**CEVIM MEETING ON THE TRANSMISSION OF FAITH**

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Throughout the Middle Ages, most people felt that Islam was some kind of heresy. From the 11th century onwards this view became the ideological basis for the infamous Crusades that mark some of the dark chapters of our history. Unfortunately, after September 11, 2001 and in the midst of our current international crises, some groups still attempt to bring new life into these age-old ways of looking at Islam. They argue that incompatibilities between Christian and Muslim civilizations can only result in a great clash. They warn that if Christians value their culture and their religion, they must be prepared to do battle on multiple levels with Islam and Muslim peoples. [[1]](#footnote-1)

Fortunately, these are no longer the voices of our authentic Catholic teaching.
Nearly fifty years ago the Catholic Church took a dramatic stand to promote constructive, peaceful and religious relations with Muslims. The famous French scholar of Islam, Louis Massignon, was convinced that a “Copernican shift” in the understanding of Islam was taking place.

In the declaration *Nostra Aetate*, the Second Vatican Council taught us in 1965:

"*The church has also a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to people. They strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God's plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own. Although not acknowledging him as God, they venerate Jesus as a prophet, his virgin mother they also honor and even at times devoutly invoke. Further, they await the day of judgment and the reward of God following the resurrection of the dead. For this reason they highly esteem an upright life and worship God, especially by way of prayer, alms deeds and fasting*" (*Nostra Aetate*, 3).[[2]](#footnote-2)

Many steps were taken in the following years. Our limited time does not permit me here to go into that more deeply. Quite a fair number of the Vincentian family have been working – sometimes for centuries – in the Islamic context in North Africa, in the Ottoman Empire, in Iran. After Vatican II. some individual provinces were acting and reacting to the challenge of Islam. But it took our Vincentian community as a whole quite some time to give a common reaction. More than 13 years ago, in 1999 at Fatqa in Lebanon, the Vincentian family first gathered to look into its ministry in the Muslim contexts.

In 2011 such an international meeting was repeated In Indonesia, when participants coming from 34 different countries and different branches of Vincentian communities, again tried to summarize very different forms of experience.[[3]](#footnote-3)

1. **‘SEEING’ OUR DIFFERENT CONTEXTS**

On the one side, we saw some problematic areas: the growing radicalization of the Islamic movement; the intensive promotion of fundamentalist readings of Islam; the growing imposition of Shariah laws in some places and the seeming denial of freedom and human rights that goes with it; the violent riots or kidnapping-for-ransom cases allegedly done by radical Muslim groups and the consequent culture of fear and silence; the poverty and ignorance among many of the Muslim people which can breed such violence; the stereotyping of Muslims as “terrorists” and the ignorance about the Islam religion itself that begets prejudices and mistrust. We understood, however, that many of these biases and stereotypes were misplaced, fired up as they were by many factors other than religion and recognized that religion can be instrumentalized for the elite’s political, economic or ideological agenda.

We also encountered and heard from many moderate Muslims who are open to dialogue, to the humanistic reading of Islamic texts, and to collaborative efforts with Christians and other faiths. From the sharing of our experiences, we also saw many signs of hope in Christian-Muslim relations: the increase of educated young people who have critical and open minds; the empowerment of women in both Muslim and Christian contexts; the numerous initiatives for peace and dialogue in the ‘official’ and grassroots level; the humanitarian interventions and socio-cultural events done in common; concerted efforts to uplift the economic conditions; and the experience of mutual respect and friendship among Muslim and Christians in their everyday lives.

We also felt that there was still much left for us to do. We realized that sometimes our own personal, professional, theological training do not help foster a dialogical approach to life. Most of us felt that we need to know more about the Islam religion in order to quash our own prejudices and biases. Beyond intellectual knowledge, however, there is also a felt need among us for more interpersonal encounters to cultivate personal relationship with Muslims and peoples of other faiths.

1. **REFLECTING ON OUR COMMON VISION**

While we saw our own ‘lights’ and ‘shadows’, we also tried to envision what God invites us to do. We discerned what it takes to follow the command of Jesus to “put out into the deep (Duc in altum)” and cast our nets, as Luke 5: 1-11 was the motto of the symposium. Through the help of our speakers, we listened to both Christian and Muslim resources on interreligious dialogue and tried to understand them in our contexts.

We realized that despite the impression of its rigid structures, there have always been attempts within the Catholic Church itself to include those ‘outside its walls’, in its own frame of salvation. But we were also made aware that the same dialogical direction is also present in the Islamic texts from the Qur’an, its interpreters and theologians up to the recent document *A Common Word* (2007). We realized, of course, that documents and ‘official talks’ are very different from the ordinary events of everyday life.

