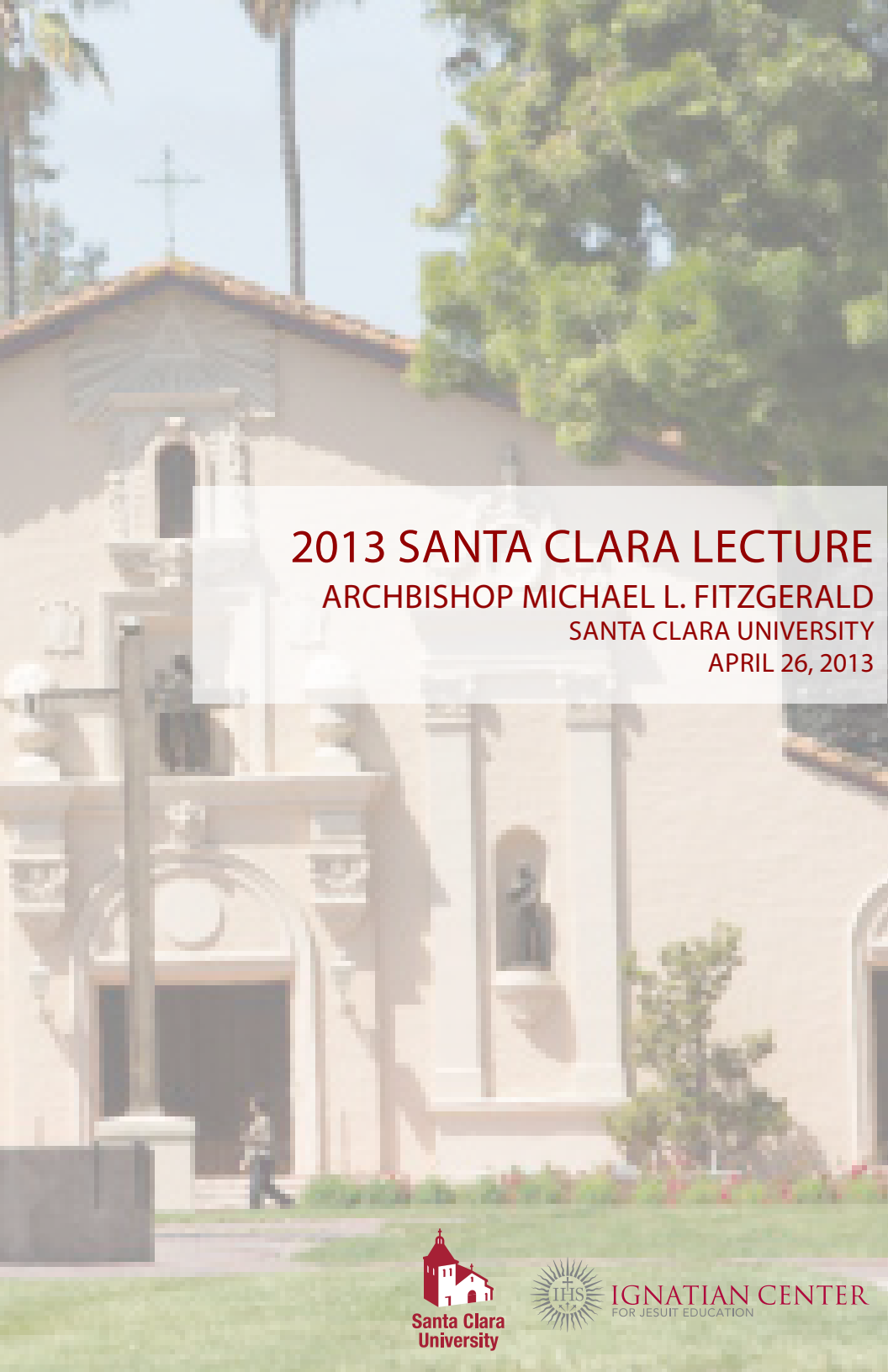

2013 SANTA CLARA LECTURE

ARCHBISHOP MICHAEL L. FITZGERALD

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IGNATIAN CENTER
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2013 Santa Clara Lecture
To Recognize and Develop the Spiritual Bonds That Unite Us
Dialogue between Christians and Muslims since Vatican II

Archbishop Michael L. Fitzgerald
Santa Clara University, April 26, 2013

I wish first of all to express my thanks to the authorities of Santa Clara University for their invitation to address this distinguished gathering. My special thanks go to Michael C. McCarthy, S.J., executive director of the Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education, and to Dr. Theresa Ladrigan Whelpley, director of the Bannan Institutes. I feel privileged to deliver the Santa Clara Lecture in this, its 20th anniversary year. I am aware too that this year the Bannan Institute is giving special attention to the theme of Sacred Texts across traditions. I shall touch upon this theme in the final part of my talk, when dealing with what is known as the dialogue of religious experience. Before tracing the progress of dialogue between Christians and Muslims since Vatican II, it would seem appropriate, on the occasion of its 50th anniversary, to say a word about the Council itself and in particular on the document *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions.

