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MEETING MUSLIMS ?

Study paper
prepared by the "Islam in Europe" Committee
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INTRODUCTION

1. In a Christian perspective, the history of the people of God is bound up with joy and pain, with the sin of man and the acceptance of the gift of God, with steps forward and backwards, with unity and division, with being open to others and being closed to others.

The Evangelical welcome to the men and women around us is without doubt preferable to being walled up in a ghetto. However, this openness to cultural and religious environments which are not our own is often held back by a fear of losing our own identity. The other seems to be more of an invader than a brother or sister.

The Word of God invites us to be *wise as serpents and innocent as doves* (Matt 10, 16). It is difficult to be both bold and prudent in the Spirit when we have to discern the most Christian solution to a complex situation.

2. In the line with the *Carta Œcumenica* signed in 2001 in Strasbourg by the main churches in Europe, this document seeks to help the churches to assess what is at stake when we encounter Muslims, in order to be more able to respond to a Gospel which asks us to love our enemies and treat everyone as our brother and sister (Matt 5, 44-48). It aims at suggesting a reflection and practice which can be adapted according to local conditions and the demands of Christian witness in a world which can no longer be limited to village, town or country.

At the heart of this changing world, filled with violence and hatred, but also with search for fraternity and reconciliation, freedom and unity, it is important never to cease looking at, and checking against the Scriptures, our own pastoral attitudes.

3. In order to help us to reflect on an approach to Muslims, we will size up the pluralistic society in which we are called to witness to our faith (I); look at Scripture, and particularly the attitude of Jesus, to find points of reference (II); try to see if there are any keys in ecclesiology (III); consider the life, action and thinking of some of the pioneers of dialogue (IV); and finally, try to analyse the stages of encounters with Muslims (V) in order to formulate some proposals for Christian education (VI).

I SIZING UP THE PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

1. The Church's defensive retreat into itself in the past was, at certain times, a successful way of safeguarding it, but often it left many wounds. Should we continue on this path? We can more or less see that this defensive attitude is outdated, but the fear of being weakened often prevents an attitude that might appear naive.

The Gospel asks to *do to others as you would have them do to you* (Matt 7, 12), but there is a real fear of being 'cheated' by our own values of forgiveness, brotherhood, and reconciliation. Is there not a risk that the other might take advantage of us, or dominate us? The past, near or distant, has plenty of sorry examples of violent confrontations, conquests, and discrimination between Christians and Muslims, as well as the more immediate, recent history.

2. Before analysing whether a change of perspective is possible, let us try to see if the position of denying the other is true to the Gospel as it should be lived in today's world.

Is the strict correlation between ethnicity and religion still a model for a generation which regards the world as a global village? Does the legitimate continuity of a people's culture and spirituality still necessarily pass through this historical link? By giving up certain secondary cultural aspects, the deep fear of seeing one's faith and religious practice diluted will be less oppressive and a more positive outlook on the coming world will be made possible.

3. Over the last 50 years, the world has changed so much that we are required, even obliged, to look around us with new eyes. The churches are conscious that witnessing in Paris, London, Moscow or Istanbul has an increasing impact on the situation in other places. It is said time and again that "No man is an island"¹, which applies not just to the individual but also to nations or religious communities. We must constantly size up this pluralistic world. Since we must live with others, it is best to see them as brothers and sisters whom God has put on our journey, and in whose company he asks us to grow.

We need a childlike attitude to be able to look together for changes that might help us to proclaim a message that remains unchanged to people on the move, to a world in the grip of transformation. We need to see how this is true to the Gospel today, without hanging on to outdated attitudes.

4. Our Trinitarian faith must be affirmed without denying the existence of others; it is no longer sufficient just to defend it. It must be proclaimed and lived, above all as an experience which respects other beliefs and even unbelief.

There is an extraordinary human ferment, both positive and negative, requiring pastoral priorities which are sometimes difficult to discern, accept and practice. Jesus himself reproached his co-religionists for *not seeing the signs of the times* (Matt 16, 3).

5. Let us take note of certain signs of our times through which God is calling us:

¹ John Donne (1573 - 1631), repeated by the Trappist Thomas Merton (1915 - 1968), and adapted by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907 - 1972) "No religion is an island".

1) The **voluntary or forced migrations of peoples**, their uprooting and their integration, leading to a displacement of believers and unbelievers. Religions which have been relocated, and are now present alongside our own, necessarily require a proclamation of the Christian faith that corresponds to these physical and psychological displacements.

2) How could we refuse to engage with the **religious transformation of Europe**? We cannot reach out to the majority of people who have given up any religious practice or are tempted to find refuge in other spiritual homes by retreating into traditional practices.

3) **Secularisation** today is no longer battling against religious conviction. While we cannot celebrate all its fruits, we can be grateful for the separation of powers and for the freedom that ensues when the State is no longer tempted to dominate.