We ended our meeting in Indonesia by declaring our vision and convictions necessary for interreligious dialogue:

* Dialogue is not a strategy; it is a way of life, a spirituality. Since dialogue could not be tactically prepared, we also could not program its aims and strategies. In interreligious dialogue, we leave it to the Spirit to lead us.
* Interreligious dialogue starts with interpersonal encounters in the context of personal friendships. We are convinced that dialogue first happens in the ‘dialogue of life’ and ‘dialogue of action’ within the personal and grassroots levels. When this basic trust is established, we will then have the courage to dialogue on our common faith convictions and differences (e.g., dialogue of faith and spiritual experience).
* Interreligious dialogue is not a denial of my own faith convictions. It is being fully rooted in its foundations so much so that I can face the other in total openness and honesty. If we could not agree on one area of the dialogue, there are still many other areas in practical life that we can agree on and collaborate. We believe that our differences serve as the basic foundation of our unity.
* These are the personal and communal attitudes needed for interreligious dialogue: presence among the people, the courage to risk, openness, mutual trust, patient waiting, sensitivity to people’s needs, and ultimately, the utmost humility to let go.

We were reminded of the words of St. Vincent in the last years of his life to Anthony Fleury when that confrere was sent on mission to Saintes: *“[You must] be convinced that God asks of you only that you cast your nets into the sea, and not that you catch the fish, because it is up to him to make them go into the nets… To this work of patience, you must join humility, prayer, and good example: then you will see the glory of the Savior*” (6 November 1658).

1. **POPE BENEDICT ON DIALOGUE**

Sometimes people argue that our present pope is no longer so deeply interested in efforts like the intercultural dialogue. We need to see, however, that Benedict has taken a necessary new step by deepening the preparatory work done by his predecessors. Benedict’s pontificate is one of theology, of intellectual seriousness, of reflection, and even the Regensburg lecture must be understood in this context. Benedict apparently wants to provoke to new thought.

Instead of arguing about his views I simply want to give you some thoughts of the Holy Father himself spoken only recently on December 21, 2012 during his address on the occasion of Christmas greetings to the Roman Curia:[[4]](#footnote-4)

Looking back unto the finishing year 2012 the Pope gave some very substantial views that could easily be overlooked:

*At this point I would like to address the second major theme, which runs through the whole of the past year from Assisi to the Synod on the New Evangelization: the question of dialogue and proclamation.*

*Let us speak firstly of dialogue. For the Church in our day I see three principal areas of dialogue, in which she must be present in the struggle for man and his humanity: dialogue with states, dialogue with society – which includes dialogue with cultures and with science – and finally dialogue with religions. In all these dialogues the Church speaks on the basis of the light given her by faith. But at the same time she incorporates the memory of mankind, which is a memory of man’s experiences and sufferings from the beginnings and down the centuries, in which she has learned about the human condition, she has experienced its boundaries and its grandeur, its opportunities and its limitations. Human culture, of which she is a guarantee, has developed from the encounter between divine revelation and human existence. The Church represents the memory of what it means to be human in the face of a civilization of forgetfulness, which knows only itself and its own criteria. Yet just as an individual without memory has lost his identity, so too a human race without memory would lose its identity. What the Church has learned from the encounter between revelation and human experience does indeed extend beyond the realm of pure reason, but it is not a separate world that has nothing to say to unbelievers. By entering into the thinking and understanding of mankind, this knowledge broadens the horizon of reason and thus it speaks also to those who are unable to share the faith of the Church. In her dialogue with the state and with society, the Church does not, of course, have ready answers for individual questions. Along with other forces in society, she will wrestle for the answers that best correspond to the truth of the human condition. The values that she recognizes as fundamental and non-negotiable for the human condition she must propose with all clarity. She must do all she can to convince, and this can then stimulate political action.*

*In man’s present situation, the dialogue of religions is a necessary condition for peace in the world and it is therefore a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities. This dialogue of religions has various dimensions. In the first place it is simply a dialogue of life, a dialogue of being together. This will not involve discussing the great themes of faith – whether God is Trinitarian or how the inspiration of the sacred Scriptures is to be understood, and so on. It is about the concrete problems of coexistence and shared responsibility for society, for the state, for humanity. In the process, it is necessary to learn to accept the other in his otherness and the otherness of his thinking. To this end, the shared responsibility for justice and peace must become the guiding principle of the conversation. A dialogue about peace and justice is bound to move beyond the purely pragmatic to become an ethical struggle for the truth and for the human being: a dialogue concerning the values that come before everything. In this way what began as a purely practical dialogue becomes a quest for the right way to live as a human being. Even if the fundamental choices themselves are not under discussion, the search for an answer to a specific question becomes a process in which, through listening to the other, both sides can obtain purification and enrichment. Thus this search can also mean taking common steps towards the one truth, even if the fundamental choices remain unaltered. If both sides set out from a hermeneutic of justice and peace, the fundamental difference will not disappear, but a deeper closeness will emerge nevertheless.*