The Second Vatican Council

Nostra Aetate was a surprise result of the Council because it had not been foreseen in the preparatory phase. Nor did it have the benefit of a strong preceding movement such as existed in the fields of biblical scholarship, liturgy, and ecumenism which prepared the way respectively for other documents: *Dei Verbum, Sacrosanctum Concilium* and *Unitatis Redintegratio*. *Nostra Aetate* owes its origins to the desire of Blessed John XXIII that the Council issue a statement countering anti-Semitism, a statement which, on account of political and ecclesial circumstances, was subsequently broadened out to encompass all religions. This is not the place to go into detail on the drafting of this document.[1] It could

1 This will be related in full detail in a forthcoming book by Fr. Tom Stransky, of the Paulist Fathers, who was a staff member of the Secretariat for Christian Unity which had been entrusted with the task

nevertheless be pointed out that *Nostra Aetate* was in complete harmony with the thrust of the Council which had as its main focus the understanding of the nature of the Church, as exemplified in the two Constitutions, *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*. It is also good to remember that *Nostra Aetate* is not to be taken in isolation from the other documents of Vatican II. It is obviously related to *Dignitatis Humanae,* the Declaration which affirms the principle of the right to religious freedom. There are links with *Ad Gentes*, since the mission of the Church is exercised in a world marked by religious plurality, and also with *Gaudium et Spes*, which ends with an appeal for developing dialogue with all. Above all, it is *Lumen Gentium,* the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, which provides the theological foundation for *Nostra Aetate.*

Pope Paul VI, in his first encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, published before the third Session of the Council, showed that the Church must always be in dialogue. He said of the Church that "There is no one who is a stranger to her heart, no one in whom her ministry has no interest. She has no enemies, except those who wish to be such. Her name of catholic is not an idle title. Not in vain has she received the commission to foster in the world unity, love, and peace."[2] He indicated four circles of dialogue: the vast circle of humanity; those who believe in God; fellow Christians; and finally within the Catholic Church itself. Moreover, Pope Paul VI, even before the final vote in the Council to approve *Nostra Aetate*, created the Secretariat for Non-Christians, later to become the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, in order to facilitate the application of the Declaration.

The Role of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue

In its third paragraph *Nostra Aetate* deals explicitly with Islam. The paragraph begins: "The Church has also a high regard for the Muslims" (NA 3). Such an affirmation, in an official document of the Church, may surprise some people since, after the Cold War, it is often Islam that is

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of steering the document through the Council.

2 Cf. Francesco Gioia (ed.), Interreligious Dialogue. The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church from the Second Vatican Council to John Paul II (1963–2005), Boston, Pauline Books and Media, 2006, no.120.

considered to be the enemy number one in the world. Certainly, at the time of the Council itself, it came as a surprise to many Christians—aware, as they were, of the wars that in history had opposed Christians and Muslims, namely the Islamic conquests and the Crusades. The paragraph continues by presenting some elements of the beliefs and practices of Muslims to which a statement in paragraph 2 of *Nostra Aetate* surely applies: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions" (NA 2). Then, responding to the foreseen reaction of many Christians, it makes a solemn plea: "Over the centuries many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. The sacred Council now pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding; for the benefit of all men, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice, and moral values" (NA 3). This exhortation follows on the encouragement given at the conclusion of the previous paragraph: "The Church, therefore, urges her sons to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with the members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve, and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture" (NA 2). The term "dialogue" is not actually used, but this is what is meant.

Under its first president, Cardinal Paolo Marella (1964–1973), the Vatican's office for interreligious dialogue took up the task of spreading the vision of Vatican II, showing Catholics that in relating respectfully to followers of other religions they were not being untrue to their Christian faith. For this purpose a modest journal was created, at first simply called *Bulletin* but later renamed *Pro Dialogo*. Another initiative was the production of small booklets providing guidelines for dialogue with the followers of different religions, including *Guidelines for Dialogue between Christians and Muslims*, first published in 1970, and then again in 1981 in a revised and augmented edition.[3] This booklet, while identifying the partners

3 Maurice Borrmans, Orientations pour un Dialogue entre Chrétiens et Musulmans, Paris, Cerf, 1981 (English translation by R. Marston Speight, Guidelines for Dialogue between Christians and

in dialogue, and the various ways in which dialogue can take place, also presented the different values found in Islam, such as the strong witness to the transcendence of God, the generally sober way in which Muslims conduct their worship, and the sense of community among the believers. It then turned to certain prejudices about Islam (fatalistic, legalistic, morally lax, fanatical, opposed to change, a religion of fear), while responding to criticisms levelled by Muslims at Christianity (falsified Scriptures, not pure monotheism, unfaithful to the message of Jesus).