4) **Globalisation** adds both positive and negative aspects that require our reflection. How can we not celebrate the birth of a truly international justice which can put a stop to bloodthirsty and perverted people rising to power? The promotion of a spirit of international solidarity, and a concern for the protection of the environment, which has been badly treated of late, are other aspects of globalisation.

5) **The search for unity** which will lead to reconciliation between the Christian churches is a gift of God, as well as a challenge for our time.

6) The time is ripe to consider the **relationship between Christians and Muslims**. After recent and not so recent history, the believers no longer want religion to be a factor for war. It is up to us to contribute to the development of this awareness and to move towards a more Christian approach.

II FROM THE SCRIPTURES

Before any reflection, two convictions should move us: *There is one God, and also one mediator between God and men, Christ Jesus* (1Tim 2, 5) and: *If you greet only your brothers [and sisters] what is there extraordinary about that? Even the Gentiles do as much* (Matt 5, 47).

1. Biblical texts are harsh with the false gods of the stranger, but the foreigner himself, either ethnically or by faith, has a privileged place in the heart of the people of Abraham. *When you reap the harvest in your field and forget a swathe, do not go back to pick it up; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan and the widow, in order that the LORD your God may bless you in all that you undertake. When you beat your olive-trees, do not strip afterwards; what is left shall be for the alien, the orphan and the widow. ... Remember that you were slaves in Egypt; that is why I command you to do this.* (Deut 24, 19-22).

2. We are familiar with the intractable determination of the prophet Elijah in his lonely battle against idolatry, but he is the same Elijah who, having left Israel, asked a widow at Sarepta for food. Although she had almost nothing, she shared what she had because of her confidence in this man of God of another faith. Jesus recalled this

episode: *There were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when for three years and six months the skies never opened, and famine lay hard over the whole country; yet it was to none of those that Elijah was sent but to a widow at Sarepta in the territory of Sidon* (Luke 4, 25-26).

3. Abraham, the father of the faith of the Jews, Christians and Muslims, was called by God with the promise that *in him all the families of the earth shall be blessed* (Gen 12, 3). Let us not ignore the meeting of the patriarch with the mysterious Melchizedech, priest of the Most High, who gave him bread and wine as a sign of communion, and to whom Abraham paid the tithe in recognition of his priestly status (Gen 14, 17-20).

4. The prophet Micah, in a text which is repeated in Isaiah (Is 2, 2-5), takes up the vision of the pilgrimage of the nations to the holy mountain of Jerusalem, with the specific formula : *All peoples may walk, each in the name of his god, but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God for ever and ever.* (Micah 4, 5)

5. God loves all humankind, and *desires everyone to be saved* (1Tim, 2, 4). The blood of Jesus *poured out for many* is poured out for others as much as for us. We are therefore obliged to see others as brothers and sisters; we can exclude no-one. The great revelation of Jesus is that God is Father and Love, a love which knows no boundaries.

6. This unique and Trinitarian God calls us to a covenant with him, and a covenant with others. The Spirit which has hovered over the world from the beginning did not leave the universe to concentrate only on one People. Before and after Jesus Christ, he is at work everywhere, and therefore also in the heart of the faithful of other faiths.

The Father sends his Son into the world to give it life and salvation. Through Jesus, the only Mediator of universal salvation, God excludes no-one. In the same way as the Father sent his Son among human beings, he sends us to encounter others. The Spirit of the Son also moves us to go among those with whom we are living, witnessing to our encounter with Him who is Wholly Other.

7. Thus the Christ, the Emmanuel who has come to his own gathers together the children of God (John 11, 51-52) scattered in the various cultures, races, nations and religions of the world. The encounters of Jesus with non-Jews can help us to understand the approach which should be our own.

Where Jesus could have emphasised how much separated them from the faith of Israel, he was able instead to bring out the positive aspects and the religious values in their hearts. This does not mean that we should suppress the proclamation of the Gospel. We must evangelise. But the Good News does not force itself on people nor does it oblige us to set up barriers against those who cannot or are not willing to believe as we do.

1) **The Samaritan Woman.** The fourth chapter of John's Gospel is considered to be the great baptismal catechesis. Given the religious landscape of Europe and the world, it is good to pause at this meeting of Jesus.

The Samaritan Woman is surprised that the Rabbi talks to her, and the disciples even more so! Jesus takes advantage of this to express his conviction that one can come to God outside Mt Gerizim and the Temple of Jerusalem (Jn 4, 21 and 23). There are also people in other faiths who worship in spirit and in truth. If, as Christians, we think

that the mediation of Christ is necessary (*There is salvation in no-one else*, Acts 4, 12), the bounds of his Church are wider than we can imagine.

