

Third Meeting: 9th Sunday in Ordinary Time

'He deserves to be healed by you!'
Cooperation between religions



Preparation:

Plan the placing of some articles of devotion from various religions (a small edition of the Koran, Catholic and Muslim rosary beads, a Hebrew menorah candelabrum, a Protestant Bible, a picture of the Pope or of the saints...)

Welcome setting and Opening Hymn: The leaders arrive before anyone else to welcome the participants and ensure that the room is properly prepared (clean, bright, heated, with enough seating, arranged so that everyone can see one another.) After some customary words of welcome, and without delay, we begin with a hymn (chosen by the leaders, but in line with the theme of spiritual fraternity, without barriers.) Then, for a few minutes, we relate *what has been possible to apply in accordance with decisions taken at the preceding meeting*. Once everyone has been informed, we recite the following prayer:

Humble prayer of St Francis of Assisi¹. *May be recited in turn or all together, depending on the leaders' decision.*

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;

¹ On the 30th August 1219, this Italian Religious left the Crusaders' camp at Damietta (Egypt) to go out on a peace mission to Sultan Mohammed Ibn Abi Bakr el-Malek el-Kamel. He received him and both discussed matters of faith. One risked believing that the other could understand him; the other perceived that coercion was not the way. In 1986 at Assisi, for the first time in human history and at the invitation of John Paul II, ALL the religions of the world gathered to pray for peace.

where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen.

1- Let us examine our lives as they are: the various religious articles would have been placed on the table in the middle before the start of the meeting; (perhaps curiosity would push one or other to look closely at them, so much the better!) After the opening prayer, we ask:

- *What comes to mind when I see all these articles side-by-side?*
- *Am I capable of stating what disturbs me in other religious traditions?*
- *Interreligious dialogue seems to be in fashion: what is your experience?*

2- Sung Acclamation of the Word of God (leaders' choice)

Gospel Reading: Lk 7: 1-10. Someone reads the text aloud, in dialogue: narrator, leading Jews, Jesus and the centurion. After a few moments of silence, re-read the text sentence by sentence, spontaneously.

Deepen the meaning of the reading in our own circumstances: In a very tense political and religious situation in the Palestine of Jesus, we see the Jewish leaders (usually in conflict with the Roman occupiers) intercede for a pagan soldier. In addition, they refer to Jesus whom they also regarded with suspicion. For his part, the centurion has already broken down several barriers: showing affection for his slave, contributing financially to the building of a synagogue, respecting Jewish laws; (he knows that if Jesus enters his house, Jesus will become impure. Cf. Jn 18: 28).

- *Why are some people more 'open' than others? Is religion necessarily prone to dissension?*
- *Jesus praises the Roman centurion: what aspects of faith in other Christian denominations appear to you as worthy of admiration? What about Muslims?*
- *In this passage, God seems 'open and willing' to all prayer. Have you ever asked for someone of another religion or denomination to pray for you? Have you prayed for someone of another religion? Why?*

Repeat the Acclamation Song for the Word of God.

3- Pray so that God will grant his grace to all: Like Jesus, let us learn to welcome the lives of other believers in our prayer and present them to God the Father. Now, we may compose prayers in the name of Jesus Christ for other believers or for members of Churches other than our own. (Foresee a suitable refrain).

4- Putting the Word of God into practice. All around us people of good will are growing together spiritually. It is the work of the Holy Spirit. Often priests and Sisters work ‘for’ Muslims ‘to the detriment’ of Christians who are claiming more of their time. Further to the reflection we made,

- *What is today’s Gospel proposing to us to do as a group?*
- *How can we learn more about another’s faith?*
- *How can we go from interreligious dialogue to interreligious service? With whom can we work together?*

Avoid vague decisions: it is better to be clear about what, who, where, when with whom, how often. Moderation is better than inaction! ‘*Short steps can travel far.*’ (Lesotho proverb).

Prepare the next meeting: place, date, leaders...

