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Inter-Religious Dialogue: Past and Present

Good morning. So, it has happened to me in this assembly that each time somebody has asked me, "Who are you?" and I say, "I am a Missionary of Africa," the person says, "White Father?" It seems we are known more by our nickname than by our real name. In many parts of the world we are called "White Fathers." And when I say I am a White Father, people look at me and say, "Are you joking?" But I'm not joking, I'm a White Father. It is because of our habit. That's why I chose to wear it this morning, so you see why we are called White Fathers.

We were founded in North Africa, in 1868, by a French cardinal, Cardinal Charles Lavigerie. And his aim, like many congregations that were founded in the nineteenth century, was to bring the good news to Africa in particular, in view of saving souls and planting the Church. And, although as a Frenchman he was appointed bishop in North Africa to take care of the French, he saw Algeria as a door opened wide to Sub-Saharan Africa. So quite early on he sent missionaries to East Africa, to Central Africa, and then through the desert of North Africa to Sub-Saharan Africa and West Africa. Today we have 1300 members, with about 500 candidates in formation, mainly from Africa. We come from around thirty-seven different countries in the world, and we are present in twenty-three countries in Africa. That means almost half of Africa has had some contact with the Missionaries of Africa. Because of the place where we were founded in North Africa, we have always had a special interest in dialogue with Muslims. We also have a group of sisters (the Missionary sisters of Our Lady of Africa – "White Sisters") that were founded a year after us, in 1869, by the same founder. They work pretty much along the same lines as we do, that is, in Africa in different social commitments, and also in dialogue with Muslims.

I would like first of all to say thank you to Brother Alois and the community for having given me this opportunity to share in this colloquium. My connection with Taizé goes back to when I was a student, in 1982, and then later on when I was doing formation work in Toulouse. I felt there was something happening here. There was a spirit that could not leave me indifferent. You breathe something of the simplicity, something of the desire for communion, and something of the desire for reconciliation. And, I think that this is the fruit of the life and the charism received through Brother Roger. I would like to acknowledge that, and I would like to pray that it continues, and that all of us who pass through here would be contaminated, in one way or another, by this spirit, and that we would also contaminate our Brothers of Taizé with our own spirit, hopefully a good one.

A DIFFICULT PAST

When I thought of sharing with you on the question of inter-religious dialogue, I said, let us just look quickly at what has happened in the past. We have come a long way, though we probably missed the first step, the chance to dialogue in a good way with our Muslim brothers and sisters. How did that happen? In the seventh century, when Islam was being shaped, they met some types of Christian, but not necessarily what we would call today “orthodox” Christians, those in full communion with the teachings of the Church. They met many who had been condemned by some ecumenical councils. They also met some Orthodox Christians and Jews. In this process of Islam's being born, in this process of seeking their place, they felt that they had a vocation to purify the monotheism that had been deformed to some extent by the people they were in contact with. They were convinced about this obligation to purify. So, you have a religion on the one hand that is convinced that it has a duty to purify monotheism, and then on the other you have people who still believe that the way they are living that monotheism is the right way, and that they cannot give in. So what did that produce? It produced a clash. And that's why I say we missed the first opportunity to enter into fraternal dialogue and coexistence. It produced a clash because as Islam spread, sometimes through violence and through war, from the seventh or eighth century up through about the fifteenth century, Christian writers did all they could in an apologetic manner, in a polemic manner, to prove that Christianity was the right religion, and that Islam was a heresy. Because of that, of course, true dialogue could not be possible. I am simplifying a little bit, but I am trying to explain how we missed the first step in our dialogue with Muslims.

And you will recall as well that from the fifth century until about the fifteenth century, there was that Church teaching (and even those who do not know Latin will recall that phrase because you have probably heard it again and again), *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. It means “outside of the Church, no salvation.” What Church were they talking about? Of course, at the beginning it was an undivided Church, but then as divisions entered the Church, we appropriated that for ourselves, to mean outside of the Catholic Church there is no salvation. And that influenced our theology and our dialogue with other Christians, and our dialogue with Muslims, and our dialogue with African traditional religions, and other religions. That type of theology continued for a long time. I say, until the fifteenth century. Why? Because in the fifteenth century we had the so-called discovery of the Americas. It's not really a discovery, because the Americas existed before those people went there. They found it, and they said they discovered it. So with that “discovery”, people came to the realization that there is more out there than here. There are a lot of good people there, there are a lot of good things happening there. And our God, who really wants all people to be saved, cannot be so narrow-minded in his salvation. There must be a way that he would give that salvation to these people too, and why not to other religions? and why not to other Christians? So

things started to change. We moved from polemics to apologetics and from there to beginning to seek dialogue with our Muslim brothers.

A FOURFOLD DIALOGUE

Now, let me say a bit about the situation today and why it is important to dialogue with Muslims. We have grown in our realizations. This is expressed in certain documents of the Second Vatican Council, for example *Nostra aetate*, which was the fruit and the struggle of missionaries coming from different places who had been in contact with Muslims and with other religions. It recognizes that as a Christian Church, as a Catholic Church, we've got to accept and to recognize whatever is good in these religions and to say, "God is already at work in these religions." Different terms were used. Sometimes they talked about "seeds of grace and truth". Other times they talked about "seeds of the Word". But all of that was to say that we are no more in the time of condemning; we are in the time of recognizing that God is present and active in these religions too. And, different documents, you can think of "Dialogue and Proclamation," you can think of *Redemptoris Missio*, you can think of *Evangelii Gaudium*, have continued to raise our awareness about the importance of dialogue with Muslims and with other religions. We could say that this awareness that has arisen in the Church is somehow a global awareness because participating in the World Council of Churches Assembly in Busan in 2014, we could feel that the concern for dialogue with Muslims is not only something particular to Catholics, but to all Christian denominations, and to our Orthodox brothers and sisters. Everybody says today that interfaith dialogue is unavoidable. In the plurality of today's world, where we encounter people of many different faiths, ideologies, and convictions, we cannot but enter into dialogue.