2) **The Roman Centurion at Capernaum** (Matt 8, 5-13, Luke 7, 1-10)

At Capernaum, a meeting place of Gentiles, upon whom *a great light has shined* (cf. Matt 4, 12-16 and Isaiah 9, 1), Jesus takes advantage of the friendship established between the Jews and the Roman Centurion who built their synagogue (Luke 7, 5). Here, he does not hesitate to stress the faith of a believer who is not Jewish, and to say that many others like him will have their place in the Kingdom: *I tell you, many will come from east and west ... while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown in the outer darkness* (Matt 8, 11).

3) **The Syro-Canaanite Woman** (Matt 15, 21-28)

Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. *Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me'* (Matt 15, 22). Not just a woman, but a Gentile! They first ignored her, but finally this foreigner annoyed the disciples, who said : *Give her what she wants*, or according to other manuscripts : *Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us* (Matt 15, 23).

Jesus first agrees with them; he reminds her of the current opinion, that the Messiah is for the Jews, it is out of question that he should care for other people who do not share his culture or faith. The woman insists, and it becomes very dramatic : we don't give bread to dogs, those impure animals who, like pigs and goats, live on rubbish. But the Canaanite woman does not let herself be flustered and says words that tip the situation in her favour : *Yes Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table* (Matt 15, 27). You can take me for what you will, but I believe that you can cure my daughter; you send me off, but I believe in your power. And Jesus then says in front of his dumbfounded disciples : *Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish!* (Matt 15, 28).

4) **The man from Gerasa² possessed by demons** (Luke 8, 38-39)

This man wants to follow Jesus, who refuses, contrary to what he does in the story of the rich young man (Mark 10, 17-22). Let us put this refusal in relation to the reproaches he makes to the missionaries of his own Jewish faith : *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.* (Matt 23, 15). Thus the Saviour of all does not demand of everyone to come to him through the religious rites and sacraments. He does however give a mission: *go back home and proclaim everything that God has done for you*; among the people of Gerasene, who are incapable of hearing Jesus, because of their fears.

No doubt our calling is to be bearers of the Gospel: *Woe betide me if I do not proclaim the gospel* (1Cor 9, 16); but what does evangelisation mean? Does it mean spreading the love of God communicated in Jesus the Saviour, or restricting the proclamation only to those who are part of the structure of the Church? God is greater than structures and institutions, even those which come from him. If faith is a gift of God, how could those who have not received it be condemned? The verse *the one who does not believe will be condemned* (Mark 16, 16) can only apply to those who have

² A country situated on the bank of the lake of Gennesareth opposite Galilee, also called the country of the Gadarenes (Matt 8, 28).

received the gift, who know that Jesus is the Son of God, but do not accept him. If we have the chance to say, like Peter, *You are the Christ!*, this extraordinary grace must not lead us to disdain others. We have certainly not a monopoly of truth.

In John 6, 65, Jesus says, *No-one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.* When Paul talks of salvation, he states : *This is not your own doing, it is the gift of God* (Eph 2, 8), and again, *you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry Abba, Father, it is that very spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God* (Rom 8, 15, cf. Gal 4, 6). Those who cannot in conscience call God Father and Jesus Son have not received this gift of God which should fill us with gratitude and humility.

III. THE CHURCH AS A SIGN AND SACRAMENT OF THE COVENANT AND OF BROTHERHOOD

Enlarge the site of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes. For you will spread out to the right and to the left... (Isaiah 54, 2-3).

1. We believe that the Spirit of Jesus has gone before us into the heart of others. If, when we are with them, our role is that of a messenger who helps them to know the Spirit of Jesus, it is for God, not for us, to decide the path they should take. Just as for the pagan from Gerasene, we have to discern the will of God, whether we should journey a little way with a new companion, or be given the joy of leading him or her to baptism.

2. We can think of the Church as the tent which the Lord God asks us to leave open to the wind of the Spirit. She must be a sign and a servant of the love that God is; she must be the spouse of the Spirit which precedes us in the other.

Are there not two types of mission ?

- The first would be to give rise to, and journey with, a community, until it becomes a local church. Reaching this stage, by the grace of God, can only fill us with the fullness of joy in the Spirit.
- The second would be to walk with those who do not feel called to join our own church communities. Living this journey takes the form of witnessing by a life that mirrors the gospel, while respecting believers, agnostics and atheists.

3. Our Christian ideal expects us not to place limits to our brotherly love - *you have one teacher, and you are all students* (Matt 23, 8). We must go further than those who only love their brothers from the same cultural or religious backgrounds (Matt 5, 46-48).

This may presuppose a difficult reconciliation with Muslims, but the Lord has given us enough of an example to dare to ask us to take this path: *If, when you are bringing your gift at the altar, suddenly you remember that your brother [or sister] has a grievance against you, leave your gift where it is before the altar. First go and make your peace with your brother [or sister]* (Matt 5, 23-24).