Final Hymn

MOVING AHEAD

Some ideas

- a- If you live in Algiers, organise a visit to Notre Dame d’Afrique to speak with those in charge of the shrine.
- b- Visit the website of the Church in Algeria www.ada.asso.dz and ask to subscribe to the newsletter of one of the four dioceses of Algeria.
- c- Organise a discussion on the topic: ‘If all religions are equal, why remain faithful to Jesus?’
- d- Ask someone from another Church or a Muslim to inform us on his or her way of living their faith...
- e- Select one of the following readings for group discussion.

POVERTY:
A BOND BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS
White Father Community at Tandale, Tanzania²

A mixture of facts

Tandale is one of the socially excluded neighbourhoods of Dar es Salaam («haven of peace» in Arabic). Tandale came about as a slum area around the financial centre of Dar-es-Salaam in the 1940s. The first inhabitants were from the ethnic groups typical of the coastal area around Dar es Salaam of *Swahili* culture, and Muslim religion. Then, thousands of mainland Tanzanians migrated to the capital, attracted by the economic progress. They settled in marginalised neighbourhoods like Tandale. Most of them are Catholic. Islam continues being predominant (70% of the population). There are 20 mosques within the parish area.

The Christian community at Tandale came about in 1978. It started out as an outstation of Manzese and began to organise itself as a parish.

In Tandale, there is no urban planning. The houses are on top of each other and up to 10 families may live in one house. People are used to living that way. They share the toilet, shower room and the corridor. Tandale is known as one of the violent areas in Dar es Salaam, with a reputation for criminality and prostitution. One area is called *uwanja wa fisi* (the place of the hyena). The government is trying to combat these situations. We do the same at parish level by dealing with those concerned in prostitution. They would need to be involved in positive activities to get legitimate income. The youth need seminars and training to overcome immorality and criminality: 20% of the adult population of Tandale are AIDS carriers, life expectancy is between 40 and 45 years, death is an everyday reality. Access to medicine or hospital is prohibitive. This breeds a life based on pessimism and despair. All

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the same, miraculously, you can still come across cheerfulness. Most girls manage to complete their primary education, but few the secondary. With the boys, the dynamic is similar. But more boys try to complete half of their secondary education or seek alternatives at carpentry, mechanics and tailoring.

Poverty and religion mark social life and there are plenty of opportunities for cooperation between people. The world of poverty is a world of survival. Prices are adapted to the economic reality. Food (a plate of rice or ugali with vegetables, meat and beans) at any “bar” in Tandale costs 500 Tsh (0.3 Euro). You can buy good quality second-hand imported clothes for 200 Tsh (0.1 Euro)

The population within the Tandale parish limits is about 70,000, with 5,000 Catholics spread out amongst Muslim neighbours, six Pentecostal Churches and one Anglican, Lutheran and Moravian

² Text adapted from the booklet ‘ENCOUNTER Take the Plunge’, published by the Missionaries of Africa, White Fathers, Rome, September 2008, pp. 49-51. Three WFs from three different countries work in Tandale.

Church.

Christians and Muslims living together

It is in this context that our Missionary of Africa community witnesses God's dream of unity and peace. Compared with other countries, there is relative peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims, an experience of a twofold perspective.

The first is the one experienced by ordinary people. Poverty is a bond between Christians and Muslims. There are many examples of mutual solidarity. Faith is respected. Coexistence is pacific.

Interreligious dialogue is experienced through daily human sharing between neighbours. Christians and Muslims mutually invite each other to eat at the religious festivals: Christmas, Easter, Eid (after Ramadan)... There is great solidarity at funerals and wakes. The Christian community shows no prejudice whenever underprivileged Muslims need help. The majority of the poor receiving help from parish-based Caritas and World Food Programmes are Muslims. There are many examples of love and trust in a compassionate living together.

At the same time, strictly theological dialogue is almost non-existent.

Some Muslim leaders uninterested in dialogue mould the second experience. Any attempt by the Catholic Church is viewed with suspicion.

In many cases, faith is mixed with politics. They think that the Catholic Church is allied to the Tanzanian Government in an attempt to oppress them. A clear example is their reaction to the possibility of receiving food aid for the poorest people from the mosques. The UN World Food Programme wants to help the poorest people through the Catholic Church. A group of Muslim leaders think that behind the charitable project is an attempt to bring their faithful into the Catholic Church. Another sad example is the constant campaign, via the mosques, called *mhadhara wa dini*, to discredit the Christian faith through public rallies and deriding Sacred Scripture. At festivals, funerals, weddings, there is no respect in the neighbourhood; you can have night-long noise from speakers full blast. In addition is the constant calling to prayer with loudspeakers at early hours.