Our brothers from Asia help us to understand how we can enter into dialogue. Already in 1974 the bishops of Asia said, "How can we not recognize the goodness in the people that are around us? How can we not recognize the presence and action of God in them?" And later on, when we come in the Catholic Church to the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, together with the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, when they speak about dialogue, they take inspiration from experiences like that. And they identify four major areas of dialogue or four major types of dialogue. The first one is a **dialogue of life**. That is very common: living with our Muslim brothers and sisters. As Missionaries of Africa, we see that all over in the places where we are living. In North Africa and West Africa, we are rubbing shoulders with our Muslim brothers and sisters. It is unavoidable, this dialogue of life. Pope Francis even calls that a preventive dialogue, because through the friendship that grows, we begin to respect each other. And, we begin to want to see how to solve problems together, and that brings me to the second type of dialogue: **dialogue of social action**. Social action, to improve the conditions of life of our brothers and sisters. I have seen this in parishes. For example, in Tanzania, in the suburbs of Dar Es Salaam, where the majority are Muslims, there are Christians, but the social projects that are run both by the sisters and by

our missionaries do not target only the Christians; they are open to everybody. That is a second form of dialogue, dialogue of action, social action. And, Pope Francis, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, says that type of action should lead to a more just society. Our desire for a just society is not only something that concerns us, but something that we want to offer to all.

And then there is a third form of dialogue, the **dialogue of theological exchange**. To reflect together, to say, "How do we understand God?" When I mentioned that previously we were in polemic and apologetic phases in terms of dialogue, that was because we did not understand how Muslims understood their faith, how they lived their mysticism and other aspects of their spirituality. But, later on, when other people, living in Muslim contexts, experienced God and saw the sincerity of their faith, and shared that with the West, something else began to happen. We can think of the example of Charles de Foucauld. We can think of the example of Louis Massignon. We can think of many of our confreres who are working in North Africa, the Dominican Institute in Cairo, and many other institutions that, through publications, have helped us to understand Islam from within. It is important to have the right knowledge, the right understanding, of the faith of the others, in order to appreciate it and not to condemn. Then, the fourth type of dialogue is the **dialogue of spiritual and religious experience**. Not just praying using the same text, but praying with the same intention. When there was an attack in Nairobi, and there was a prayer service organized, it was an interfaith prayer service. Muslims, Christians, traditional religion, all took part with the same intention, saying, we want to pray for peace. We can recall the example of St. John Paul II in Assisi, the meetings in Assisi. So, those are the types of dialogue that we see we can do. In spite of the fact that things may look very critical, it is always possible to dialogue.

CHALLENGES TO DIALOGUE

I will end with some challenges to dialogue today. Why we may be hesitating, but why it is important to continue in spite of these challenges. One of the challenges for dialogue today is the fact that there is fundamentalism. There is fundamentalism, and fundamentalism tends to lead to violence. And, because of this violence, we easily associate that with Muslims and with Islam. That is not the case. There are fundamentalists in all religions. And, we cannot, because of the actions of a fundamentalist, say that religion is like this or is like that. I was struck recently listening to a confrere in Marseille, who said he went to pray, to work with some families, whose sons are in Syria. The idea was just to be able to weep together. We could say that, after having wept together, we would be able to wipe the tears and then we would be able to seek a way forward. One of the mothers said, "It is more consoling to weep with somebody than to weep alone." And I think, there, the space of listening and sharing that Taizé offers may be something that we can think about and that we can encourage. So, it is good to realize that in Islam itself, not everybody approves that type of attitude and not everybody identifies Islam with that. And we ourselves, as

Christians, as missionaries, what we are trying to do is to avoid the cheap generalizations of Islam because of fundamentalism. So that is one aspect: fundamentalism and violence.

It had happened to us in Niger when our church was attacked and recently again when many churches were attacked and burned. The Muslims were the ones who saved the people, by hiding them and pretending that they were not there. When the other people came around looking for them to kill them—it would have really been something terrible, there were more than forty people in there—they said, “We have not seen anybody.” And that saved them. They were Muslims. And, in Mali, after the intervention of France, many said, “This is not the Islam that we know, so we are grateful that you came to intervene.”

One of the points that is also challenging still for dialogue, I would say, is the fact that on the one hand, for us as a Missionary Society, we respect Muslims, we want to promote dialogue with Muslims, but on the other hand we need to be aware that there is also a growth in the search for God and an openness to Christianity in some areas. In North Africa, there are people who are searching, not openly, but who are receptive and journeying with the confreres. We have to say, “How do we accompany these types of people without entering into proselytism, making crusades, because then we would make things worse for everybody. How do we accompany them?” The other thing that has brought a sort of Christian revival, in some little communities in North Africa, is that there are many students from sub-Saharan Africa and many migrants who are passing through these places and who need pastoral care. So, how do we continue to offer the pastoral care to these people, to accompany these communities that are being revived a little bit, and at the same time to respect Islam, to respect our Muslim brothers and sisters, and to journey with them?

So, those are some of the challenges that I see. In the discussion we will be able to mention some more if you want. But what I would like to underline, in order to finish, is a quotation from *Evangelii Gaudium*, where Pope Francis invites us to a certain attitude. He says, “An attitude of openness in truth and in love must characterize the dialogue with the followers of non-Christian religions.... Inter-religious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world, and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities. Being open to them, sharing their joys and sorrows.” That is the way forward. And I think that through the experience that we are living together here, there is something that we can take with us in order to promote the dialogue in whatever form we can.