



GRAND MAGISTERIUM – VATICAN
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THE HOLY SEPULCHRE OF JERUSALEM

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

Dialogue of life between Christians and Muslims

Interview with Jesuit Father Thomas Michel, expert in Christian-Muslim relations and Islam



From 1981 to 1994, Father Michel worked at the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. He is also the former secretary of the Jesuit Secretariat for Interreligious Dialogue in Rome and former ecumenical secretary for the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (1994-2008). He taught in many universities around the world and he spent the last semester of 2016 in Rome teaching at the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies.

Islam is a world religion which sometimes appears to people like a monolith without distinctions. Can you help our members to have a glimpse into the diversity within the Muslim communities worldwide?

With over a billion people the Muslim world is as diverse as our Christian world. There are cultural differences between one culture and the other, there are theological differences and there are differences in people's approach and reactions to modern life. To start with the cultural differences, most people are unaware that most Muslims do not live in the Middle East but in Asia. The four countries with the highest number of Muslims are Indonesia, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh while Arabic speaking Muslims make up about 20% of the Muslims in the world. One of the mistakes some people make is to identify Islam with what happens in the Arab world while this is only one of the many manifestations of Islam.

There is also a theological variety – which we might also call historical – and this is the difference between Sunni and Shia. This goes back not to a theological point but to an historical point: did Muhammad appoint a successor or not? The majority of Muslims – about 90% – said he didn't appoint a successor and left the choice of leadership to the community while a minority – about 10% – said he appointed a successor, his son-in-law Ali. Starting with this basic historical disagreement, two

forms of Islam developed separately so that today we see many points of divergence between Sunni – the majority – and Shia Muslims. This may lead to conflict, particularly when one group has more economic or political power than the other. We see that happening in countries like Iraq and Bahrain. But we have to take into consideration contexts. If we look at Muslims in United States or in Sweden, there is no conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims, they go to the same mosque and pray together because the context does not raise any issue.

The third type of diversity concerns how people respond to modernity. Some people see modernity as liberating, as something they want, that is good for Muslims. Other Muslims find they have no problems with technological advancements but they find that there is a cultural aspect of modernity with which they have trouble and they would be suspicious. Others would think that modernity is a plague coming from Western countries to remove people from God. So, when we talk about Muslims we really talk about a wide variety of people and approaches to their own religion and to modern life.

Dialogue of life between Muslims and Christians in the Holy Land is to be lived every day. What do you think are the key aspects enhancing the encounter between these communities?

There was an interesting development in Church's thinking when we started talking about dialogue. Paul VI in Ecclesiam Suam took the idea that had already been developed by Martin Buber and others that I grow in relationship to talking to you and you grow in relationship to talking to me. However, to many Christians around the world, and maybe Christians in Israel and Palestine were among those, the idea of dialogue sounded very elitist and only for very educated people and religious leaders coming together. Their experience of Muslims was that of people living next door and they could not come together and discuss the Trinity with them also out of fear of making mistakes. The Church responded saying that they did not have to do that but everyone is called to the dialogue of life and in that dialogue each one of us is called to live one's own Christian faith as deeply and as fully as one can in full acceptance of the Muslims with whom one lives.

This is done by taking care of the elders in the community, by raising children to be God-fearing people, by seeing who are the marginalized, the poor and the needy and opening hearts and institutions to them and in doing so Christians are kind of throwing a "challenge" to the Muslims and they allow themselves to be challenged by the good things the others do: this is what dialogue of life is. Dialogue of ordinary communities comes first and, if that is there, all the other levels of dialogue find their place.

Christians in places like Palestine and Syria have been doing that for centuries: they share culture and language, sing the same songs, tell the same jokes and watch the same movies. And when they share also the best of their faith, that is when dialogue of life happens.

The Year of Mercy closed in November 2016. How do you think we can draw upon the common theme of mercy in Christianity and Islam to foster theological and practical reflections?

Mercy is definitely an important topic. There have been many academic conferences about this topic during the Holy Year but I also know of many places where Christians and Muslims got together out of academic contexts to talk about God's goodness. We often say that Christianity is about love and Islam about something else but Ibn Sina [Avicenna, a Muslim philosopher] basically said "God is love" and is all about love. There are indeed a lot of aspects that we don't know about the other's faith.

We also have to remember that God is not indifferent to what we do in this world and that His mercy is not limited to any one group. He is merciful to all of us and this is a common witness we have to

make. Both Christianity and Islam also teach that mercy is something that you do, it is not a feeling. You are merciful when you concretely try to help who is in need.

In September 2016 in Assisi, the Holy Father celebrated the 30th anniversary of the Interreligious gathering for the World Day of Prayer for Peace. How can prayer help us to draw closer together?

Prayer happens when we consciously realize that we are in God's presence. We can have different ideas about who God is but I think we can pray as Abraham and Melchizedek did. It is in prayer that we become aware of God's qualities and when you acquire this awareness together with someone else, it becomes more difficult to be suspicious or to be angry at the other.

Interview by Elena Dini

(February 2017)

A personal experience of dialogue of life: serving the other to serve God



"In 1988 I was teaching Christian theology in Konya, in Turkey. I had an apartment in the old part of the city but it was completely empty. I was telling people at the university and someone told me that he knew a person who may have an extra bed. I went to this person I never met before and I told him who I was and that I was told he could lend me a bed. He immediately took the bed and we brought it to my apartment. People on the street saw me and asked me who I was and I told them I was a professor and I was going to be teaching theology at the university. They thought I was a Muslim but I told them I was a Christian priest. I was asked if I needed anything for the apartment and I told them that a chair would be useful. By the time I went to take the mattress and came back it seemed that people in the streets all knew about the situation and everyone was offering me something. For the next three days people of the neighborhood went on bringing furniture and all kind of objects to my place: glasses, dishes, table, chairs, carpets...

When I came back home after the first day of teaching at the university, there was a man sitting outside my apartment waiting for me. He told me that his wife came earlier that day but the door was locked and she couldn't come in. He explained me that I didn't need to lock the door. I thought that by doing so I offended the neighborhood telling people that I didn't trust them so I never locked the door again.

So some day I would come back home and on the table there is a covered dish with cooked food. I would eat it and a couple of days later the dish would disappear from my apartment. Some days later other food would appear. Some other days I come back home and I would find my clothes washed and ironed. This went on for about six months and I never saw who did it because they knew when I was teaching at the university and they used to come when they knew I was not at home.

At the end of the semester, it was time for me to leave and I told a man in the neighborhood that I had a final request. Some of the women of the neighborhood were really good to me and I wanted just to meet them once and thank them. The man told me I didn't have to meet them and thank them: they didn't do it for me, they did it for God and God who sees what they do in secret would give them their reward. This is dialogue of life.

Father Thomas Michel