

Salaam

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Quarterly to Promote Understanding



AN EXPERIENCE OF BEING ONE HUMAN FAMILY
INTERNATIONAL INTERFAITH CONFERENCE AT CASTELGANDOLFO (ITALY)
DIALOGUE STARTS FROM GOD AND BRINGS PEOPLE BACK TO GOD
OUR HEART KNOWS THE WAY: A GUIDE TO CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM MARRIAGE
DIALOGUE OF LIFE IN MOROCCO

ISLAMIC STUDIES ASSOCIATION

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

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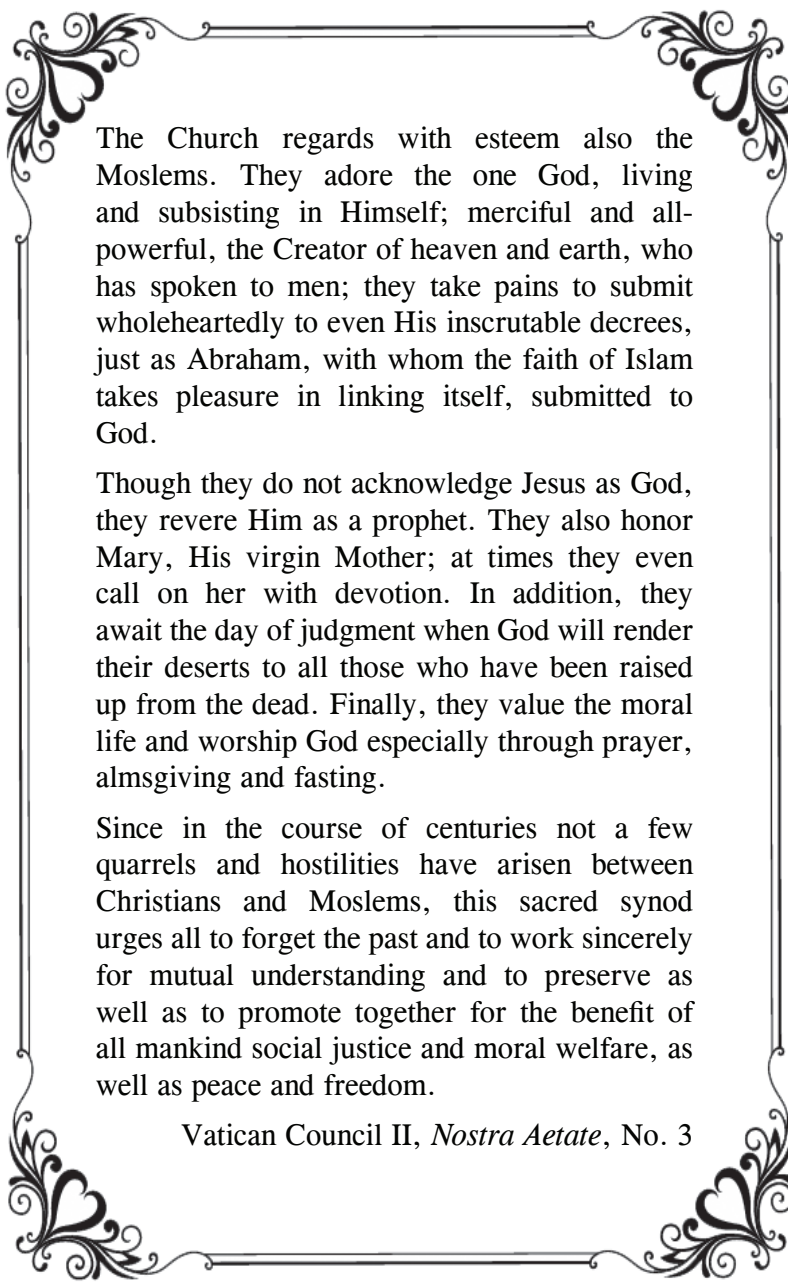
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The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable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

In the men's javelin throw final at the recently concluded Paris 2024 Olympic Games, Arshad Nadeem from Pakistan clinched the gold medal, while Neeraj Chopra from India secured the silver. The heartwarming display of warmth was evident when Raziah Parveen, Arshad Nadeem's mother, expressed her affection for Neeraj Chopra, referring to him as 'both a friend and a brother' to her son. Similarly, Neeraj Chopra's mother Saroj Devi shared her joy about her son's achievement and warmly referred to Nadeem as "her child".

The touching video footage of Chopra's mother affectionately referring to Nadeem as 'also my child', and Nadeem's mother expressing her deep fondness for Chopra as 'both a friend and a brother to her son', captured the hearts of many as it quickly spread across social media. The affectionate gesture exhibited by these two women serves as an important lesson for those who hastily aggravate tensions between these two neighbouring nations. It is not an exaggeration to say that these two women made 'waves of peace' around the sub-continent through the beautiful words from their hearts. Witnessing the genuine bond between these two mothers brought a sense of consolation to my heart. Consolation, St. Ignatius of Loyola (d. 1556), the founder of the Society of Jesus explains as 'loving everything in God and God in everything'.

Women have often been overlooked in their crucial role in peace efforts. Aren't they? Women do play a unique role in initiating peace waves. A friend told me of another example of 'women as agents of peace'. In southwestern Kenya, he said, where Gusii and Maasai women, though excluded from formal peace processes, actively contribute to healing and reconciliation within their communities. They draw upon their local Christian and indigenous African religious traditions to perform mourning and burial rituals, denounce violence, and provide comfort to survivors. By

acknowledging these women's experiences and contributions, we can understand the significant influence that they are having within their communities, despite not having formal leadership. We can find hundreds of such examples around the world. We should come together to collect these experiences, and then share them to inspire and uplift one another.

.....

The recent protests by university students across Bangladesh forced the country's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed to leave Dhaka amid mounting controversy. She earlier secured her fourth term in office following a controversial election. Political analyst Badiul Alam Majumder told the BBC that the election commission was inflating the voter turnout. "From different sources and media reports, we have seen that the turnout (provided by the election commission) doesn't match with the reality," he said. Despite starting her career as a pro-democracy figure, she has faced criticism for allegedly taking on more autocratic tendencies in recent years. Reports from the BBC highlight the increase in politically motivated arrests, disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and other human rights abuses under her leadership. Many are hoping for a peaceful resurgence of democracy in Bangladesh. We add our humble prayers.

....

In the current edition of Salaam, Rose Aloysius and Roberto Catalano talk about how the Focolare movement fosters deep understanding and respect among people and communities. Focolare promotes intercultural communication through various programs that emphasize the exchange of ideas and cultural norms, as well as the development of meaningful relationships. They emphasize that in an intercultural society, everyone learns from one another and grows together, leading to a transformation for all. The following two articles highlight the remarkable contributions of individuals, Fr. Sebastian D' Ambra and Dr. Helene Ijaz, to intercultural life from different parts of the world. Their work is truly inspiring, and we keep them in our prayers for their continued efforts.

Joseph Victor Edwin SJ

BEYOND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: AN EXPERIENCE OF BEING ONE HUMAN FAMILY

By Rose Aloysius

480 people of different faiths from 40 countries, speaking 12 different languages, participated in the interreligious conference themed “One Human Family” promoted by the Focolare Movement held from 31st May to 2nd June 2024 at Castel Gandolfo (Rome, Italy). The conference was preceded by two preparatory days by an interfaith core group, and was concluded with a private audience with Pope Francis at the Vatican on 3rd June, followed by a day of reflection and prayer for peace in Assisi on 4th June.

Our India contingent’s WhatsApp group was very active. My phone pinged again, and I saw that Zuhana, a young Muslim girl from Coimbatore, had posted a longer than usual chat: “‘Every soul has to give to others what brings them immense joy’. I choose to reflect on this today because there is a common thing that a lot of people do to inflict the pain that they have experienced upon others to feel a sense of satisfaction, but if we follow what was shared this morning - to give to others what brings them immense joy, I am sure that the contentment and joy they experience would be greater than the sense of satisfaction they’re craving for.”

This chat touched me deeply, as I realised that “immense joy” was what we were all experiencing in Castelgandolfo those days, notwithstanding the intense pain that all of us felt whenever we met participants who came from experiences of war, conflicts and persecution. The 24 Indian representatives hailing from Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore and Coimbatore formed a vibrant and colourful group of people of different ages and backgrounds, of Hindu, Muslim, Baha’i and Christian faith. Zuhana was right: in these days of multiple world crises we all felt that this conference created a safe space for all to talk, to share our beliefs and life journey, and

experience the true, deep joy that comes when one is in a family, and can simply be one's true self.