The 1970s were years of striking initiatives in dialogue, particularly between Christians and Muslims. The World Council of Churches organized an international meeting in Broumana, Lebanon, in 1972, which was followed by regional meetings in Africa and Asia. The years following saw congresses in Cordoba, Tunis, and Tripoli. The Secretariat for Non-Christians, under the leadership of Cardinal Sergio Pignedoli (1973–1980), took an active part in these meetings, establishing relations with Al-Azhar in Egypt and different Muslim groups in Indonesia and Iran and even receiving a delegation from Saudi Arabia.

The short presidency of Monsignor Jean Jadot (1980–1984), who had previously occupied the post of apostolic nuncio in Bangkok and subsequently in the United States, and the much longer presidency of Cardinal Francis Arinze (1984–2002), offered a time for theological reflection on the foundations and practice of dialogue. Twenty years after it had been set up, the Secretariat produced its first official document: *The Attitude of the Church toward the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission* (1984).[4] *Dialogue and Mission*, to give it its short title, is a truly inspirational document. It situates interreligious dialogue firmly within the mission of the Church, together with other elements of the Church's mission, such as the witness in faith of a simple Christian presence, prayer and worship, social action, and the explicit announcement of the Gospel message. In this way it reassures those who are engaged in interreligious dialogue that they

Muslims, Mahwah, New Jersey, Paulist Press, 1990.

4 For the full text see Francesco Gioia, Interreligious Dialogue. The Official Teaching, nos. 808–851. The document will be referred to as DM.

are not marginalized figures, or mere extras, in the Church's activity. This document also distinguishes four types of dialogue—dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of discourse, and dialogue of religious experience—a presentation of the multiple forms of dialogue which has been found useful, and which I intend to follow in this talk.

Perhaps it was thought that *Dialogue and Mission* had said everything that needed to be said, but almost immediately questions arose: What is the exact relationship between interreligious dialogue and the preaching of the Gospel? Is dialogue the new form of mission, rendering the proclamation of the Gospel message superfluous? These questions, which reflected perhaps some exaggerations on the part of those who were engaging enthusiastically in interreligious dialogue, or more exactly betrayed growing fears of relativism, could not be ignored. Consequently a further document was produced by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, in conjunction with the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. The joint authorship is significant, giving the document extra weight. *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991)[5] was published soon after *Redemptoris Missio*, the missionary encyclical of John Paul II. I wish to quote one paragraph from this document. Following the teaching of the encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of Paul VI, it distinguishes between evangelization in the broad sense which embraces all the activities of the Church, including interreligious dialogue, and a narrow acceptance of the term referring to the explicit proclamation of salvation in Jesus Christ. The document accepts both usages as being correct, so it can state: "Interreligious dialogue and proclamation, though not on the same level, are both authentic elements of the Church's evangelizing mission. Both are legitimate and necessary. They are intimately related, but not interchangeable: True interreligious dialogue on the part of the Christian supposes the desire to make Jesus Christ better known, recognized and loved; proclaiming Jesus Christ is to be carried out in the Gospel spirit of dialogue" (DP 77).

A feature of this document, very relevant to dialogue between Christians

5 For the text see Francesco Gioia, Interreligious Dialogue. The Official Teaching, nos. 925–1013. The document will be referred to as DP.

and Muslims, is its realism. It recognizes the difficulties facing both the proclamation of the Gospel message and interreligious dialogue. It is not necessary to deal at length with all of these, but some have particular importance for Christian-Muslim relations. There is mention of sociopolitical factors. These could include majority-minority relations. It is difficult to engage in dialogue if being in a minority situation leads to the adoption of a defensive attitude. Such a difficulty can only be overcome by ensuring freedom and respect for each person's rights. There is also mention of the burdens of the past. These would include the Crusades and colonialism, which still have the capacity for rankling Muslims, but also the practice of slavery which has aroused negative feelings towards Islam, especially among many peoples of Africa. Another obstacle mentioned is suspicion about the other's motives in dialogue. On the one hand, some Muslims tend to think that Christians enter into dialogue as a covert way of trying to bring about conversions to Christianity, just as they entertain the same suspicions regarding the charitable activity of the Church, its *diakonia*. From the Christian side there is often diffidence with regard to Muslims, the feeling that they are only entering into dialogue in order to strengthen the position of the Muslim minorities and bring about the eventual domination of Islam. An impression of a lack of reciprocity can reinforce such feelings if religious freedom is demanded for Muslims in Western countries but not granted to Christians in certain Muslim majority countries (DP 51–54). Also mentioned are places where conversion is forbidden by law, or converts to Christianity meet with serious problems, both serious obstacles to the preaching of the Gospel message (cf. DP 74). These difficulties need to be, and often are, matters for dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Nevertheless, *Dialogue and Proclamation* concludes, "despite the difficulties, the Church's commitment to dialogue remains firm and irreversible" (DP 54), and that "to proclaim the name of Jesus and to invite people to become his disciples in the Church is a sacred and major duty which the Church cannot neglect" (DP 76).