4. If the Church is to be a tent, we are nomads. Nomads are always looking for another place, and must go out to meet other people. Moreover, in all parts of the world nowadays, the intermingling of populations means that poor Lazarus is at our gate, and the Canaanite woman is our compatriot. The Christian mission is not just specialists travelling through the world, it is a state of mind, which does not gaze at itself in a ghetto, but in the mirror of the Gospel in the wider world.

It is sometimes hard to accept this, but it was also hard for the apostles. Jesus was angry with them about this: *When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him because his face was set towards Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it they said, 'Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?' But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.* (Luke 9, 51-56).

IV PIONEERS IN DIALOGUE

All through her almost 2000 years of history, the Church has come into contact with other faiths, before and after the emergence of Islam, although the latter has constituted a particular challenge. Face to face encounters have, most often, been negative, but both in the East and the West there have been exceptions on both sides who have prepared a more constructive way.

The story of these confrontations and encounters is complex, so let us content ourselves with a brief overview.

1. At the beginning of Islam, John of Damascus (675 - 753) who worked at the court of the Caliph of Damascus before becoming a monk, reflected a lot on this new faith and talked with Muslims. He is the first to express an opinion on Islam.

After him, for many centuries, discussion, although often polemical and apologetic, remained a link between the two communities, despite other events. In fact, there were many who engaged in or accepted discussions with Muslims, even if more often than not the aim of the 'argument' was to convince the other, rather than to create conditions for a dialogue which would bring friendship and respect among believers. Christians, in particular, having become a political minority, could not always speak as equals.

However, mutual respect is visible in some historical initiatives, which indicate that throughout history believers have sought a way of agreement, despite the difference of their convictions.

2. In the East, Timothy I (728 - 823), the Catholicos of the Eastern (Nestorian) church, entered into dialogue with the Caliph in the new capital of Baghdad, to which he

moved the seat of his church. Without denying any of his Trinitarian faith in Christ, he went as far as recognising that Mohammed had 'walked in the path of the prophets'³.

Gregory Palamas (1296 - 1359), the Metropolitan of Salonika, was captured by the Turks. He took part in a dialogue with Muslim theologians, who both respected and admired him. In fact, a whole group of Orthodox scholars wrote about Islam and translated extracts from the Quran into Greek⁴.

Manuel II Palaiologos (1350 - 1425), the Emperor of Byzantium and a vassal of the Turks held meetings⁵ with a Muslim who was prompted by the search for a climate of understanding between Muslims and Christians after centuries of controversy.

George of Trebizond (1395 - 1484) dedicated a book on *The Truth of the Christian Faith* to Sultan Mohammed II. Convinced that 'God desired the unity of all mankind', he suggested renouncing the use of force and organising a meeting between Christians and Muslims.

George Gennadios Scholarios (1405 - 1472), the first patriarch after the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans, responded courageously and fearlessly to an invitation by Mohammed II to engage in dialogue on the Christian faith. This led to a mutual appreciation between the patriarch and the sultan.

3. In the West, there is the letter of Pope Gregory VII (1020 - 1085), written in 1076 to al-Nasir, Prince of Bougie (in Algeria), who had sent the priest Servandus to him to be ordained bishop. Over and above of the political context, the letter remains relevant: 'You and I owe this charity to one another even more than we owe it to other people, as we recognise and profess - in different ways, it is true - the One God, whom we praise and venerate each day as the creator of all and master of the world, according to the words of the Apostle: *For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one*' (Eph 2, 14)⁶.

At the same time, the Abbot of Cluny, Peter the Venerable (1094 - 1156) undertook the bringing together of a collection of writings, including a Latin translation of the Quran, in order to better understand Islam, although, it is true, his aim was to refute it. In 1219, in the middle of the 5th Crusade, Francis of Assisi (1182 - 1226) managed to meet the Sultan of Egypt, besieged at Damietta. The 'monk' was admired for his faith, which he demonstrated without any controversy. He himself discovered among these 'enemies' men who prayed. On his return, he encouraged his brethren to go and live peacefully among the Muslims, and to witness, by their life, to their faith in Jesus Christ, until the time when God, if he wanted, would create a church.

4. Later, Nicholas of Cusa (1401 - 1464), a witness of the fall of Constantinople, before becoming a cardinal had dreamed of a great meeting in Jerusalem which would reunite the three monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. He was the

³ J.-M. Gaudel, *Encounters and Clashes. Islam and Christianity in History*. Rome, PISAI, 1984, Vol I p34-36. Cf *Islamochristiana* 3, 1977, p122.

⁴ A. T. Khoury, *Les théologiens byzantins et l'islam*. Tome 1: *Textes et auteurs VIIIe - XIIIe s*. Louvain, Nauwelaerts, 1969. Tome 2 *Polémique byzantine contre l'islam (VIIIe - XIIIe s)*, Leiden, Brill, 1972.