The India group greatly contributed to the proceedings of the conference. They were part of the 85 close collaborators of the Focolare Movement who attended the two-day preparatory meeting, which included prayer, sharing and group discussions, setting the tone for the warmth needed to welcome all those who were to join later. We took every opportunity we had to interact with the participants from other countries who were Jewish, Buddhists, Sikhs, and believers of traditional African religions. Among them were Rabbis, Imams, Catholic priests, Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist monks. Each one brought the richness, wisdom and life of one's own faith and origin. During meals at the canteen there was a pleasant din of homely chatter as we tried to communicate to each other the different ways of preparing food, our culture, the sorrows that we face, as well as our efforts to take ahead dialogue, drawing strength and courage from the help and prayers of those who like us believe in this one human family.

At the preparatory meeting we drew inspiration from the experience of Chiara Lubich (1920-2008), founder of the Focolare Movement, who was a pioneer in promoting dialogue with people of different faiths. Professor Dr Kala Acharya from Somaiya College of Mumbai, who had a special relationship with Chiara Lubich and considered her as her "spiritual sister", commented texts that Chiara wrote during a period of great illumination. Dr. Kezevino Aram President of the Gandhian Shanti Ashram of Coimbatore addressed the participants on various occasions to share about the contribution of the charism of unity of the Focolare in the life of people of different religions. She also addressed the conference to speak of Religions and Peace. Prof. Dr Priya Vaidya, Head of the Philosophy Department at the Mumbai University, addressed the conference about *An Economy for Peace*. The representatives of Anam Prem Movement of Mumbai offered prayers and traditional Indian music on flute, while the Shanti Ashram representatives

spoke of their projects of Poverty Solutions and of building bridges between people of different faiths.

All talks at the Conference were extremely enriching. Experts spoke on the impact of new technologies and artificial intelligence on interpersonal relationships and on dialogue among people of different religions. Others spoke of the *Laudato Si* movement for creation. But there was also time for prayers, workshops, games, a cultural evening and sharing of numerous life experiences Joy. I found that word again in the address of Pope Francis to 200 representatives of the Conference who went to meet him in a private audience at the end of the convention: “*Dear friends, your witness is a source of joy and a source of consolation, especially in this time of conflict, when religion is often misused in order to fuel division. Indeed, interreligious dialogue “is a necessary condition for peace in the world, and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities” (Evangelii Gaudium, 250). I encourage you, then, to move forward and always be open.*”

The event was concluded with a Pilgrimage of fraternity after a three-hour journey to Assisi. Prof. Dr Shubadha Joshi, former Head of the Philosophy Faculty of Mumbai University, spoke on Religions and Peace with Creation from a Hindu philosophical approach. In the city of peace, the prayer pronounced by the participants, each according to their own faith, for fraternity, justice and reconciliation for all peoples, resounded deeply among all present.

Our India WhatsApp group messages continued to flow as we departed to return to our cities: *The images and even the sounds are so vivid! It’s an inspiring experience of love, unity, harmony and deep inner peace. One thing we can surely do is to positively sustain our renewed commitment to live and promote the oneness of the human family.*



ONE HUMAN FAMILY

International interfaith Conference at Castelgandolfo (Italy)

By Roberto Catalano

Five days of total immersion with about five hundred people from all over the world. Among them rabbis and rabbinas, imams, catholic priests and a Swiss Reformed minister, Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist monks, as well as Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh and Baha'i lay people. Young and old: a true kaleidoscope long thought out and, in the end, realized to bear witness, as the title of the conference reads: *One human family*. This can be the summary of the International Conference held at Castel Gandolfo (on the hills southward of Rome in Italy). Yet, these few figures and elements have to be read in the perspective of a strong statement made by Pope Francis, during the private audience he granted to part of the group. The Pope, in fact, defined this experience as “*a revolutionary journey that does so much good for the Church. It is an experience animated by the Holy Spirit, rooted - we can say - in the heart of Christ, in his thirst for love, communion, fraternity*”.

The event was organized by the Focolare Movement, one of the new ecclesial communities, born in the 40's of last century and committed to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, respectively, since 1960 and 1970's. Due to the recent pandemic some of the programs which were expected to take part in 2020, on the occasion of the centenary birth of Chiara Lubich, the foundress of the Focolare, had to be rescheduled. The interfaith event was one of them. Those who experienced these days agreed that they were transforming moments that allowed participants to experience a shared and true fraternity. True because it is not always easy. One morning a Jewish friend confided in me her discomfort at what a Muslim had said the previous day. The reaction would have been quite different ten years ago, she told me. Time has honed the training to dialogue with everyone and at all costs. That friend had realized that she could not leave the door open to feelings that would lead her to react, especially in these months of wars, massacres, kidnappings and bloodshed, and the resulting polarization.

The first two days of the conference gathered a group of about fifty animators (Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Baha'i) of this dialogue, committed to deepening the spirituality that enables the practice of dialogue. The effects produced by years and decades of practice, far from being taken for granted, became evident in the following days when people started pouring in from different parts of the world (40 countries were represented) and cultural (translations were required in twelve language) and religious backgrounds. One day, at the end of lunch, I saw an Orthodox Jewish lady from Jerusalem eating with Muslims. A scene beyond imagination against the background of what is happening right now in Israel and in Gaza. One afternoon, two monks were talking to a group of Turkish Muslim women living in Germany. By the end of the conference, in fact, there were no longer any groups that were closed within their own culture, language or religion. Only the Buddhist monks were anticipating everyone to observe the lunch time, which in the *sangha* (their monastic community) requires meals to be eaten before 12 noon.

During the event, the organizing committee (made up by people of different religions and generations) made sure that present burning issues could be addressed. Experts from different faiths discussed religion and peace (with a focus on international relations). Religions and economics were also addressed as well as religions and artificial intelligence, concluding on Sunday - during the open day when the audience reached five hundred presences - with a long and articulate round table discussion on 'religions and peace with creation'. In the latter, before a packed hall and in absolute silence, an American Christian, a Japanese Buddhist, a rabbi of Algerian origin and now living in Tel Aviv, a Hindu from South India and an Indonesian Muslim spoke. As the rabbi said, we caught sparks of wisdom and holiness.

These were challenging sessions, some even heavy, others very interactive. The protagonists, all experts with different backgrounds and well-defined religious roots, contributed to the cultural dimension of this dialogue experience, as perhaps never before in these areas. Yet, all this was never at the expense of the life

and experiences in daily life that always followed these cultural reflections to show that many are hard at work, in life and on the ground in various parts of the world, to realize and continue what was being said. The impression was that of a unique experience, the fruit of years, often decades, of commitment. These are people who have transformed themselves over the years, while remaining anchored to their culture and religion, which they have, indeed, deepened through their commitment to dialogue.

Two other moments had a special significance: a fraternity pilgrimage to Assisi to celebrate in a special way the care for creation and the audience with Pope Francis. During this solemn and touching moment in the heart of the Vatican, the pope, referring to the experience of interfaith dialogue inspired by the Focolare spirituality, specifically referred to the half a century old experience of Muslims and Christians in Algeria where a Catholic Movement – the Focolare – is today formed, in overwhelming majority, by people of Muslim tradition. In order to summarize their experience the protagonist of this Christian-Muslim dialogue affirm of having reached a stage well beyond dialogue, experiencing what can be truly defined as ‘brotherhood’. Yet, other experiences between Muslims and Christians are today truly meaningful in the frame of this spirit. It is enough to mention *Wings of Unity*, which involves Shi’a Muslim and Catholic students in a project born at Sophia University Institute (Florence – Italy) in order to deepen academically as well as experientially unity of God and unity in God. In Austria, every year a group of Muslim and Christian scholars regularly meet for a week to dig out into the Mystical dimension of dialogue. Finally, we cannot ignore the great spiritual friendship and social collaboration born and developed in the US between African-American Muslims (follower of the late Imam W.D. Mohammed), and the Catholic members of the Focolare. They regularly meet and cooperate around different mosques and churches in several parts of North America.

The congress injects new enthusiasm and opens to fresh creativity for a more and more fruitful dialogue.

DIALOGUE STARTS FROM GOD AND BRINGS PEOPLE BACK TO GOD

By Fr. Sebastian D'Ambra

Fr. Sebastian D'Ambra, a missionary of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME), was honoured with the Bishop Jorge Barlin Golden Cross Award for his outstanding contributions to the Catholic Church in the Philippines, with a focus on Christian-Muslim relations. In an interview conducted by **Joseph Victor Edwin SJ**, Fr. D'Ambra reflects on his experiences and insights gained from his mission work among Muslims. Below are selected excerpts from the interview.

Edwin: Congratulations, Fr Sebastian D'Ambra, on receiving the Bishop Jorge Barlin Golden Cross Award. Could you please provide some insights into the Silsilah movement, Emmaus Dialogue Community and the Emmaus College of Theology that you initiated to promote dialogue between Christians and Muslims in the Philippines?

D'Ambra: I initiated the Silsilah Dialogue Movement in 1984 after spending several years doing mission work in a remote area of Mindanao during the Martial Law under President Marcos. This was the time of the father of the current president of the Philippines.