The Example of the Popes

Leadership is of vital importance in the spreading of ideas and the changing of attitudes. Above and beyond the formal teaching of recent Popes, from John XXIII to Benedict XVI, is the example of their actions. When Pope

Paul VI went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land at the beginning of 1964, not only did he visit the Holy Places, not only did he embrace Patriarch Athenagoras, he also met with Jewish and Muslim authorities. Visiting Uganda in 1969, he took the opportunity to meet with Muslim leaders and, through them, to greet "the great Muslim communities spread throughout Africa." While commemorating the Catholic and Anglican martyrs of Uganda, he recalled also "those confessors of the Muslim faith who were the first to suffer death, in the year 1848, for refusing to transgress the precepts of their religion."[6]

Much can be said as well about the pontificate of Blessed John Paul II. I mention only his acceptance of the invitation of King Hassan II of Morocco to address Muslim youth in Casablanca in August 1985 and, of course, the World Day of Prayer for Peace, held in Assisi on October 27, 1986, which various representatives of Muslim communities attended. This last event, witnessed by millions on television, was a sure sign to Christians, and to Catholics above all, that it was both right and necessary to cultivate relations with Muslims as with people of other religions. We must note what Pope John Paul II said to the small Catholic community in Ankara, Turkey, during his visit on November 26, 1979: "It is therefore in thinking of your fellow citizens, but also of the vast Islamic world, that I express anew today the esteem of the Catholic Church for these religious values. When I think of this spiritual patrimony and of the value it has for humankind and for society ... I wonder whether it is not urgent, precisely today when Christians and Muslims have entered a new period of history, to recognize and develop the spiritual bonds which unite us in order to 'safeguard and foster on behalf of all mankind—as the Council invites us to do—social justice, moral values, peace, and freedom'"[7]

At the beginning of his pontificate Benedict XVI stated clearly that he would follow in the steps of his predecessors in fidelity to the teaching of *Nostra Aetate*. During his apostolic journeys he met with representatives

6 Francesco Gioia, Interreligious Dialogue. The Official Teaching, no. 263.

7 Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Recognize the Spiritual Bonds that Unite Us. Sixteen Years of Christian-Muslim Dialogue, Vatican City 1994, p. 15.

of different religions, including Muslims. Speaking to representatives of Muslim communities in Cologne, in August 2005, he said: "Interreligious and intercultural dialogue between Christians and Muslims cannot be reduced to an optional extra. It is in fact a vital necessity, on which in large measure our future depends."[8] Although his speech in the University of Regensburg offended many Muslims, Pope Benedict continued to meet with representatives of Islamic communities, and he repeatedly expressed his respect for Islam. It could even be said that by stimulating Muslim scholars to suggest the Common Word initiative, this speech brought Christian-Muslim dialogue to a new level. Pope Francis, in the audience following the inauguration of his pontificate, spoke to the Muslims present: "I also greet and cordially thank all of you, dear friends who are followers of other religious traditions; first Muslims, who worship God as one, living and merciful, and invoke him in prayer, and all of you. I greatly appreciate your presence: In it, I see a tangible sign of a will to grow in mutual esteem and in cooperation for the common good of humanity."[9] Addressing members of the diplomatic corps a few days later, he emphasized the importance of dialogue: "It is important to intensify dialogue among the various religions, and I am thinking particularly of dialogue with Islam. At the Mass marking the beginning of my ministry, I greatly appreciated the presence of so many civil and religious leaders from the Islamic world."[10]

Dialogue of Life or Harmonious Living

Let me now reflect on the four forms of dialogue. What is called the dialogue of life, or what I have termed harmonious living, takes place "where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations" (DP 42a). Two conclusions can be drawn from this definition. First of all, the dialogue of life is generally a spontaneous activity carried out by Christians and Muslims who are living side by side. Such a form of

8 For the full text of this speech see http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict/xvi/speeches/2005/august/documents/hf_ben-xvi_sp