Dialogue and cooperation with other Christian Churches is in progress. This year, we had a very successful shared prayer service with the Lutherans. It was a time of real communion, of joint understanding towards building new bridges in an effort to be one. There is cooperation at all levels, among laity and pastors. Somehow, living in a Muslim context brings more self-understanding to our shared Christian faith.

Conclusion

Despite all these challenges, Tandale is a place of hope and joy.

Our presence as a Missionary team in the area, our closeness and sharing with the people in their struggles and joys is an undoubted witness.

The Church shines forth like the morning sun in the darkest night of these 'forgotten' people. Though on occasion we feel powerless and helpless, we go on convinced and assured by His ever-loving presence, whose great project is the salvation of all. Praise to God who dreamed up this project.

A CATHOLIC AMONG ORTHODOX AND MUSLIMS IN ETHIOPIA.

Eddie Ndahinda, Ethiopia³

I come from a family background of a religious cocktail, Muslims, Protestants, Catholics and Traditionalists; all in one pot! Last year, my sister, a former entrenched Catholic, changed camps when she got married to a Seventh Day Adventist pastor. Many were disenchanted, especially my parish priest, because she was very much involved in the preparations of the Sunday liturgy in the parish.

I also had my high school education in a Muslim school, where Christians formed a meagre minority of about 3%. It was during my university studies, however, that I started reflecting on religious issues on a personal level. The question that prevailed was the division within Christianity itself.

What I am living now in Tigray (Ethiopia) is a deep down-to-earth experience with people of divergent religious beliefs. Tigray has a long Christian tradition going back to the 4th century. Since our forerunners came, in 1968, we have been engaged in the Eparchy of Adigrat, working in education and social welfare. With Catholics forming a small minority (about 0.5%), ecumenism has been and still is at the centre of our missionary engagements. Liturgically, we follow the Ethiopian Catholic Church calendar, which is very close to that of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Since we are surrounded by an Orthodox population, we try to live what they live as much as possible. We also observe their fast and feast days. Occasionally, we go to pray with them and they also reciprocate, especially on big occasions. When I arrived in Tigray, my first impressions were not all that positive, especially regarding rituals, the numerous fasts and the long liturgical procedures, which often start before dawn. With time, I found myself being invited to plunge myself into the lives of the people to whom I had been sent. It is now seven years and I am not yet accustomed to it, but I have learnt things and my willingness to “taste and see” has opened me up to a yet wider enriching horizon.

Currently, I am engaged in *Bruh Tesfa Youth Development Centre*, which is 99% Orthodox, 1% Muslim and not a single Catholic, save one member of staff! Well, how do I feel about these statistics? Great! I have learnt to recognise God in people, places and events, whereas before I would not. “God is not only Catholic”, I often remind myself! John’s Gospel reminds us that “God is love, and where love abides, God is.” My attitudes of old have been transformed by this Love I have encountered in Tigray among the Orthodox and Muslims alike.

In *Bruh Tesfa Youth Development Centre*, an Orthodox priest

³ Text adapted from the booklet ‘ENCOUNTER Take the Plunge’, published by the Missionaries of Africa, White Fathers, Rome, September 2008, pp. 93-94. Fr. Ndahinda is from Uganda.

alternates with a Muslim Imam to give instructions once a month. The youth seem happy with the arrangement. We do not proselytise. Our biggest concern is to see that there is mutual respect, understanding and peace between people. The issues of justice and peace we so often speak about cannot be engaged without efforts to reconcile different beliefs and practices. We strongly acknowledge that the Spirit of God, who “shows no partiality” (Acts 10:34), remains active in all cultures and religious traditions. Wasn’t Jesus trying to open up our minds towards the accessibility to His Father’s Kingdom?

“Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ... But the hour is coming – indeed is already here – when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth...” (Jn.4:21, 23-24).

In the meantime, we, on the mountains of Tigray, continue holding hands as co-pilgrims journeying towards God, who is already in our midst. Salaam!