I arrived in Mindanao in 1977 with a focus on the Christian communities and the Subanon, a tribal group in the mission of Siocon, Zamboanga del Norte. However, I soon shifted my attention to the Muslim community due to the ongoing conflict between the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), consisting of Muslims, and the government. Living in a Muslim community, I befriended the locals and gained their respect. The MNLF group in the area even asked me to be their negotiator to facilitate their surrender and return to their families. This period was challenging, often spent living with the rebels in the forest, but it was also enriching, as I gained a deeper understanding of their aspirations and frustrations.

After two years, the negotiation was successful, but I encountered trouble with the military and had to leave the Philippines, returning to Italy.

In Italy, I studied Islam and Arabic at PISAI (Rome), which led me to reflect deeply on the true meaning of dialogue. I realized that a spiritual approach was essential for genuine interreligious dialogue with Muslims.

Upon returning to Mindanao, I shared my understanding of dialogue with the Muslims, proposing the spirit of the “Great Jihad” (the struggle for internal purification according to the spirit of Sufism in Islam) and to the Christians, the Beatitudes of Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew (5:1-12), the “Magna Carta” of Christianity. This became the foundation of the dialogue I proposed to some Christian and Muslim friends in Zamboanga City in 1984 when I started the Silsilah Dialogue Movement. Despite the high levels of prejudice and animosity between Muslims and Christians, I found friends who were convinced of the new movement, guided by the idea that “Dialogue starts from God and brings people back to God.”

This principle guided us to promote the spirituality of life-in-dialogue, encouraging members to live and promote the culture of dialogue as a way to peace. We agreed that the spirituality of life-in-dialogue should be nurtured through dialogue with God, oneself, others, and creation. This new approach was revolutionary, as the primary focus of dialogue in Mindanao had previously been on controlling conflict and animosity between Muslims and Christians.

Thanks to God, Silsilah began to grow in various ways. Our first program was a summer course on Muslim-Christian dialogue for our members, which has been held annually since then. This year marks the 38th summer course. One key aspect of the course, in addition to teaching Christianity and Islam, is the immersion program where Christians live with Muslim families and vice versa.

Over time, Silsilah’s programs expanded to include initiatives such as small schools in poor areas, care for orphans from conflict

situations, prison outreach, promoting dialogue and peace among Filipinos abroad, meetings of Muslim and Christian leaders, youth groups, and the Harmony Prayer, which is now spread in about 30 countries. We also promote environmental dialogue to protect Mother Earth, the World Interfaith Harmony Week, and the Dialogue with Creation Partners Week in October. We have published various books and other materials.

The emergence of Silsilah and other dialogue initiatives in Mindanao prompted the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) to focus more on interreligious dialogue, establishing a specific commission. Bishop Capalla, the first chairperson of this commission, appointed me as the first executive secretary in 1989, allowing me to have an office in Zamboanga City near the Silsilah centre. This marked the beginning of my collaboration with the CBCP on interreligious dialogue.

In 1992, my dear friend Fr. Salvatore Carzedda, PIME, was killed during a Silsilah summer course by a terrorist group opposed to Muslim-Christian dialogue. As I was also a target, I was sent back to Italy for my second "exile." Despite this devastating situation, we continued to move forward in the spirit of "Padayon" (move on).

The Emmaus Dialogue Movement emerged from Silsilah in 1987, formed by Catholics dedicated to the mission of dialogue and peace. The initiative began with Aminda Sano, now president of Silsilah and director of interreligious dialogue for the Archdiocese of Zamboanga. Initially composed of Catholic teachers, the group later opened to other Catholics and was approved by the diocese as a private lay association. Today, it includes lay consecrated men and women, married couples, priests, sisters, seminarians, youth, and even a bishop.

From this experience, we established the Emmaus College of Theology, majoring in Interreligious Dialogue, to form Catholic boys and girls as leaders in the Church and society in the spirit of dialogue.

Edwin: **What developments are encouraging, promising, or hopeful in contemporary Christian-Muslim relations?**

D’Ambra: In the context of contemporary Christian-Muslim relations, I draw inspiration from the concept of “Human Fraternity” as articulated in the 2019 Abu Dhabi document, a pact signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar University. This document underlines the significance of fostering a Culture of Dialogue, a principle deeply embedded in the spiritual ethos of engaging in dialogues at Silsilah. It is imperative to reexamine the profound essence of dialogue, underpinned by love and reverence for all, to nurture solidarity across various domains, particularly in Dialogues with Creation and other specific requirements pertinent to our geographical and cultural milieus.

In the Philippines, I have been continuing various initiatives in line with the Human Fraternity Document and the spirit of Synodality. One of my significant achievements was publishing a manual on interreligious dialogue, which received the Card Sin Award for best book in ministry. I have also authored other books, some of which are available on the web (see: www.silsilahdialogue.com). During the COVID-19 pandemic, despite travel restrictions, I sent my books to bishops and universities to share ideas and the spirit of dialogue.

The Emmaus College of Theology, specializing in Interreligious Dialogue, aims to form Christian leaders open to interreligious dialogue. It is approved and recognized by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED). Students receive comprehensive academic and spiritual formation at Harmony Village, Zamboanga City, where Silsilah conducts most of its activities (see www.emmauscollegeoftheology.com).



OUR HEART KNOWS THE WAY: A GUIDE TO CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM MARRIAGE

By Helene Ijaz

Helene Ijaz PhD is an educator, mediator, and consultant in cross-cultural, interracial, and interfaith relations. She's the author of 'Your Heart Knows the Way: A Guide to Christian-Muslim Marriage'. A Roman Catholic Christian, she has been married to a Muslim for over fifty years. In her conversation with **Joseph Victor Edwin SJ**, she shares the graces and challenges of interfaith marriages that involves Christian and Muslim partners.

Edwin: In your book "Your Heart Knows the Way: A Guide to Christian-Muslim Marriage," you explore the significance of interfaith marriage in the Western world. Could you share insights on the book's relevance in the context of Western society?

Helene Ijaz: As a result of globalization, there has been a shift in the population of many Western countries from culturally, religiously, and racially largely homogenous societies to multicultural, multireligious, and multiracial societies. This has created greater opportunities for people from different religions and cultures to interact, get to know each other, and intermarry. Some people have become more open to and accepting of religious and cultural diversity and intermarriage. However, others continue to adhere to exclusivist religion and ethnocentrism. They view interfaith marriage as a threat to their religion and cultural identity. Christian-Muslim marriages are widely frowned upon due to the long-standing adversarial relationship between the two faith communities. Stereotypes about Muslims abound and are constantly fueled by events at a local, national, and international level. Religious leaders in Christianity and Islam discourage interreligious marriage out of concern about the long-term effect on the faith life of members of their religion. Many Muslim immigrants to the West discourage their children from marrying outside their faith for fear of losing

their identity, including their language, culture, and religion. These social dynamics create much pressure and tension for interfaith couples.

The book analyzes various religious and social factors that can impact a Christian-Muslim marriage, their sources, and ways of addressing them. It argues that emphasizing human differences creates division and conflict among people. By opening ourselves to people different from us and learning about their values, beliefs, practices, and traditions we become enriched and grow as a human being.

Edwin: Living in an interfaith context can significantly influence one's faith response to the revelation in Christ. How has this shaped your faith as part of an interfaith family?

Helene Ijaz: Living in a Christian-Muslim family has shifted my focus from unquestioning obedience to Church teachings **about** Jesus and related religious precepts and practices to seeking to live by the spiritual teachings **of** Jesus: his message of God's love for all of God's creation, including all human beings, regardless of religion, ethnicity, gender, and social status; his calling us to search for a deeper awareness and understanding of God's ways and thereby grow as human beings; his focus on human relationships instead of religious laws, and mutual love and respect, compassion, fairness, and justice, and mercy and forgiveness as guiding principles. I have discovered similar teachings in the Qur'an and its call to surrender to God and recognize there is no compulsion in religion (2:256). I believe God is greater than any one religion. The goal of religion is to help us grow and become transformed into the human beings we are meant to be. The exclusivist approach to religion in much of mainstream Christianity and Islam conflicts with core spiritual teachings by Jesus and the Qur'an. It is profoundly divisive and has a particularly negative impact on interfaith couples

Edwin: What would you identify as critical elements contributing to a successful interfaith marriage?

Helene Ijaz: Critical elements contributing to a successful interfaith marriage include a couple's mutual love and respect, the equitable treatment of their religions, and a shared focus on God. Spouses must be authentic in their faith, open to otherness, and willing to learn about, respect, and honor each other's faith traditions. Their relationship needs to be internally not externally driven. It is important for both sides to critically reflect on the implications of the religious rules on intermarriage in their own and each other's faith community and how they can maintain religious integrity, given potential pressures by their partner to surrender their faith and engage in a false conversion.

To build a harmonious relationship, husband and wife must feel free to be and grow as who they are. At the same time, they must find a fit between their different ways of seeing and experiencing the world and their different religious beliefs and practices. This is often not easy. A couple can build mutual understanding and trust through effective communication. Cooperation and joint problem-solving promote a strong partnership and bring issues out in the open before they seriously affect the relationship. For an interfaith couple to effectively communicate entails moving back and forth between their own world and their partner's world and actively engaging with each other's beliefs, practices, and experiences.

