All humanity united in prayer

This May 14, 2020, the faithful of different religious traditions are invited to prayer and fasting for the end of the pandemic

Interview with Msgr. Yoannis Lahzi Gaid, Secretary of Pope Francis and member of the High Committee for Human Fraternity, created after the historic Abu Dhabi meeting between the Holy Father and the Grand Imam Al-Tayyeb.

Msgr. Yoannis Lahzi Gaid, how did this idea of a day of joint prayer and fasting on May 14, for Christians and Muslims, come about?

The idea arose within the High Committee for Human Fraternity during its last meeting, which took place on March 31, 2020 in a video conference due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The initiative was born from the question: how can we give shared witness before a shared danger? The answer was "praying together as brothers and sisters".

How is the High Committee progressing one year on from the Abu Dhabi meeting and what are your future plans?

The High Committee continues with enthusiasm and great good will to carry out its mission, that is to strengthen fraternity and to spread the values mentioned in the Document on Human Fraternity, through concrete initiatives, such as, for example, the invitation to prayer, fasting and charity works scheduled for May 14, as well as the promotion of the "Human Fraternity" award which will be given each year to personalities recognized as promoters of fraternity, and also the construction of the "House of Abraham" in Abu Dhabi to realize the value of fraternity and respect for divergences and differences. Faith in God must unite and not divide or even justify violence.

The Document on Human Fraternity is prophetic in affirming universal fraternity. In fact, Coronavirus has not differentiated between rich and poor, between West and East, between developed and developing countries... we are the same, we are brothers and sisters in danger and with a common struggle.

Some would speak of syncretism and give way to polemics when it comes to prayer with an interreligious dimension. Why is it not syncretism and how can we help make this aspect better understood?

Prayer is a universal value inherent in man in every age and time. This is a fact. Inviting everyone to pray together, each according to his or her own faith and belief, does not syncretize but reinforces the value of prayer and fraternity. As a priest and as a Christian who recites the prayer that Christ taught his disciples every day, the "Our Father", I can see in this invitation only the hand of God that unites all the siblings and children in an act of prayer. This does not weaken my faith in Christ, the only Saviour of the World, but strengthens it, knowing that only God can transform evil into good, a pandemic into an occasion of fraternity, a prayer into a power. We cannot forget that God brings his rain down on the good and the bad, makes His sun rise on it all. And precisely for this purpose, Pope Saint John Paul II held an international peace meeting in Assisi in 1986 where the participants each prayed according to their faith.

The initiative therefore wishes to unite all men and women to call for the end of the Coronavirus. It would be the first time that all humankind unites for a single goal: to pray together, each according to their own faith, thus proving that faith unites and does not divide.

Covid-19 has brought us all to our knees but being on our knees is the best position to pray. The virus made us understand our fragility and the need to unite as brothers. We cannot emerge from this separately: either united, together or nobody.

In your personal experience, in Egypt, your country, what can you say about the role of Our Lady in Islamic-Christian spiritual friendship?

The figure of the Virgin Mary is fundamental in interreligious dialogue with Muslims who venerate and respect her. In Egypt many Muslims go to pray at Marian shrines and some even make vows to her. Both the figure of the Virgin and the Document on Fraternity can represent "common points". It is always better to start the dialogue from what unites us and not from what divides us. This never means failing in our duty to proclaim the Truth of the Gospel and of our faith, but to do it with charity, with respect and with humility. Determination never means presumption. Christ who commands us to bring the Gospel to the whole world also asks us to love and pray for everyone, that is, not to fall into the trap of the Pharisees: to believe that we possess the keys to the Kingdom of God, without entering and without letting others enter. Adversity does not bring Christ to others, on the contrary, it hinders the proclamation of the Gospel and deforms the beauty of our faith.

Interview by François Vayne

(May 12, 2020)