⁵ The 7th Controversy was published in French under the title *Entretien avec un musulman* in the *Sources chrétiennes* collection. Paris, Cerf, 1966.

⁶ Quoted by J.-M. Gaudel, *op cit* Vol 2 p 75.

author of a critical analysis of the Quran, and never ceased to strive for a better understanding with Muslims, calling for 'the peace of faith'.

In the early days of the Protestant Reformation, Bibliander (1504 - 1564) was the first to print the Quran in Latin at Basle, along with other texts on Islam and the Muslims, fruits of the work of Peter the Venerable. In addition to a preface by Luther, to answer his detractors, Bibliander insisted that it was necessary to know Islamic faith and laws.

5. It is right to point out that Muslims were not inactive in these exchanges, although they were often dominated by a spirit of confrontation. This is how many exchanges of correspondence have come down to us, both real and fictitious. Notable among them was the correspondence between Umar II of Damascus and Leo III of Byzantium, the pseudonyms for a Syrian Muslim and a Byzantine Christian living at the end of the 9th century. There was also that between a 'monk of France' (an abbot of Cluny?) and al-Bagi (1012 - 1081), an Islamic jurist and councillor of the King of Saragossa, and that between Frederick II of Hohenstaufen (1194 - 1250), who started the Sixth Crusade, and Ibn Sab'in (1217 - 1271), a Sufi scholar from the Maghreb.

There are also many great Muslim scholars who took positions on Christianity, such as Ibn Hazm (994 - 1064) in Andalusia, al-Juwayni (1082 - 1085) from Nishapur, Iran, and the master of al-Ghazali (1059 - 1111), to whom the 'Excellent refutation of the divinity of Jesus from the text of the Gospel' is attributed. The famous hanbalite jurist Ibn Taymiyya (1263 - 1328) replied to a letter from Paul of Antioch, Bishop of Saida in Lebanon, with a 1400 page text.

6. The spirit of refutation dominated most of the Islamic-Christian encounters, and still prevailed in the missionary current of the 19th century, as shown by Karl Gottlieb Pfander (1803 - 1965), a Lutheran missionary in India and the author of a polemical work which earned him a reply from Sheikh Muhammad Rahmatullah (1817 - 1891)⁷.

The dawn of the 20th century brought a more resolutely positive approach through the engagement and writings of such Christian Islamicists as Fr Charles de Foucauld (1858 - 1916), who inspired the institutes of the Little Brothers and Little Sisters of Jesus, the Reformed church pastor Samuel Zwemer (1867 - 1952), a missionary in Egypt and the founder of the magazine *Muslim World*, the Catholic spiritual writer and researcher Louis Massignon (1883 - 1962), and the Anglican Bishop Kenneth Cragg (1913 -).

7. This movement gained further momentum following the Second Vatican Council (1962 - 1965) and the efforts of the World Council of Churches to advance the cause of dialogue between believers of different faiths. Patriarch Athenagoras and his successors in the East, Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II in the West, as well as the leaders of many Protestant and Anglican churches have increased the initiatives to bring men and women together in the search for peace.

Thus, Christians found themselves together at Assisi in Italy on the 27th of October 1986, and again on the 24th of January 2002, with leaders of other faiths. Without confusion, they brought the cry of mankind to God. Following the time of the pioneers, it was now the time of the institutional churches; it was necessary that this spirit of openness should be taken up and brought to its completion by all Christians. The

⁷ Respectively *Mizân al-Haq* (The balance of Truth) and *Idh-hâr al-haq* (The manifestation of the Truth), both of which were translated into a number of languages, and remain in print today.

Church in her entirety must engage all its members if possible, so that in the field of interfaith dialogue, the time can arrive at last of openness to the other, while respecting the convictions of each.

V. STAGES FOR ENCOUNTER AND DIALOGUE

We would now like to try and enumerate the stages which, from our experience, may mark the steps of men and women towards the Father who does not reject any of his creatures, or any of his children. Above all, it seems to us to be absolutely necessary to be fully convinced that the Christian is called by the Gospel to make the first step. If not, we would always be waiting for the other to respond to an initiative he or she should already have noticed, and the absence of response would be a pretext on our side for not going further. With a peaceful conscience, we would shut ourselves up, pretending to be right, forgetting that we must *forgive seventy-seven times seven* (Matt 18, 21). Too often we give the excuse that 'He isn't doing anything, I always have to do it'. Even if that is true, as Christians, we should always be ready to reach out to others.

1. Being aware of our wounds

Taking the first step is a Gospel command which we find difficult to put into practice. Why ? Undoubtedly, we are certainly marked by wounds, both old and new, which may lead us to justify having a 'victim' mentality, even though deep down we may not really be happy with it. Others have harmed us, either our own generation, or preceding ones, and so we expect the other to come towards us on his knees.