9 Cf. http:/www.vatican.va/holy_father/Francesco/speeches/2013/march/documents/papa_francesco

10 Cf. http:/www.vatican.va/holy_father/Francesco/speeches/2013/march/documents/papa-francesco_20130322_corpo-diplomatico_en.html

dialogue has been going on for centuries in the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, and parts of Africa where Islam has been long established. Elsewhere, in Western Europe, the U.S. and Canada, and also in Australia, more recent immigration of Muslims has created the opportunity for the dialogue of life. Secondly—emphasizing the word "strive" in the above definition—an *effort* is required to establish positive relations between Christians and Muslims. It is quite easy to be content to live side by side with hardly any interaction, the minority living in a ghetto and more or less ignored by the majority. Steps must be taken for people to get to know one another. This often takes the form of mutual visits on the occasion of feasts, such as Christmas or Eid al-Fitr, the feast at the end of Ramadan. One of the first initiatives of the Vatican's office for interreligious dialogue was to send a message to Muslims for Eid al-Fitr, a practice that continues today, and one which has been taken up by many local bishops. Another way of showing interest and concern for members of the other community is by being present at significant ceremonies, such as the baptism or circumcision of a child, or at funerals. It could also be mothers helping to take care of one another's children. Let me give one example of a successful dialogue of life, taken from this country, although it concerns in fact not Christians and Muslims, but Jews and Muslims.

I was taking part in a formation session on Islam for diocesan ecumenical officers held in Chicago. On Friday it was arranged for us to go in small groups to different mosques to attend the Friday prayer. My group was taken to a mosque established by Bosnians. They had recently engaged a retired university professor to manage the mosque. While waiting to enter the prayer room, my eye was caught by a notice which announced a joint picnic with the local Jewish community. Intrigued by this, I asked the mosque manager after the prayer how the event came about. He answered that one of the first things he had done on taking up his post was to arrange an "open day" at the mosque. The regular worshippers were at first dismayed by this proposal, since they thought that he wished to sell the premises. He, however, convinced them of the importance of allowing their neighbors to visit and to learn more about the activities of the Islamic center. One of the guests who came was the local Jewish rabbi. Having seen and admired the facilities, he approached the manager with a request: "Our synagogue," he said, "has to be refurbished. While the work is going on, would it be possible for our community to come

and pray here in one of your halls?" The request met with a positive reception, leading to a solid friendship between the two communities, hence the Sunday picnic together.

It is true that in many parts of the world the social climate is not conducive to good relations between Christians and Muslims. The effects of 9/11 are still being felt, producing an attitude of suspicion towards Muslims in general. On the other hand, the invasion of Iraq, the war in Afghanistan, the lack of resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and so on continue to stoke the fires of Muslim resentment, particularly in the Arab world, toward the West. Christians, for their part, point to the harsh treatment their fellow believers are receiving in Pakistan, for instance, or increasingly recently in Indonesia, as also in Iraq and in Syria. There are frequent clashes between Christians and Muslims in Northern Nigeria, not always on religious grounds, but nevertheless colored by religious differences, and there have been numerous attacks on Christian churches by the aggressive Boku Haram. Such events have led a number of Christians to question whether Christian-Muslim dialogue has any future. This means that there needs to be a readiness to start all over again when, for one reason or another, relations have been broken.

Let me give some examples from other parts of the world. An Italian missionary, Sebastiano D'Ambra, founded in Zamboanga, in the southern Philippines, the Silsilah Dialogue Center, which has already celebrated its silver jubilee. In an area which has seen many conflicts, Silsilah concentrates on promoting mutual understanding between Christians and Muslims, and also on training people to be agents of reconciliation and peace. In Kaduna, Nigeria, a Protestant pastor and an imam, who had been on opposite sides of a violent conflict, finally met and became friends. Since then they have been travelling together, sharing their own experiences, and encouraging people to forgive one another and to make peace.

Dialogue of Action, or Cooperation in the Service of Others

Harmonious living may lead quite naturally to actions undertaken in common. In certain countries Christians and Muslims are working together to face up to problems of society. One thinks of the Muslim

involvement in basically Christian pro-life movements. There are also instances of Christians and Muslims engaging together in movements advocating human rights, social reforms, or care of the environment. There have been reports from different countries of Africa of mutual assistance in villages for the construction of places of worship, Christians helping to build a mosque, and Muslims helping to build a chapel or a church. These are examples of sporadic cooperation, but there can also be a more permanent type of cooperation which deserves the name of dialogue of action. In Tunisia, for example, Christians and Muslims have collaborated to form associations dedicated to the care of the disabled. On a wider scale Islamic Relief, a humanitarian organization founded by a Muslim, has been cooperating with CAFOD, an organ of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, to respond to emergencies around the world, not only in majority Muslim countries but also elsewhere, as in Haiti. Religions for Peace, an international body whose secretariat is in New York, has in different countries involved religious communities, including Muslims, in common action to prevent the spread of AIDS and to help its victims. It has been instrumental in forming interreligious councils whose representatives have acted as mediators in trying to overcome sectarian conflicts.

