamed desires lie at the root of our needless suffering. The three poisons identified by the Buddhist tradition, ignorance, craving, and anger, are very similar to the three forces that Thomas Aquinas

identified as the internal causes of vice and sin: ignorance, passion, and malice. Even though their contexts perspectives are in many ways very different, Thomas Aquinas like the Buddha also proposed a Middle Way in which virtue is found between the extremes, and he developed a type of cognitive psychology to overcome our deep-seated ignorance.

Catholics can learn much from the traditional Buddhist virtues of the Brahma-viharas, the dwelling-places of the Buddha: loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity. Buddhists and Catholics can learn from each other in dialogue how best to apply these virtues to contemporary life.

## Friendship

Finally, the most important practice in shaping a culture of encounter is friendship. A number of years ago the Franciscan leaders of the Graymoor Spiritual Life Center north of New York City reached out to the Buddhist leaders of Chuang Yen Monastery, inviting them to come to a ceremony of blessing animals in honor of the feast of St. Francis of Assisi. The Buddhist leaders were delighted to accept; and warm friendships developed, in which I was happy to participate. I am delighted to continue this relationship today.

In the spring of 2002, I participated in the second Gethsemani Encounter, a weeklong meeting of Buddhist and Catholic monks and nuns, together with advisors like myself. The conference examined various forms of suffering and discussed Buddhist and Catholic ways of responding. On the opening evening, Bhante Gunaratana spoke of the tremendous value of friendship for Buddhists. Friendship is a central value for Catholics as well. In the twelfth century, a Catholic Cistercian monastic leader, Aelred of Rievaulx, wrote that “Christ is the third between two friends,” and even stated, “*Deus amicitia est*” (“God is friendship”). At the conclusion of this encounter, Norman Zoketsu Fischer of the San Francisco Zen Center and I were asked to describe what had happened during the week. We both agreed that the most significant

development was the forming of a new community of friends and companions across religious lines. One of the greatest blessings for me in Buddhist-Christian dialogue has been the wonderful people I have met along the way and the friendly relationships I have developed with them.

I hope and pray that the Amatavihara Meditation Center will always be a house of friendship for all peoples. Thank you for your attention and friendship.

The image shows the name 'Al-Basith' written in elegant Arabic calligraphy. The letters are black on a light grey background. The word is written in a style that is both clear and artistic, with distinct diacritics above and below the letters.

Al-Basith



**“The Lord will guide us and help us to be a more synodal and missionary church, a church that adores God and serves the women and men of our time, going forth to bring to everyone the consoling joy of the Gospel.”**

**Pope Francis**



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