Forgiveness is not possible if we do not take account the wounds of history inflicted by each of our communities on the other. Faced with the gulf for which we hold the other responsible, we must undoubtedly recognize that God alone can heal our wounded memories and bring us to look at the faith and the life of the other without prejudice.

2. Seeing the Other with the eyes of God; loving him with His heart

As ambassadors of reconciliation with God and between human beings, without God's help, we will find it hard to step out further and shake off the constraints of fear, contempt, and hate. Only God truly forgives; only God can give us the gift of forgiveness; only God can heal us.

We should go to the other having made the deliberate choice to look for the good in him or her. The Spirit is at work in his heart also. In every community, some can be resistant to God's work, but we cannot imagine that to be the case for everyone. God is stronger than evil and death.

We do not have to consider everything that the other does as worthy, even less so do we have to take everything he says as "gospel". Vigilance is necessary to evaluate differences of faith or practice. Whoever finds everything good in another community is naive, or a coward who is scared by difference. Our job is not to suppress the

differences, but rather to dismantle the psychological barriers between us. To do this, following Jesus, we should not hide the positive points in the other community which we sometimes find it difficult to see.

It is necessary to make an effort to look at the other and his environment calmly. The attitude of Jesus towards the Roman centurion, the Canaanite woman, the heretical Samaritan woman, should help us to find the right attitude.

3. Sharing our values

Having recognised the work of the Spirit, even when it is dimmed by the impediments which are in us despite the graces received at baptism, we will make the effort to listen to the Other describe himself. This is a difficult step, as the Other can be irritating if he tries to justify the difference by saying that we are wrong. But that can itself teach us to avoid doing the same.

In effect we are trying to imagine thoughts, attitudes and beliefs for the other that he or she might never have had. We have to listen to each other so that we don't act on ideas which are as old as our ancient quarrels, but still wrong; we have to listen to the other to know what we each mean by the same word. We need to listen to each other, again and again, and peacefully, so that we do not ignore the way in which our interlocutors practise their religion in a world which is now different from that in which our "answers to everything" were first developed.

4. Recognising our failings

We must have the courage not to defend at all costs the past, but to see whether we have been as perfect as our history books used to say, and indeed still say. If we are proud of our historic saints and in communion with them, we must recognise that we are also connected with sinners.

We are afraid to express regret for the past for fear of condemning our forbears. This fear is a bad counsellor, because in fact we judge our predecessors when we defend them by saying "It was the time they lived in". It is not a matter of judging people, but of being sorry about an attitude. Let us stop looking for excuses by saying "We would have done the same". Of course, we might even have made more mistakes. The problem is rather that at that point "We did not follow Christ".

5. Wanting to be brothers and sisters with our likenesses and differences

We have to want real brotherhood between God's people - brothers and sisters as his creation; brothers and sisters having the same world to transform; brothers and sisters in our humanity on history's path; and, above all, brothers and sisters believing in the one God. We want to work with human beings, not systems. We need to go out to meet men and women shaped by their religion in order to be perceived ourselves as a community of prayerful believers.

Not wanting to look at the resemblances between our two ways of believing prevents us from rejoicing before God and before humankind. Not willing to accept our differences can lead to the destruction of a community by denying its right to live and

to think according to its own conscience. This refusal to accept difference has led groups of believers to despise one another, and to war with one another.

Recognising difference is easier once we have understood that it is not necessary to believe in the same way in order to advance together. We have to take note, with a quiet mind, of our real similarities and differences. At that point, theological dialogue gains its true meaning – yet, everyone, at their own level, can already do some groundwork. By accepting difference, we diffuse hostility towards the other. We also avoid the trap of syncretism or of the lowest common denominator.

6. Give an account of your hope (1Pet 3, 15)

The Apostle Peter did not reduce the proclamation of the Good News to a sort of catechism or Creed. Through our way of life, we need to show others how much our life is fulfilled by Christ, the Father and the Holy Spirit. However, without giving the other any impression of doing violence to him or her, we sincerely wish to be able to tell our reasons for loving and for believing. This is easier from the minute that we recognise his or her right to do the same to us, as long as it is without pressure or aggression.

Indeed, when we reach this stage, we are rightly to expect a certain reciprocity, although this is not always the case. But if the other is not ready, are we? Should we not prepare our minds and our hearts to *give an account of our hope*, accepting that the other can also give us an account of his or her hope and faith.

7. Favouring peace in difference and mutual respect

We must offer our faith without polemic to those who are capable of hearing us. But in day to day encounters, we need to know when to leave the explanation of our differences to God, so that together, we can become the trail-blazers of peace in the 3rd millennium, without abandoning anything of our faith. Christians and Muslims, who jointly constitute nearly half of the world population⁸, have a great responsibility to advance justice and peace in the world.