Different rules, norms, and social practices in the faith traditions of husband and wife can affect a couple's daily life. If one partner insists that theirs is the only right way and must be followed, this can lead to tension and conflict. To build a loving, harmonious relationship, spouses must distinguish between what is essential and nonessential to the practice of their faith, balance each other's religious requirements and needs, and be willing to compromise on nonessential issues. The many spiritual values shared across Christianity and Islam can provide a source of unity for husband and wife.

Edwin: In a society where family structures are increasingly vulnerable, how can interfaith families serve as a refuge that upholds faith values?

Helene Ijaz: There are many reasons for vulnerable family structures. Loss of faith is one of them. Christian-Muslim families are highly vulnerable to encountering problems due to their religious and often also cultural and racial differences, the long-standing adversarial relationship between their faith communities, and gender-related inequities. Family members may experience societal bias, prejudice, or discrimination, including by some extended family, or one spouse may fail to effectively respond to the other's physical, emotional, or spiritual needs or those of other family members. Raising children in a Christian-Muslim marriage poses particular challenges, especially if one or both parents – following religious prescriptions – insist that their religion is the only right one and that their children should be raised in it.

My experience suggests that interfaith couples that succeed in effectively managing their many challenges rely primarily on principles such as mutual love and respect, the fair, equitable, compassionate, and caring treatment of everyone involved, and paying due attention to their needs and aspirations, regardless of the faith tradition to which they belong. Foundational to a religiously and spiritually informed life, these principles reflect universal human values that positively impact any relationship. They transcend dualistic thinking and any effort to promote oneself or assert one's superiority. They show openness to and affirm and honor otherness while acknowledging the interconnectedness and interdependence of all human beings and striving for unity, balance, peace, and harmony. Such an approach may well serve as a model for other families with vulnerable family structures.

Edwin: **In the context of a Christian-Muslim family, what practical steps can one undertake to discern the will of God?**

Helene Ijaz: To discern the will of God means to acknowledge and surrender to a power greater than ourselves, the source of everything that is, and seek to abide by its precepts as imprinted on our hearts. Both Christians and Muslims share this concept of the will of God. Jesus described the key elements of what represents the will of God

by saying: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind..., “Love your neighbor as yourself,” (Mt 22:37) and “Do to others as you want to have them do to you.” (Mt 7:12). “Essentially, discerning God’s will entails distinguishing between good and evil, right and wrong, and what is good for or harms other people and ourselves. The right course of action reveals itself through our conscience, the voice of our heart.

As children, most of us learned and internalized basic moral values as part of our religious upbringing. But if these values are to provide effective guidance in all life situations, we must deepen our awareness and understanding of how we can uncover what may be God’s will. To discern what course of action God may want us to take in a given situation we must listen to our heart, the link between us, God, and others. We must become attuned to how God speaks to us. As we listen deeply to our inner self, we may gradually intuit the right path. We may also become aware of external clues as to the direction God may want us to pursue.

Uncovering God’s will requires effort. Private prayer, meditation, and reflecting on the tasks and challenges before us can deepen our understanding of the intentions and motivations behind our actions and potential implications for others and ourselves. We can also explore the rationale for and impact of different options by discussing them with our partner and other family members. We can seek to live by moral values and spiritual principles as a family by addressing issues and situations where someone has chosen the wrong path and analyzing ways of remedying it. We can pray or fast together as a family to purify our hearts. Self-examination at the end of the day can help us monitor and grow in our ability to discern the will of God. As parents, we can help shape our children’s conscience by discussing the values behind moral actions, encouraging them to explore what drives their actions and their impact on others and themselves, and modeling the right action to them.

DIALOGUE OF LIFE IN MOROCCO

By Connor Baldwin

Attending mass at Saint Francis Church in Rabat, Morocco is a unique international experience. Walking inside, one will notice the pews filled with Christians from all over the world; Asians, Africans, Europeans and even Americans coming together in prayer. The church offers mass in three different languages, French, English and Spanish. On the outside, St. Francis church has a modest appearance, a white building with a bell tower pointed towards the heavens. The only thing indicating that it is a church is a small cross that stands piously on top of the bell tower. Heading into the church, the roof is decorated with stained glass windows. At the front of the church where the altar rests there is a large mural of saints observing the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, which hangs alone behind the altar, Jesus' eyes looking up towards heaven.

Today's mass was special as it was the first communion for a group of young Catholics in the parish. During the mass there was a cute celebration and exchange of peace, as the young Catholics walked up and down the aisles shaking hands with everyone in attendance.

What is nice about the service is that despite the location, language or cultural differences, the liturgy is the same. The only difference being the music, which will have slight variations in sound depending on what people make up the choir. For example, at St. Francis Church there is an instrumental that plays along with a piano as well as a choir composed of mixed voices from Africa and Asia, from what I saw of the choir, while others will incorporate drums.

Towards the end of the mass the priest thanked the catechists who had made the young Catholics first communion possible and gifted them with an icon of "Our Lady of Morocco."

Afterwards, the priest shared a story with the congregation about pelicans and how they are an example of Jesus' humility. As the priest explained, if pelicans are unable to feed their young, they

will pierce themselves and feed their children their blood; like how Jesus feeds Christians his body and blood for their salvation. It was an interesting story that I had never heard before, apparently it is a common symbol in Christian art.

After mass I hung around waiting for a chance to talk to the priest so I could ask him if he would be around later for an interview. While waiting, three students from Ghana approached me and asked what I thought of the mass. I said it was good, and that most of it was the same from where I was. The only thing that was different was the architecture. The small stained-glass windows at St. Francis' church appeared incredibly modest compared to the large stained-glass windows depicting epic biblical stories that I had become familiar with in the United States. One student, Fernando, told me that the churches in Morocco are very similar to the ones in Ghana, the only difference being that the church he went to in Ghana was constructed out of red rocks which were locally sourced from the city that he is from. From what I understand, the churches here are constructed out of local material, for example St. Peter' Cathedral in Rabat incorporates tiles as well as using wood originating from Rabat into its construction.

After exchanging WhatsApp's with Fernando, I went to look for the priest by asking one of the Franciscan monks in attendance if he was available. The monk was from France and said that his English was not that good, although I beg to differ as I was able to hold a decent conversation with him before he informed me that the priest was in the back and he carried on with his responsibilities around the church.

Heading towards the back of the church, I ran into a couple of catechists who were still hanging around and I asked them about their story. They were both American teachers currently teaching at American Universities in Morocco. Before Morocco they had been teaching around the world, one of them sharing that this is the fourth country she'd been to while teaching. She explained that she is married to the United States religious freedom ambassador,

and he was currently ending his term in Morocco and moving on to somewhere new. I exchanged numbers with the couple and asked if they would be around for an interview, but because they were leaving soon they said they wouldn't have much time for an interview.

I asked the catechists if there were any big differences between the churches they had previously attended compared to the one in Morocco and they said there is a lot more of a lively community in Rabat. At this point I looked around the church and noticed people exchanging hugs with one another and a little girl running around passing out candies and sweets. The catechists added that this is one of the only English masses in Morocco that has a presence, they commented that there is a service in Marrakesh in English, which is good, but there are only about 20 people that attend the mass so it is hard to authentically match the energy of today's mass which had about 50 people joining in song and prayer.

After saying goodbye to them and wishing them the best of luck, I was finally able to locate the priest where I gave him a short summary on the research I was conducting as well as an introduction of myself. At first, he asked me if I could meet him at the end of the month but after a bit more negotiation he told me to come back at 5PM that day.

Soon the clock rolled around to being five and I walked over to St. Francis' church where I waited patiently at the door. After a moment I was accepted by a different Franciscan than the ones I had met before and he led me inside before telling me in French to sit and wait for Father Stephen, the priest who I had spoken with in the morning, who would be arriving shortly.

After about 15 minutes, Fr. Stephen arrived and he led me into the library for us to conduct our interview. It was a modest room with bookshelves lining the walls and a large wooden table in the middle. Before starting I took my phone out and asked if it was possible to record the conversation. He said it was no problem and we began

a conversation that lasted for at least two hours about everything concerning Christianity, Islam, Interfaith and Morocco.

First, I asked him about his spiritual journey and what brought him to Morocco. Born in France, Father Stephen always felt the need to join the spiritual life and work for God. Yet his parents encouraged him to get an education and so he studied mathematics and economics. After graduating and working in France he joined the seminary and became a Franciscan lay friar to live among the poor like Jesus did. After this he received the call to join a community in Meknes, working in a cultural center in the middle of the *medina*, the old marketplace. After one year of life in Meknes he returned to France to finish his studies in philosophy and theology. Slowly during this time, he learned that he wanted to become a priest and live among Muslims. After this he began learning classical Arabic in Egypt with a Franciscan community in Cairo before being told he would return to Morocco. In 2011 he returned to Morocco, serving 10 years in the community of Meknes, living among the poor. During this time, he worked very closely with the cultural center, teaching French, English, math or whatever was required for the day.