Such common action is truly a form of dialogue. Of course, common projects require serious discussion about the aims of the project, the means used to achieve these aims, and on who is responsible for what. The action also needs to be monitored to ensure that different religious sensibilities are being taken into account.

Dialogue of Discourse, or Theoretical Foundations

Dialogue and Proclamation mentions as one of the forms of dialogue "the dialogue of theological exchange, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other's spiritual values" (DP42c). What is meant here are formal dialogue meetings which, in fact, have not been confined to strictly theological issues. Indeed the topics examined in these exchanges have often been more of an ethical or social nature, rather than theological. Themes such as justice in international trade relations, business ethics, problems of migration, media and religion, respect for the environment,

questions of bioethics, have been taken up in meetings in which the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue has been engaged, whether with the Aal al-Bayt Foundation in Jordan, or the World Islamic Call Society, based in Tripoli, Libya, or with the Iranian Centre for Cultural Dialogue. Most of these meetings follow the same pattern: first the elaboration of the position of each religion regarding the question under discussion, then a description of the actual situation, and finally some suggestions for joint action.

Until recently the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue had rarely engaged in dialogue with Muslims on strictly theological questions. An exception, perhaps, was the seminar on holiness held in Rome in 1984, which examined the foundations for holiness according to the two religions, and looked at examples of people recognized as saints.[11] As mentioned already, one of the effects of the lecture given by Pope Benedict XVI in Regensburg in 2006 has been the Common Word initiative, launched by a number of Muslim scholars, which called for theological dialogue. A meeting in the Vatican in November 2008 whose topic was "Love of God and Love of Neighbor" ensued. A second meeting, held at the Site of the Baptism of Jesus in Jordan, in November 2011, discussed the theme "Reason, Faith and the Human Person." These dialogues were preceded in 2008 by meetings at Yale University, where the theological issues discussed included different understandings of the Unity of God, of Jesus Christ and his passion, and of the love of God, and in the U.K., at Lambeth Palace and Cambridge University, where the discussions turned on the understanding of scripture, shared moral values, respect for foundational figures, religious freedom, and religiously motivated violence. It deserves notice that theological questions were combined with practical issues.[12]

The abovementioned meetings have been at international level, but dialogues go on at the regional level also. In the U.S., Catholic-Muslim dialogue has been continuing for many years in three different areas of the country. Each dialogue is headed by a Catholic bishop and a leading

11 The proceedings of this meeting were published in Islamochristiana 11(1985).

12 See http://www.acommonword.com

member of an American Islamic organization. In 2008 the mid-Atlantic dialogue decided to take up the theme of religious education. The midwest group has opted to discuss "In the Public Square: Muslims and Catholics on Religious Freedom." Finally, the west coast Muslim-Catholic dialogue is exploring "Stories of Abraham." A feature of these dialogues is that they usually take place over weekends at a retreat house, and thus allow time for prayer and fellowship, as well as for intellectual exchanges.[13]

I would like to mention also the Building Bridges program, an Anglican initiative in dialogue with Muslims started by Lord George Carey when he was archbishop of Canterbury, and continued by Archbishop Rowan Williams. The 11th seminar, held in April 2012, was titled "Death, Resurrection, and Human Destiny: Christian and Muslim Perspectives." It is sincerely to be hoped that the new Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Justin Welby, will support this program. Notably, the Building Bridges seminars include careful reading of passages from the Bible and the Qur'an—a practice perhaps introduced through the influence of Professor David Ford, of Cambridge University, a leading participant in scriptural reasoning.[14] Having taken part myself in one of the Building Bridges programs, I can attest to the importance of this sharing of scriptures, where selected passages from the Qur'an were presented by Muslim participants, and passages from the Hebrew scriptures or the New Testament were presented by Christians. My own task was to introduce the Prologue from St John's Gospel, and it was interesting to see how this passage, with its strong insistence on incarnation, was respectfully listened to by the Muslims in the group.

To be complete, a reference should be made to dialogue with Muslims

13 Cf. John Borelli, "Recent Muslim-Catholic dialogue in the USA," in Michael L. Fitzgerald and John Borelli, Interfaith Dialogue. A Catholic View, Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books, 2006, pp. 97–108.