VI FORMATION OF CHRISTIANS

It was difficult to conceive of such a spirit of openness when each country, with its own religion, used to shut itself off from others in a spirit of exclusion. Today our environment forces us, all members of the body of the Church, to train ourselves to a very different way of living with believers of other faiths, or non-believers. This is difficult, but if we are convinced that the Spirit is working in all of us, we can discover within ourselves the enthusiasm which will enable us to overcome the obstacles. In the end, will not this widening of our heart bring us nearer to the Gospel?

⁸ Almost 2 billion Christians and 1 billion 300 million Muslims according to D. B. Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopaedia*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000.

Below are some principles and comments which may help the faithful who wish to start on this aspect of the gospel adventure.

1. Formation through walking towards the other

To encounter the other in truth, we have to endeavour to get close enough to him in what he or she really is and wants to be. We expect this same movement from other. We therefore need to form all those who become conscious of the need for a Christian approach to the Muslim community.

Many agree on the need for this formation, but some consider that it is better, at this time, to avoid taking initiatives. It would indeed be a grave error to abandon part way along the road those with whom we have begun to open up the ways to dialogue; nevertheless, this risk must not prevent us from action. We believe it is impossible to develop a spirit of dialogue simply by working on texts.

We must not form people by being protective and shutting them in but by going forward with them. Using failures and successes, we can at one and the same time open up to another's faith and also *confirm* (Luke 22, 31) Christians in their own faith. At every level, from grassroots Christians to the experts, it would be good to provide an opportunity to learn through encounter regarding Muslims and Islamic-Christian dialogue, at levels appropriate for each group.

This can and must be conceived as a deepening of our own faith, confronted by that of our neighbour. Such a catechesis, neither aggressive nor defensive, while viewing the other with genuine esteem, will embody the gospel imperative of love for God and for the other.

2. Starting from new friendships

We do well to identify those who desire to live the Gospel of encounter. Some know nothing of the other, but wish to imitate Christ in his love which knows no boundaries. We need to be sure that they are capable of discerning the positive and the negative. Others, who have already had some experience, could be agents of a way forward which is both reasoned and open.

It may surprise us to learn that those who are reticent about approaching Muslims in general sometimes have had friendships or family relations with Muslims. Having themselves experienced the difficulties of this encounter, sometimes having suffered an aggressive relationship with other members of that same faith, they find it difficult when other people talk of encounter, let alone friendship. We should not hesitate from listening to their negative thoughts, but then we should ask them to talk about what was successful in their encounters. Just as difficult experiences can weigh a situation down, so friendships which one can talk about can offer a way forward, particularly when we ask if their friend's Muslim faith really is foreign to the mutual friendship they are sharing with us.

If we succeed in persuading these Christians that what they bringing to the common reflection is of capital importance, they can help us to discern a realistic path forward; and in making their Muslim friends known to the community, they can, little by little, transform the climate of hostility or indifference.

3. Leaving aggression behind, and helping the other to do the same

We have already discussed the healing of our wounded memories and the need to let ourselves be reconciled by Christ. One of the important stages in this process is letting go of aggression. If it is almost unseemly for those who have not suffered to give advice which can all too quickly sound like a lecture, we can not skimp in this area. With God's grace, one must drive out all remaining hostility from one's spirit, if one wishes to come to the forgiveness which sets us on our feet again and enables us to walk with the other. While we cannot condemn those who remain shut up in their own suffering, we must prepare the future. Reciprocating violence and hatred has never led to happiness for succeeding generations. If some Christians cannot overcome hatred, his brothers and sisters in faith can prevent this resentment becoming the lot of the whole community. Serenity and forgiveness do more than any kind of weaponry.

When hostility comes from the Muslim side, it is more complicated. But even there, if we are really concerned to promote peace, we will find a way to our Muslim interlocutors more easily, and with them, if they agree, we can look to encourage a lowering of tensions until the blessed day when relationships will become human and fraternal. Friendly relations between religious leaders can help to limit future conflicts.

There is frequently a fear of being cheated by the other, and becoming his prey. As the fear is not simply imaginary, it is necessary to look squarely at the reality. Yet don't we also need to ask ourselves whether the other, who doubtless has the same fears, might not reasonably entertain the same thoughts about us?

4. Inter-religious marriages

As a result of recent migrations, inter-cultural marriages have multiplied. When cultures and faiths were opposed to one another, these unions used to seem treasonable. Even today where communities live side by side most successfully, those responsible for education and faith do not encourage such unions - they have many good reasons not to - and are much concerned to explain the implications of such marriages. In spite of this, social change which brings with it increased interaction is leading inevitably to an increase in this phenomenon. We would do well, perhaps, to work positively with these couples, whatever may be the "spiritual" solution they have chosen. Experience shows that communities which are open to welcoming marital situations of these kinds can give many a couple the opportunity to be a link between two worlds which can be hostile to, or ignorant of, one another. When mutual love triumphs over such obstacles - which is, sadly, not always the case - this love, which respects the other's conscience, becomes an example of dialogue lived every day. Even if such a couple avoid religious dialogue itself, and each remains attached to their own tradition, this can be a sign of reciprocal respect which should not be judged negatively.