In 2022, he was elected by his fellow Friars to be the head responsible of Franciscan life in Morocco, which led him to living in Rabat. Currently, there are 18 Franciscan monks from all over the world living in Morocco. These communities range across Morocco in five different cities: Tetouan, Tangier, Rabat, Meknes and Marrakesh. Currently, Fr. Stephen is serving his second year in a three-year term as the head responsible overseeing Franciscan communities and helping other monks assimilate to their new environment. At the end of his term, he will stay in Morocco yet return to life as a simple Friar, living as a humble monk working among the poor communities. Fr. Stephen explained that returning to this lowly position would be a nice change of pace from the busy life he experiences as a priest in downtown Rabat.

I asked him how he bridges together the cultural divide between so many different people including monks from all over the world as well as Muslims. He told me that it is all about being interested while also being open. He explained to me that when he first came to Morocco he had all these understandings, understanding of Islamic belief and of the Arabic language, but he told me it was more than just understanding. He called on the example of when Pope Francis came to Morocco quoting, “Now is not the time for tolerance, but instead it is the time of *taaruf* (Arabic word for knowing one another),” Fr. Stephen explained.

Fr. Stephen went further and said that this mastery of understanding was also a barrier for him. Because of his understanding of Arabic culture and language, he was unable to make new discoveries. He told me that although it is good to have an interest in other cultures, you cannot go into a dialogue with an understanding, you must also allow yourself to be surprised while discovering differences. For example, he shared the story of how he was on the train one time when a woman sat down next to him. She was wearing a *niqab*, a Muslim garment that covers everything except for the eyes. Fr. Stephen, upon seeing her glove, looked down at the ground avoiding conversation with the woman, thinking it was improper to converse with her. Yet as she approached, she asked him if the seat next to him was taken, he told her no, which then sparked a conversation between the priest and the woman. While on the train together, they shared their beliefs in God and learned about each other’s faiths through a common dialogue. Fr. Stephen explained that much like himself, people need to share their understanding of others and learn that each person is different and encounter surprises in inter-religious dialogue.

Fr. Stephen continued speaking with a sort of religious fervor, expressing himself with his whole body as he spoke, drawing symbols on the table with his fingers. He explained a passage from Genesis, describing God as “the Separator” separating the sky from the Earth (Genesis 1:7). Fr. Stephen explained that it was God who separated religions from one another and made all of us unique.

“Making distinction, in order to create communion, and maybe the difference between Muslims and Christians, have a divine meaning,” Fr. Stephen said.

Later he described difference as something that is an unsettling feeling for humans, but not for God, as it is all with Him.

Continuing, I asked him about the congregation that attends the Eucharist. He explained that it is a beautiful thing, to have so many people from so many different nationalities coming together under one roof to praise God. Workers from the Philippines and Indonesia, students from the Congo and Ghana, expatriates from France and the United States and tourists from all over the world coming together in a church in Morocco, he smiled as he described the unique situation he had at hand. But despite the cross-cultural beauty, he went on to say that it is also hard because so many of these Christians are passers-by and will soon leave Morocco.

He explained the story of modern Christian presence in Morocco. At first, in the 1990’s, Christian’s were mostly students who were coming to Morocco for education and returning to their home countries afterward. Then in the 2000’s, there were migrants from Africa who were coming to Morocco with the ambition of going to Europe, some staying for a week while others stayed for years waiting for their chance. Nowadays however, Morocco is starting to see people stay and slowly build a consistent presence in the church congregation. Fr. Stephen emphasized this point by noting that St. Francis’ church was finally able to have catechism classes, which has not been possible earlier. First communion, baptisms and other sacraments are not something which are available in Morocco because of the swinging door of Christians, but now with the stability, it is becoming more common.

I then asked about the influence of St. Francis of Assisi regarding interfaith dialogue in Morocco. Fr. Stephen exclaimed that St. Francis is a vital pillar in the pursuit of interreligious life in the country. St. Francis, because of his tolerance for all people and his

passion for learning has become a valuable role-model to reflect, or perhaps pray with, in terms of interfaith dialogue. Fr. Stephen said that the Archbishop of Rabat, Cristobal Lopez Martinez is influenced by the Franciscan spirituality, which has had a long history in Morocco. Fr. Stephen commented that the Archbishop of Rabat, Cristobal, has a very unique responsibility as he is only overseeing about 20,000 people, which compared to the work of other Archbishops is not a lot of people. Most of his responsibility relies on engaging with the Muslim community and ensuring peace.

Afterwards I asked about the interest in Christianity from Moroccans. Fr. Stephen explained that there is a growing interest from Moroccans but there is still a long way to go. Because of the classical understanding of Islam in Morocco many people feel there is no need to learn anything about Christianity, everything they need to know about Christianity is already included in the Quran. But despite this, there is a growing interest, Fr. Stephen recalled a time when there was a Muslim woman who came into Eucharistic adoration and sat and observed the prayer for about an hour. Other times there are Moroccans that approach him about converting to Christianity. Moroccans that come to him must genuinely want to follow the words and example of Jesus Christ, and not use it to escape family drama or look for an easy way around certain social rule. When a Moroccan comes to genuinely express interest in becoming a Christian, Fr. Stephen will take the needed time to speak with them, in Arabic, about life as a Christian and the Gospel.

We talked about other things including the Pope's visit to Morocco as well as the interfaith scholars such as Louis Massignon and documents like "A Common Word" which I had learned in previously, but it was a nice reaffirmation in what I already know and nice to know that these examples of interfaith are not just unique to American inter-faith dialogue but known around the world.

Afterwards, Fr. Stephen showed me around the church and led me to a small chapel which was adorned with Arabic calligraphy on the

top, as well as presenting me with a couple of prayer cards of our lady of Morocco.

One thing that I thought about while walking back from the interview was that Christianity in Morocco is not just “Christianity in Morocco”. It is Christianity in the world. There is nothing that makes this spirituality, distinctly “Catholic” or “Moroccan” because there are so many different people from around the world and to describe it as distinctly one or the other would be to inhibit the intricacies of the church. Because it is illegal to proselytize in Morocco, Christians have to live much like the disciples in the Gospel, authentically being an example of the Christian life without being inhibited by existing presumptions. Fr. Stephen told me that many times churches in Europe and America will become obsessed with congregation numbers, or they will worry about the identity of the parish community, but that is not something that is possible in Morocco. Because the community in Morocco is so small (about .1% of Morocco’s population is Christian) everyone is accepted to come as who they are. The community is entrusted with being the living example of the Gospel to themselves and others. Just as Jesus lived and accepted all types of people, so must the Christian living in Morocco.



JESUIT AMONG MUSLIMS MEETING 2024, BERLIN

In June 2024, a group of twenty-five Jesuits gathered at the Katholische Akademie in Berlin for the *Jesuits Among Muslims* Meet. The event, which took place from June 30th to July 6th, was skillfully organized by Jean-Marc Balhan SJ, Felix Koerner SJ and his team.

The opening event was a specialised guided tour through Berlin under the question how the city symbolises the (un)making of democracy. In the first session, Mansur Dogan, a German doctoral student with Turkish roots, provided a sociological overview of Muslims in Germany. Subsequent sessions led by German Muslim scholars delved into the development and expansion of ‘Islamic Theology’ in Germany. Professor Serdar Kurnaz discussed the framework of Islamic theology in the German-speaking world, while Professor Mira Sievers emphasized the significance of historical-critical analysis in her research. Additionally, Professor Tuba Isik shed light on the transmission of contemporary Islamic theology through religious instruction in schools and mosques. These presentations set the stage for the Study Day, which revolved around the current state of Quranic Studies in Germany.

The in-depth conversations we engaged in during our study day following the lectures on Qur’anic research by Professor Angelika Neuwirth and Dr. Tugrul Kurt shed light on the valuable lesson of respecting the sacred texts of others, such as the Holy Qur’an, as originating in the context of an interaction with other holy texts.

Studying the intertextuality between Bible and Qur’an reveals an opportunity to understand both scriptures more profoundly without imposing judgments of superiority or inferiority. This approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of shared origins while acknowledging the distinctiveness of each text. The concept of intertextuality implies that no text, be it the Bible or the Qur’an, exists in isolation. Instead, each text is an intricate

tapestry of references, allusions, and influences from other religious claims, as well as from social and cultural contexts.

Thus it became clear that some of today's Western Qur'anic research does not undermine the spiritual significance of Islam's holy book but elucidates it, especially by studying how the Qur'an interacts with Christian and Jewish testimonies.

In the next session 'Encountering Muslims – Encountering Islam' members of JAM from different Conferences shared their experiences. At the heart of their conversation one recognised the Jesuits sent *Among Muslims* as Christ's conscious collaborators are deeply aware that their mission opens up in the threefold function of *koinonia* (fraternal communion), *diakonia* (humble service) and *kerygma* (witnessing to the good news) among Muslim brothers and sisters around the world.