14 Scriptural reasoning is the communal practice of reading sacred scriptures, in small groups, together. Normally the passages of scripture chosen are Jewish, Christian, and Muslim and are linked together by a particular issue, theme, story, or image. A participant in an exercise of scriptural reasoning made the following comment: "It was immensely stimulating to examine the three complementary texts, each first read in its original language, and to hear resonances among the three and elsewhere in those scriptures that each participant was most familiar with."

of the Shi'a tradition which has particular features that bring it closer to Christianity, the salvific value of suffering, the grace of guidance given to religious authorities, the expectation of a Second Coming, to mention only some. This dialogue is being pursued in a fruitful way by the monks of the Benedictine monastery of Ampleforth in the north of England together with Heythrop College, a Jesuit institution which is a constituent college of the University of London. In September 2011 a meeting was held at Sant'Anselmo, in Rome, the headquarters of the Benedictine Order, where "Monks and Muslims" shared about their respective spiritual practices.[15]

The Dialogue of Religious Experience

Such diverse discourses bring us directly to the fourth type of dialogue, one described as an exchange "where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith, and ways of searching for God or the Absolute" (DP 42d).

Monastic Interreligious Dialogue,[16] which has been organized as a special service within the Benedictine family since the mid-1970s, has naturally been primarily concerned with Buddhism, where monastic life is a strong feature, but attention has also been given to the followers of other religions, including Muslims. Islam, which gives such importance to married life, is adverse to monasticism, but in its Sufi dimension it contains rich spiritualities. It is generally with Sufi movements that the monks and nuns have been in contact.

In 1979, in Algeria, a number of religious men and women decided to help one another to live their vocation within Islamic society by a constant reference to Islamic spirituality. They selected a theme which each one would follow up personally in the scriptures and in the Qur'an or other Islamic sources. Once or twice a year, they would come together,

15 Mohammad Ali Shomali and William Skudlarek (eds.), Monks and Muslims. Monastic and Shi'a Spirituality in Dialogue, Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 2012.

16 For an account of its origins, see its online publication Dilatato Corde.

usually at the Trappist monastery of Notre Dame de l'Atlas, in Tibhirine, to share their findings and select another theme. Some members of the Alawi confraternity, living in Médéa, near the monastery, asked to join them, and eventually these Muslims became full members of what is known as *Ribat al-Salam* (the bond of peace). The prior of the monastery, Fr. Christian de Chergé, had studied at the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies in Rome, and had been leading the community, not without some initial resistance, into deeper knowledge of and respect for Islamic spiritual tradition. Although seven of the monks, including Fr. Christian, were kidnapped and killed, the *Ribat* has continued its activities, although not necessarily in Tibhirine.[17] The following are some of the themes that have nourished this spiritual adventure: Act Justly and Walk Humbly with Your God; How Does God Invite us to Humility?; Live in a Spirit of Thanksgiving; Compassion—the Language of the Heart; Compassion Extended to the Whole of Creation; Hospitality as a Fruit of Compassion; Together to Pray and Build a World of Justice and Peace. It seems to me that this is truly an example of interpreting and embodying sacred texts across traditions.

For my own part, having been engaged at times in giving courses on the Qur'an, I decided to offer a retreat for Christians in which constant reference would be made to the qur'anic text. The theme chosen was that of the Most Beautiful Names of God.[18] It is said in the Qur'an: "The most beautiful names belong to God: so call on Him by them" (Q 7: 180)[19] and again "To Him belong the Most Beautiful Names: whatever is in the heavens and on earth doth declare His Praises and Glory" (Q 59: 24). In Psalm 113 we find the following:

> You servants of the Lord, praise,

17 Cf. Martin McGee, OSB, Christian Martyrs for a Muslim People, New York/ Mahwah N.J., Paulist Press, 2008.

18 Cf. Michael L. Fitzgerald, "The Most Beautiful Names of God: Their Meaning for a Christian" in Islamochristiana 35(2009) pp. 15–30; also online in Dilatato Corde Vol.1: 2 (July–December 2011).

19 Translation of A. Yusuf Ali, The Holy Qur'an. Text, Translation and Commentary, Beirut, Dar Al Arabia, 1968.

praise the name of the Lord!
Blessed be the name of the Lord,
henceforth and for ever!
From east to west,
praised be the name of the Lord! (Ps 113:1–3)

There is a difference in understanding between "the name," in the singular, and "the Names," yet the link with praise in both texts is significant. The "Names" can be considered to offer both a *bridge* and an *invitation.* They are a bridge insofar as they establish a way of communication between God and ourselves. They are an invitation to praise, but also to imitation. Islamic tradition speaks about *al-takhalluq bi-akhlâq Allâh*, clothing oneself with the morals of God, while in the Gospel we are exhorted: "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate" (Lk 6:36). A Muslim author has written: "The purpose of meditating on the Names of God is *to intensify their presence in ourselves,* to develop progressively, generation after generation, their activity, their intensity, their fullness within ourselves."[20]

The retreat is designed to last for eight days. It was obviously not possible to consider all of the 99 Names which Islamic tradition has retained, so only some could be examined. The selection was made according to pre-established themes (attempting in fact to follow the progression suggested by the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola):

- God, the Creator
- God in Himself, the Transcendent One
- God close to human beings, the Immanent One
- God of Goodness, Pardon and Love
- God, Lord and King
- God who guides
- God who is generous and faithful
- God of Peace.