5. The experience of the Trinity at work in us

The religious pluralism in which we find ourselves impels us to take up a greater challenge. We will not succeed in our Christian witness without living the experience of the Trinity, both inwardly and outwardly. As long as we remained entirely among our own, the Christian faith did not need to be made explicit on this point. Many of Christ's faithful believed in the Trinity, without needing to reflect upon it. With the growing number of Muslims in the world, and the influence of Islam making itself felt, it seems necessary to live out this Trinitarian existence more explicitly than ever before, both to be well anchored in our Christian identity and in order the better to live as Christians in this present time.

From the moment when we urge our co-religionists to live in brotherhood with Muslims, we will have to avoid a tendency towards syncretism which would reduce our Trinitarian monotheism to a unitary monotheism. Islam can also be considered as a challenge which calls upon us to deepen our covenant monotheism. It is not easy to express by word and life the Christian specificity of the Incarnation and the Trinity; yet that is what is required if we wish to witness to Christ the Saviour.

To love like our God, the Father who goes to the heart of humanity, the Son who comes among us, the Spirit who accompanies us to the end of time on the path of encounter and dialogue: such is our mission. Rather than defending a church barricaded within its past, should we not put ever more into practice the *Beatitudes* (Matt 5, 3-12), the *Our Father* (Matt 6, 9-13), the greeting of peace in the light of the Resurrection (Luke 24, 36; John 20, 19-26), solidarity without boundaries (Matt 5, 46-48)? If this incarnation of the Scriptures in us and our imitation of Jesus lead us to make the witness of love and forgiveness of the Saviour more transparent, we will be true witnesses of God: as Jesus says *No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends* (John 15, 13).

CONCLUSION

1. If we consider Islam to be a religious and political system to fight against, we strongly risk putting ourselves in a church which stands for self-sufficiency and aggression. How will she be a sign and expression of the Good News attractive and open to men and women of our time?

In a mere religious system, the *Beatitudes*, the *Our Father*, the Risen Christ's greeting of peace, solidarity with others without limit are often pushed to the margins, far from the heart. These phrases are no longer the spring which waters the soil and makes it fertile, but simply an ideal of a few saints to be venerated, not imitated.

2. For many Muslims, the *da'wa* is a call to enter Islam by making a profession of Islamic faith, upon pain of damnation. Some Christians preach their faith with the same motivation. It seems to us that evangelisation is rather a call from Christ to go towards the Father, within the Church, not only with our co-religionists, but with all the men and women which the Spirit puts in our path, as for the deacon Philip in Samaria (Acts 8), or for Jesus in Gerasa (Luke 8, 38-39), Tyre and Sidon (Matt 15, 21-28).

3. Reducing evangelisation to oral preaching is to reduce the life of the Word of God incarnate, not just to His public preaching, but even, within that time, to a few isolated though important phrases. It is to forget not only His life in Nazareth, but also his encounters with non-Jews during his public life. It is to forget that the commandment *Go into all the world and proclaim the Good News to the whole creation* (Mark 16, 15) is not to be separated from the rest of the Gospel. The age of the Church is not only the imitation of the public life of Christ, but the imitation of His whole life.

We are to proclaim everything that we believe, and lead people to baptism every time that, by the grace of God, a Church can visibly spring up. But even where a Church cannot open up and be displayed, we must witness to Christ, and live the greeting of peace, the Beatitudes and solidarity without limits in the midst of the men and women of this generation.

4. *The love of Christ urges us on* (2Cor 5, 14). God will not ask us if we have achieved miracles or baptised masses (1Cor 13), but he will look to see if the love He has put in us has impelled us as often as possible to *proclaim the news from the housetops*. He will also look to see above all if that love has led us to live, each day, the message that the other cannot bear actually to hear from our lips. It is not a matter of keeping quiet, but rather the more that the message can't get through in words, the more our lives should shout it out.

5. Paul VI, in Bombay on the 3rd December 1964, told the representatives of various faiths in India: "We must not come together simply as tourists, but as pilgrims who are going to seek God, not in buildings of stone, but in the hearts of men"⁹.

If we have less fear of one another, we will do great things. Coming close to the other will not be the dead-end of being crushed, but an avenue of respect for the other. This reciprocal respect will lead to the creation of a space where all will feel equal before God and before mankind.

⁹ *Le dialogue interreligieux dans l'enseignement officiel de l'Eglise catholique*, n200, p129, Ed de Solesmes, 1998,

ANNEX 1

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