Joseph Victor Edwin SJ



SEMINAR ON HUMAN FRATERNITY FOR WORLD PEACE

Jesuits and Collaborators commemorated the International Day of Living Together in Peace in a two-day seminar on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together at the Shrine Retreat Centre, Veilankanni on 14 and 15 May. The Gandhian Society Villages Association, Devakottai, Our Lady of Health Shrine Basilica, Veilankanni, and Islamic Studies Association joined forces to host the seminar. Around 40 participants from three major religious traditions took part.

Fr Cyril SJ, the seminar's convenor, emphasized the need for the seminar, stating that in today's world, we are facing increasing danger arise from war and conflict. This includes rising crime rates, natural disasters, and global pandemics, making it feel like we are constantly under threat.

He also highlighted the ongoing battle for India's identity, with some pushing for an exclusive vision of the country as a Hindu Nation. This has led to the marginalization of Dalits, tribals, and minority groups. While the Indian Constitution recognizes and affirms India's diverse and inclusive character, there is a risk of it transforming into an electoral dictatorship. It is crucial not to overlook this genuine threat.

Fr Cyril SJ stressed that the Indian Constitution offers solutions to the challenges facing India today. It upholds India's diverse and inclusive nature, making it a truly independent, socialist, secular, democratic republic. The Constitution promises Justice, Equality, Liberty, and Fraternity for all Indian citizens, embodying the essence of India.

Joseph Victor Edwin SJ, one of the speakers at the seminar, drew inspiration from the Human Fraternity Document cosigned by Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayyib, the grand Imam of Al-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt. He emphasized the importance of forging

a path toward a more peaceful, just, and harmonious world for all. He pointed out that both Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayyib were able to look at one another not as enemies, not as people from different cultures and different lands, but through the eyes of faith, recognizing in each other true signs of faith.

He further pointed out that building a fraternal world is a challenging task in the context of xenophobia, a fruit of our distancing from religious values such as peace, goodness, human fraternity, and coexistence. In the context of polarization and discrimination, we are wounded by acts of violence due to political manipulation of religions and incorrect interpretations of religious texts.

Edwin further stated that it is in these circumstances that Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed invite all people of goodwill to act with confidence that humanity belongs to God, who is our common origin and destination, to end the vicious cycle of violence by understanding the suffering of the other by putting ourselves in their shoes, to stop abusing others in the name of God, and thus build a future together. They invite all people of goodwill to cultivate frankness and courage in all circumstances.

Kulandai Samy, a Gandhian, and Eronimus, a cultural educationist, trained the participants to recognize similarities and differences between various cultural traditions and perspectives. They taught how to reach a consensus and settle disputes that arise from time to time through patience and perseverance, and how to democratically manage cultural diversity by adjusting existing social and political structures as needed.

In the seminar, Gandhian Kulandai Samy was chosen as the Convenor of the Human Fraternity Forum, with Tamilarasi and Eronimus appointed as secretaries. Additionally, Fr Cyril SJ and Ms Ananya, an active student member of the Human Fraternity Forum Coimbatore Chapter, were included as members of the core group.

Joseph Victor Edwin SJ

SUMMER SCHOOL ON ISLAM AND CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

The Henry Martyn Institute in Hyderabad recently hosted the Summer School on Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations in 2024. The program was held from April 29th to May 4th and focused on the need for four types of dialogues with Muslims.

These dialogues included the dialogue of life, where individuals strive to live in an open and friendly way by sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems, and preoccupations; the dialogue of action, where Christians and Muslims collaborate towards common good; the dialogue of religious experience, where people rooted in their religious traditions share their spiritual riches, and lastly, and the dialogue of theological exchange, where scholars engage in deep discussions that help to build understanding and foster mutual respect.

The program included comprehensive classroom presentations on a range of Islam-related topics, delivered by both Muslim and Christian scholars on Islam. These presentations were complemented by visits to a local mosque, a madrasa, a shia ashur khana, a Sufi dargah, and the Students Islamic Organisation's office. During these visits, participants had the opportunity to learn and interact with Muslims on different aspects of Muslim life in India.

One of the participants of the Summer School, Mrs Sunanda Victor, shared her learning that dialogue is a form of reciprocal communication that establishes a deeper level of interpersonal connection. She further emphasized that dialogue is an attitude of respect and friendship that is crucial in promoting mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence among individuals of different faiths.

Ms Hebsiba, another participant, learned that Christians must have a solid understanding of their faith and traditions to engage in a meaningful dialogue with Muslims. She added that Christians and

Muslims must have a clear identity and approach each other with an open mind and positive attitude while engaging in dialogue.

Joseph Victor Edwin SJ, who coordinated the program, highlighted that the Summer School aims to equip participants with the skills to recognize themselves as pilgrims of truth and peace. Rev Dr Packiam T Samuel, the director of the Institute emphasized that Christians and Muslims should come together to listen, get to know and respect each other and collaborate towards the greater good. Essentially, the program underscored the significance of interfaith dialogue in fostering mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence in our increasingly diverse and interconnected world.

Joseph Victor Edwin SJ

الْبَاسِطُ

LEADING CATHOLICS PROTEST AFTER DIOCESE SCREENS CONTROVERSIAL FILM

‘On Thursday 4 April 2024, Pope Francis in a very incisive message to the participants in the First Colloquium between the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, held in the Vatican said, “We need to support each other in fostering harmony between religions, ethnic groups and cultures. In particular, I want to emphasize three aspects...: respect for diversity, commitment to our common home and the promotion of peace.”

Unfortunately, on that very day, in Kerala, the Idukki Diocese, of the Syro-Malabar Church screened a controversial film ‘The Kerala Story’. The film was shown to students of Stds X to XII, as part of the Annual Summer Catechism programme. On 8 April, several English and vernacular media both in Kerala and elsewhere, detailed this event under the title, ‘Idukki Diocese screens ‘The Kerala Story’ for Catechism Students’. A spokesperson of the Diocese has gone on record saying that the film was ‘shown to Christian students to raise awareness about the issue of ‘Love Jihad’.’

That a Catholic Diocese has screened this film, defies logic! First of all, the movie is clearly a propaganda film created to further the Hindutva narrative that is trying to destroy the secular nature of our country.

Secondly, it is replete with lies, factual inaccuracies and half-truths; so much so, that the director of the movie, publicly admitted falsehood and had to correct the figures given in the original curtain-raiser from “32,000 girls embracing Islam to just THREE!”; besides ten obnoxious scenes, had to be deleted before the Censor Board gave its certification!

Thirdly, and far more importantly, this is a film which goes against the teachings of the Church and the person and message of Jesus. The decision by the Church authorities to screen the film, is deeply

concerning because it actively sows seeds of hatred, intolerance and prejudice, among children, instead of promoting peace, compassion, and acceptance, which are the core values of Christianity. By screening such a propaganda film that is filled with lies, the Idukki Church is instilling negative emotions and discriminatory attitudes towards people of other faiths and failing to teach children about love and respect for all religions and cultures. Such actions can have adverse effects on the future generation and society at large, particularly in the present politically charged context where hate is being weaponised to destroy the country.

Besides, the film has been given an 'A' certificate by the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC). How could this film be ever shown to children? Will the Diocese of Idukki now be prosecuted for screening the film to children?

The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue has emphasized the importance of strengthening and building good relations between Christians and Muslims during this Holy month of Ramadan; the Diocese of Idukki, on the other hand, seems to have chosen to promote conflict and tension between the two communities. Like in the time of Hitler, there are always those in authority in the Churches who wish to kowtow towards those who have political power in order to keep their own 'little empires' safe.

A contextual adaptation of Mathew 23:15 could serve as a reminder to all of us, "woe to you bishops and religious authorities, pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land, to try to ensure that your flock does not desert you, but in the bargain, you make the members of your flock twice as much a child of hell as yourselves."

We the undersigned, whilst strongly condemning this insensitive and unchristian act of the Diocese of Idukki, earnestly urge all Church authorities to do all they can to promote inter-religious, dialogue, reconciliation, fraternity, harmony and peace, remembering that our future as a country, is at stake!