20 Abdennour Bidar, L'islam sans soumission. Pour un existentialisme musulman, Paris, Albin Michel, 2008, pp.158–159; emphasis in the original.

The method followed comprised three steps:

- an examination of the Names within their Qur'anic context
- a search in the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament) for similar Names
- a reflection from the standpoint of the New Testament.

When giving this retreat I have suggested that the participants have with them a copy of the Qur'an, in Arabic or in translation. On one occasion, a priest reacted very negatively to this suggestion, but at the end of the retreat he admitted that the qur'anic texts had provided a stimulus to a fresh understanding of the scriptures, and thus an entry into prayer.

Of course, at the end of such an exercise our expectations are somewhat disappointed. We praise God with his Most Beautiful Names, but ultimately we are not satisfied. We know that human words, however inspired, are not sufficient; human language is inadequate to express the true nature of God. So we are left with silence. This is not, however, an embarrassed silence, caused by shame or shyness. It is rather the silence of long-time lovers who are simply happy to be in one another's presence. It is a silence of fullness to which only God can guide.

Yet one may ask if such an exercise is justified. Is it not a form of manipulation, of spiritual colonialism, to use the texts of another religion for one's own spiritual nourishment? Here I think care needs to be taken to avoid falsifying the meaning of the qur'anic texts, by giving them a Christian reading which would eliminate all difference. In fact the differences themselves can be stimulating. As the religious of Algeria noted, it can be helpful for Christians who are living among Muslims to become more familiar with the sources of their spirituality. I have also been encouraged by what a group of Christian and Muslim scholars have written: "We do not think that the divine Word, the foundation of our faith, belongs exclusively to us, whether we be Christians or Muslims. Christian faith is based on the person of Jesus and the witness of the Apostles' faith as contained in the New Testament. But the historical phenomenon of Jesus of Nazareth and the texts of the New Testament writings are facts and documents available for investigation by all. Similarly Islamic faith is based on the Qur'an and the authentic tradition of the Prophet. But

the qur'anic text and the life of Muhammad b. Abdullah form part of the general history of the human race and belong to its spiritual heritage. This is why on both sides, with regard to the historical facts that ground our faith and with regard to our scriptures, we accept 'readings' other than our own."[21] Though there is no direct contact with Muslims in such a retreat, I think it still deserves to be treated as an example of the dialogue of religious experience.

Conclusion

If we are to ask ourselves what, in a nutshell, has been learned through the practice of interreligious dialogue, and in particular dialogue with Muslims, over the years since the Second Vatican Council and the Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, how are we going to respond? We might say first that the Church has learned to be itself—that is, to be a sign of God's saving presence in the world. It has become more convinced than ever that the content of the Christian faith is not to be watered down or compromised in any way, but that witness is to be given to the faith in the manner indicated by Peter: "Simply reverence the Lord Christ in your hearts, and always have the answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have, but give it with courtesy and respect and with a clear conscience (1 Pet 3:15–16).

It could be added that the Church has learned to relate to Muslims and other people of different religions in different ways, through neighborliness, through joint action, through the sharing of spiritual values, through formal discussions. It has further been discovered that this field is not confined to specialists, but is open to all. Of course, there is a greater consciousness of the preparation needed to conduct fruitful dialogue, but the degree of preparation needed will vary according to the level of the encounters.

Finally, I would say that the Church has learned that the task of dialogue will never end. Just as the words of Jesus—"the poor you have always with you"—do not disqualify attempts to eliminate poverty, so the realistic

21 Muslim-Christian Research Group, The Challenge of the Scriptures: The Bible and the Qur'an, Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books, 1989, pp. 11–12 (French original, Ces Ecritures qui nous questionnent: La Bible et le Coran, Paris, Centurion, 1987).

assessment that religious plurality will persist does not make dialogue purposeless. Muslim immigration seemed at first to be a temporary phenomenon, but then permanent communities came to be formed. They are not going to disappear. We are therefore on a journey together. We can continue this journey despite our differences, or even being enriched by our differences, until that day when history itself will come to an end, and the differences will have no further significance, for God will be all in all.