*Two rules are generally regarded nowadays as fundamental for interreligious dialogue:*

*1. Dialogue does not aim at conversion, but at understanding. In this respect it differs from evangelization, from mission;*

*2. Accordingly, both parties to the dialogue remain consciously within their identity, which the dialogue does not place in question either for themselves or for the other.*

*These rules are correct, but in the way they are formulated here I still find them too superficial. True, dialogue does not aim at conversion, but at better mutual understanding – that is correct. But all the same, the search for knowledge and understanding always has to involve drawing closer to the truth. Both sides in this piece-by-piece approach to truth are therefore on the path that leads forward and towards greater commonality, brought about by the oneness of the truth. As far as preserving identity is concerned, it would be too little for the Christian, so to speak, to assert his identity in a such a way that he effectively blocks the path to truth. Then his Christianity would appear as something arbitrary, merely propositional. He would seem not to reckon with the possibility that religion has to do with truth. On the contrary, I would say that the Christian can afford to be supremely confident, yes, fundamentally certain that he can venture freely into the open sea of the truth, without having to fear for his Christian identity. To be sure, we do not possess the truth, the truth possesses us: Christ, who is the truth, has taken us by the hand, and we know that his hand is holding us securely on the path of our quest for knowledge. Being inwardly held by the hand of Christ makes us free and keeps us safe: free – because if we are held by him, we can enter openly and fearlessly into any dialogue; safe – because he does not let go of us, unless we cut ourselves off from him. At one with him, we stand in the light of truth.*

1. **TOWARD COMMON LINES OF ACTION IN THE VINCENTIAN FAMILY**

As part of the fruit from the Symposium on Dialog with Islam in Indonesia two years ago, a Commission was formed to give continuity to the proposed topics. This Commission is made up of members of the Congregation of the Mission together with other members of the Vincentian Family. The Commission is coordinated by Claudio Santangelo, CM, and its other members are Armada Ryanto, CM (Province of Indonesia); Sister Abeba Hadgu, DC; Christa Foelting, AIC; and Albert Zoghbi, SSVP. This commission met for the first time in October 2012 in the General Curia House. I participated in this meeting as consultant.

Among the aims of this Commission is to awaken interest in this topic in the different branches of the Vincentian Family (FV). It also hopes to be a sign of collaboration among the FV’s different branches, as well as a symbol of interreligious dialog, not only working in an academic sense, but also at the practical level, in ordinary life, and maintaining a Vincentian style in addressing the issue of dialog with Islam.[[5]](#footnote-5)

One of the projects of this Commission will be to organize the next **International Symposium of the Vincentian Family on Dialogue with Islam**, which is scheduled for **June 29-July 8, 2014**. It will be held **at DePaul University in Chicago**. The motto of this Symposium will be: “That they might have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). Unfortunately and maybe due to a late announcement the particiopation of European Vincentians in Indonesia was not very numerous. We want to invite from now on for Chicago on all different levels – speaking to you here is one possibility as you might know interested confreres in your provinces.

Other future activities could be:

A mapping of the places where Vincentian Family members work for and with Muslim, starting with the participants in the 2011 symposium in Indonesia.

 An already existing vindialogue website will be updated.[[6]](#footnote-6)

A power point presentation on the importance of dialogue with Islam and on the VF Commission is being prepared by Fr. Claudio Santangelo, C.M and Fr. Juventino Castillero Caen, C.M.

 The Commission will report to the 2014 Visitors’ meeting in New York and the AIC meeting in Bangkok.

1. Alexander, Scott. (2002, January 1). What's the Catholic view of Islam? *The Free Library*. (2002). [http://www.thefreelibrary.com/What's the Catholic view of Islam?-a081391925](http://www.thefreelibrary.com/What%27s%20the%20Catholic%20view%20of%20Islam?-a081391925) (retrieved January 04, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html> (retrieved January 04, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “PUT OUT INTO THE DEEP”, Interreligious Dialogue with Islam: Contexts, Vision and Action. Synthesis of the Symposium [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2012/december/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20121221_auguri-curia_en.html> (retrieved January 04, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://de.scribd.com/doc/112807539/NUNTIA-October-2012-English [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [www.vindialogue.org](http://www.vindialogue.org) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)