Signed

Dr Kochurani Abraham, Kerala, Adv Susan Abraham (Bombay High Court), Adv M A Britto, (Forum for Secularism and Democracy, Tirunelveli), Dr. John Dayal (Ex Member, National Integration Council, GoI, Ex President, All India Catholic Union, New Delhi), Brinelle D'Souza (Chairperson, Centre for Health and Mental Health, TISS, Mumbai), Dr Ruth D'Souza (Citizen, Archdiocese of Bombay), Dr Joseph Victor Edwin SJ (Secretary, Islamic Studies Association, Delhi), Midhun J Francis SJ (Doctoral Student Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome), Adv Julie George, Lawyer, Mumbai, Dr MK George SJ (Former Principal, Loyola College, Trivandrum), Adv Anastasia Gil (former Delhi Minorities Commission member), Dr Josantony Joseph (Human Rights Training Consultant, Former Supreme Court Advisor (Maharashtra) on the PIL on the Right to Food, Mumbai), Ozelle Lobo (Jagrut Nagarik, Ahmedabad), Dr Frazer Mascarenhas SJ (Former Principal, St. Xavier's College Mumbai), Anand Mathew IMS (Director Vishwa Jyoti Communications, Varanasi), Dr Suresh Mathew (Former Editor 'Indian Currents'), Cedric Prakash SJ (Human Rights Activist & Writer, Ahmedabad), Ronald Saldanha SJ (Administrator, Indian Social Institute, New Delhi), Adv Mary Scaria SCJM (Supreme Court of India), Varghese Theckanath sg (Former National President, Conference of Religious India (CRI), Paul Thelakat (Writer, former editor 'Sathyadeepam'), and Adv Henri Tiphagne (Advocate and Executive Director People's Watch)

الْوَهَّابُ

MUSLIM MYSTICS PROMOTE COMPASSION, UNDERSTANDING, AND TOLERANCE

The Islamic Studies Association recently hosted a webinar titled “Sufism on the Indian Landscape,” featuring Professor Khurshid Khan from Delhi University as the main speaker on 30 July 2024. During her opening remarks, Professor Khan shed light on Sufism, a spiritual path followed by Muslim mystics dedicated to connecting with God and serving humanity. She emphasized that while “Sufism” is a term of colonial origin “Tasawwuf” an Arabic term denotes a living tradition where extraordinary seekers undergo a spiritual journey to embrace a Sufi identity.

Professor Khan highlighted that the ultimate aim of a Sufi is to attain union with God. Tasawwuf implies the process of becoming a Sufi where in an aspirant on the Sufi path endeavours to embody at least some of the virtues embodied in the ninety-nine names of God. She further explained that Sufis strive to live a life characterized by genuine inner struggle and humility, expressing their belief through the phrase “I die to myself to live in God,” signifying their conviction that only God truly exists.

The Sufi way of life revolves around love, and its practitioners like Nizamuddin are known as Mahboob-e-Illahi (beloved of God) or friends of God. Since the journey to connect with God is challenging, seekers rely on a spiritual master to guide them along the way. Professor Khurshid emphasized that the seekers must progress through various Stations (maqamat) to overcome barriers to God’s grace and encounter different States (hal/ahwal): special favors bestowed by God. According to Professor Khurshid, through gradual steps, the murid (disciple) reaches the ultimate objective of his spiritual life: union with the Divine.

The Sufis were dedicated and devout followers of Islam, committed to upholding the principles of Sharia in all aspects of their lives.

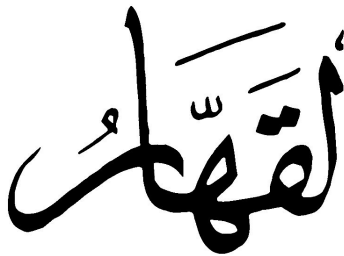
They sought to purify their souls through atonement for their sins and to combat their base desires in the pursuit of spiritual growth.

Central to their teachings was the emphasis on the unity of God and the unity of humanity, promoting a message of compassion, understanding, and tolerance. They selflessly guided those who sought spiritual growth, offered support to the less fortunate, and provided food for the hungry, transcending religious boundaries by welcoming both Hindus and Muslims into their midst, said Professor Khurshid.

The Sufis carefully tailored their teachings to be accessible to people from all walks of life, imparting wisdom in simple language so that all could comprehend their profound message. Their fundamental teachings revolved around the importance of placing trust in God, detaching oneself from material desires, embracing poverty and enduring hardships, and finding contentment in whatever one receives from God.

Furthermore, Professor Khurshid shed light on the cultural aspects of the Sufi way of life, emphasizing the significance of their music and poetry as powerful expressions of devotion that ultimately led them closer to God, who they perceived as both transcendent and immanent.

Joseph Victor Edwin SJ



HUMAN FRATERNITY FOR WORLD PEACE AND LIVING TOGETHER

On July 20, 2024, the Human Fraternity Movement, Gandhi Peace Foundation (Chennai), and Arul Kadal collaborated to organize a seminar titled “Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together.”

The event was hosted by Fr. Raj Irudaya SJ, the community leader of Arul Kadal, and was attended by a diverse group of participants, including students, educators from various schools, and the seminar’s resource persons.

In his address, Fr. Raj Irudaya SJ underscored the significance of the “Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together,” a document endorsed by Grand Imam Sheikh Ahmed Al Tayyeb, the Rector of Al-Azar University, Cairo, and Pope Francis in 2019.

This document invites all individuals and groups of people of goodwill to come together to advocate justice and peace for all.

Fr. Raj Irudaya also referenced UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who urged everyone to reaffirm their commitment to fostering interfaith understanding and cooperation to create a more peaceful, just, and harmonious world for all.

Fr. Cyril Antony SJ, who facilitated the program, highlighted the establishment of the ‘Human Fraternity Forum’ in several schools across Tamil Nadu as a testament to drawing inspiration from the aforementioned document.

Ms. Jahan Ara, a prominent speaker from the Henry Martin Institute in Hyderabad, emphasized the institute’s fundamental principles of peace, justice, and interfaith dialogue, underscoring their role in uniting people and promoting respect for human rights and dignity. She expounded upon the institute’s academic and community-driven initiatives, which include promoting conflict resolution and development.

Jahan Ara stressed the holistic approach, noting that activities such

as food distribution, healthcare, education, and economic support have had a positive impact on the community. She encouraged participants to explore creative ways to contribute to peace.

Father Joseph Kalathil SJ, a distinguished peace activist, firmly believes in the attainability of peace. He is dedicated to fostering peace among the children of India and Pakistan and initiated a project to train children as Peace Ambassadors between the two nations. Through the exchange of letters between Indian and Pakistani children, Father Joseph aims to instil a sense of peace and harmony in their hearts and minds.

Moulavi B. M. Khaleelur Rahman, the Imam of a local mosque, and Dr. S. Kulandai Samy from the Gandhi Peace Foundation emphasized the importance of nurturing a culture of peace in the hearts of children.

The interaction that ensued between the child participants and the resource persons was constructive. The children affirmed that being peacemakers is one of the most critical tasks in our fractured world. They noted that their membership in Peace Clubs has equipped them to resolve conflicts among students and become effective peacemakers.

Jenith Xavier SJ

التأليف

THE MUGHALS AND SUFISM: A SURVEY IN ART AND ARCHITECTURE

The Islamic Studies Association recently held a thought-provoking webinar titled “The Mughals and Sufism: A Survey in Art and Architecture,” featuring Professor Michael Calabria OFM as the keynote speaker on August 2, 2024. Joseph Victor Edwin SJ, the secretary of the Islamic Studies Association chaired the program. The webinar delved into the intricate relationship between Sufism and the cultural and historical contexts of the Mughal period. This relationship between the ruler and the spiritual guide has deep roots in history, and the webinar shed light on its impact during the medieval period in India. The discussion emphasized the role of Sufis in imparting spirituality to the common people, transforming Mughal art and architecture into more than just symbols of royal privilege.

Professor Calabria commenced the talk by defining ‘Tasawwuf’, building on Youseff Casewit’s definition. He said that Tasawwuf encompasses “any movement in Islam that seeks an intensely personal religious experience of God beyond the necessities of law and theology.”

According to him, Sufism involves a deep personal exploration of divine matters and striving to embody the virtues associated with the ninety-nine names of God. Ultimately, the goal of a Sufi (in many Sufi orders) is to achieve union with God.

The Mughals endeavoured to integrate Sufi, particularly Chishti, principles into lives, administration, and architectural endeavours. The beauty of Mughal architecture garnered acclaim as a physical representation of the Sufis’ yearning for divine unity. The Mughals replicated inscriptions, geometric patterns, and floral designs that symbolized the infinity of divinity, highlighting its completeness and indivisibility.

Professor Calabria pointed out that Sufi saint Mu'in al-Din Chishti taught the 'oneness of being' (wahdat al-wujud), which formed the basis of his spiritual philosophy, transcending religious and social boundaries to promote peace and inclusivity. This comprehensive body of knowledge sheds light on the profound impact of Sufism on Mughal art, architecture, and governance during this era.

Professor Calabria's lecture pointed out that the Dargahs served as sacred spaces that not only facilitated faith-based rituals but also served as cultural and social hubs where individuals sought spiritual guidance and solace. The visits of Mughal emperors such as Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan especially to these shrines illustrated their reverence for Sufi saints and their active participation in Sufi practices.

Sufi arts under Mughal patronage encompassed manuscripts, paintings, and poetry. These works aimed to glorify the inner path of Sufism, evoking divine inspiration and gently urging viewers to begin their own Sufi journey. The emphasis on love and compassion by the Sufis was reflected in the Mughal rulers' efforts to promote peace among people, creating a social environment where different religious and cultural communities coexisted harmoniously.

Professor Calabria delved into historical figures and events, such as Shah Jahan's support for Sufism, including his symbolic encounter with Khizr at the gates of Ajmer in November 1654. He also mentioned Akhund Mulla Shah Masjid in Srinagar (1649) and Mian Mir (1558), the founder of Harmandir Sahib. The webinar underscored how Mughal rulers wholeheartedly embraced Sufi traditions that manifested in Mughal artwork and architecture.

To further comprehend the impact of Sufism on Mughal art and architecture, students were encouraged to explore key works on the subject. The suggestion included seeking out books such as Syed Athar Abbas Rizvi's "A History of Sufism in India," which discusses the development and influence of Sufi thought in the Indian subcontinent and their profound influence on Indian culture.

Additionally, Professor Calabria brought up “The Mughals and the Sufis: Islam and the Political Imagination in India, 1500-1750” by Muzaffar Alam, which delves into the multifaceted engagement of Mughal rulers with Sufi mysticism.

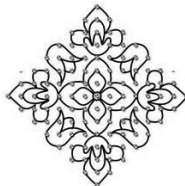
The influence of Sufism is evident in the intellectual and cultural contributions of prominent Mughal figures such as Dara Shikoh and Jahanara Begum. Dara Shikoh, the eldest son of Emperor Shah Jahan, ardently supported Sufi philosophy, as seen in his work “Majma-ul-Bahrain” (The Confluence of the Two Oceans), which aimed to explore the common basis of the mystical experiences of Islam and Hinduism.

Similarly, his sister Jahanara Begum played a significant role as a patron of Sufism, actively supporting Sufi scholars and mystics. Notably, her efforts contributed to the promotion of Sufi values, fostering an environment of love, harmony, and spiritual enlightenment. Their collective endeavours facilitated a harmonious blend of diverse spiritual and intellectual traditions, enriching Mughal India’s cultural and religious landscape.

Sufism continues to exert a powerful influence on modern spiritual and cultural life. The session included a question-and-answer segment where participants could raise specific points. The webinar “Mughals and Sufism: A Survey in Art and Architecture” offers valuable insights into the relationship between spirituality, art, and culture during the Mughal era.

Christa Ben

(A Doctoral Student at Maharaja College, Ernakulam)



THE MYSTICISM OF MUHYIDDIN IBN ARABI: A CHRISTIAN APPRECIATION

The Islamic Studies Association hosted a webinar on August 5th, 2024, titled “The Mysticism of Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi: A Christian Appreciation,” featuring **Professor Jaime Flaquer SJ** from the Universidad, Loyola, Spain.

Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi (d. 1240) was a mystic, philosopher, poet, and sage, born in Murcia in Arab Al-Andalus. His writings had a profound impact across the Islamic world and beyond.

Ibn Arabi recognized God as a Being, beyond all beings, who is Infinite, Timeless, Spaceless, Absolute Existence and the Only Reality. For him, the world, as the self, are limited realities that derives their conditional existence from the Absolute Existence, wherein the self (once fully united to the Only Reality) vanishes like a drop in the ocean of this Absolute Existence. Individual selves are like waves in the sea that do not have an existence of their own, but only ebb and flow in time, vanishing in the vast expanse of the waters of the sea.

Ibn Arabi was influenced by the philosophical ideas of Plotinus (c. 270 AD) who studied philosophy in Alexandria, a famous hub-city of Greek Philosophy and Oriental Wisdom. According to Plotinus, the world exists between two poles: divine light, which he refers to as God, at one end, and absolute darkness at the other. Plotinus argued that darkness does not exist. He believed that the soul is illuminated by the light (the Divine) and that their natural forms carry a faint reflection of this light. He also maintained that the darkness beyond is not Divine. According to him, God illuminates the soul, and we can perceive the divine light, in varying degrees, in all living beings, depending on their proximity to the Divine. For Plotinus, all things (created through the medium of the ‘First Intellect’) are One and a manifestation of God.

Like Plotinus, Ibn Arabi believed that (between God and creation) there exists another created reality through which God brought all things into existence, which he referred to as the ‘reality of Muhammad (al haqiqa al Muhammadiya)’. He quotes a Hadith in which Muhammad said, “I was already a prophet” rather than “I was a man” or “I already existed.” This implies that Muhammad possessed prophecy before the other prophets who represented him in the world. Ibn Arabi similarly stated that all creatures reflect the ‘reality of Muhammad’, but that there is only one creature that embodies all the qualities of the ‘reality of Muhammad’, namely, the Prophet Muhammad himself. According to another Hadith, “I was already a prophet when Adam was still between the water and the mud.” This suggests that Muhammad, who encompasses the ‘reality of Muhammad’, appeared as the last in the chain of the prophets, as he is the Last Prophet and seal of Prophecy.

Again, like Plotinus, Ibn Arabi affirmed that God is one and God alone exists. He expressed the unity of oneness as (wahdat ul wajud); the wujud (existence) is one. Ibn Arabi proposed that God opens his self and manifests himself in the plurality of things all created through the ‘reality of Muhammad’ and affirmed that all created reality yearns for God in every moment of history. When this yearning comes to fruition in the life of one saint who truly knows God, this Saint can be spoken of as a pole who sustains the world.

Ibn Arabi also expressed a deep connection to, and gratitude for, Jesus, whom he described as his “first teacher” who led him back to God and took care of him. He spoken often of his hope to witness Jesus’s second coming and believed that Jesus had prayed for him to remain faithful in this world and the next, even referring to him as “my darling” who had instructed him to embrace renunciation and asceticism. Ibn Arabi stated that in drawing near to the presence of Jesus, he felt love-struck as if intoxicated by divine love, clearly associating Jesus with divinity, but stopping short of strictly identifying him as God.

The lecture ended with a conversation on Islamic mysticism. The participants felt that mysticism, present in all religions, is a powerful spiritual force. It cannot be attained through any intellectual means; it is an understanding of reality that transcends conventional consciousness. The mystic's ultimate goal is indescribable and cannot be fully comprehended through normal perception; only the wisdom of the heart can provide glimpses of it. A mystic follows an inner light, which grows stronger as he/she detaches themselves from worldly desires. True mystics are more than just ascetics; they are filled with divine love. This love resides in the mystic's heart, enabling him/her to endure any suffering or trials that serve to purify them.

Joseph Victor Edwin SJ

أَبِي بَكْرٍ

JESUITS AND MUSLIMS CELEBRATE THE SPIRIT OF NOSTRA AETATE AT KALADY

On 12 August 2024, Sameeksha Kalady organized a one-day program focused on “Interreligious Dialogue” in celebration of the 60th anniversary of the Vatican II document **Nostra Aetate**. The event featured a presentation by Midhun J. Francis, SJ, a research scholar from the Gregorian University, who provided an in-depth analysis of “*Nostra Aetate*” and its continuing relevance.

Midhun J. Francis, SJ, structured his presentation into three sections:

1. **History of Nostra Aetate** and the Second Vatican Council:

The first section traced the historical context and development of *Nostra Aetate* during the Second Vatican Council. Midhun highlighted the council’s groundbreaking approach to interreligious dialogue and the Church’s evolving relationship with non-Christian religions.

2. **Analysis of Nostra Aetate** Document:

In the second part, Midhun offered a detailed examination of the document itself, focusing on its key themes and messages. He underscored its emphasis on mutual respect and understanding between different religious traditions, which laid the foundation for a more inclusive approach to dialogue.

3. **Post-Vatican II Developments: Focus on the Human Fraternity Document:**

The third section of the presentation explored the later documents and initiatives inspired by *Nostra Aetate*, particularly the 2019 **Document on Human Fraternity** signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar. Francis emphasized how these developments continue to build on the principles of *Nostra Aetate* by promoting peace and unity among diverse religious communities.

Panel Discussion

The second part of the program featured a dynamic panel discussion on interreligious dialogue and the concept of Jihad, with

contributions from several distinguished scholars:

Midhun J Francis presented his reflections on Jihad, exploring both its positive and negative interpretations. He emphasized the importance of understanding Jihad in its modern sense and traditional sense as a concept of self-examination and personal growth in daily life.

- Dr. Husein delved into the technical nuances of the term Jihad, providing a scholarly analysis of its varied interpretations within Islamic theology. His insights contributed to a deeper understanding of the term's complexity and its relevance in contemporary discourse.

- Dr. Panianadth offered a perspective on **Nostra Aetate** and its significance in promoting peace. He highlighted how the document's call for interreligious dialogue remains crucial in today's global context, where religious tensions continue to pose challenges to peaceful coexistence.

Conclusion

The program at Sameeksha Kalady was marked by active participation from attendees, who engaged in discussions and contributed to the vibrant exchange of ideas. The event underscored the ongoing importance of interreligious dialogue to foster understanding, tolerance, and peace in a diverse world.

Midhun J. Francis SJ

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