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OPEN LETTER TO CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS ON THE OCCASION OF THE MARIAN YEAR

As time goes by we are progressively seeing an ever increasing number of foreigners living and working among us. It would be really silly of us to think of them as a threat or as a purely economic resource. It is a real pity that there are those among us who are tempted to regard them as some kind of inferior class of people and so they despise them even with violent acts or they take advantage of their vulnerability. This is the case when they are exploited by being made to work for a pittance without the benefit of social security as required by law, or when they are offered shelter at rental rates far higher than is normally the case.

Their presence among us does not constitute simply a social and cultural challenge, but it has also a religious dimension. Indeed among these foreigners there is a sizeable presence of Muslims, both those coming from African countries and those from Eastern Europe.

Given the context of interreligious dialogue, I feel that at this moment of our history, characterised by the phenomenon of migration, it cannot be that God's Spirit is not telling our Church anything! This dialogue helps to achieve a certain social harmony. When one considers the lack of accurate knowledge about Islam and the prejudice against it, one sees the need to dialogue with the Muslim world without denying anything of our Christian identity.

It is now eight hundred years since June 1219, when in the context of the violent and reciprocal acts of war in the course of the Fifth Crusade, St Francis of Assisi went to the Holy Land in order to encounter the Muslim world in the person of the Sultan of Egypt, Malek al-Kamel. This meeting took place in the port of Damietta and it had several positive results. It had an effect on Franciscan mysticism and language, so much so that the 99 titles which Muslims attribute to God, served as inspiration for the praise which Francis offers to God on high. On that occasion Christians and Muslims met with the idea of "converting" each other to their respective faiths: instead Francis and the Sultan were impressed with the strength of each other's faith! Free from prejudice, they recognised each other not only as God's creatures but also as men of faith. They were both spiritual and intelligent men but it was the language of the Spirit which prevailed in their meetings¹. And as a result of of this dialogue, carried out with a profound sense of reciprocal respect, the Franciscan fathers are still active in the Holy Land today.

A few months ago a similar meeting took place in Abu Dhabi, in the United Arab Emirates, between Pope Francis and Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, the Great Imam of Al-Azhar (one of the most authoritative centres of Islam). There they signed a declaration on "Human Fraternity for world peace and living together". After asserting that "faith leads a believer to see in the other a brother or sister to be supported and loved. Through faith in God, who has created the universe, creatures and all human beings (equal on account of his mercy), believers are called to express this human fraternity by safeguarding creation and the entire universe and supporting all persons, especially the poorest and those most in need". They continue by

¹ LUCA MARCOLIVIO, "I datteri di Maria – la Vergine figura centrale nel dialogo Islamico-Cristiano e non solo" in *Osservatore Romano* (21 May 2019).

saying that this “is a text that has been given honest and serious thought so as to be a joint declaration of good and heartfelt aspirations. It is a document that invites all persons who have faith in God and faith in *human fraternity* to unite and work together so that it may serve as a guide for future generations to advance a culture of mutual respect in the awareness of the great divine grace that makes all human beings brothers and sisters”.

These extracts are enough to show us the benefits accruing if we were to engage in this dialogue, not so much between religious “institutions” but among us believers: a dialogue not between Christianity and Islam but between us Christians and Muslims, we who mix together in our streets, in shops, at work, at school, in hospital and in so many other contexts.

Since in this Marian year, the Muslim month of Ramadan (between the 6th May and the 4th June) coincided with the month of May (which for us is dedicated to Mary), I would like to present this reflection about Mary in Islam, since, as the Mother of Jesus, she can be a very good means of dialogue among us believers in one God, Christians and Muslims. Mary is the road which can lead us to open out to each other and understand each other much better. If in dialogue one’s attitude should be that of attentive listening and not of judgement or condemnation, then Mary is the model of the one who always listens!

Actually in connection with Ramadan, Muslims have a curious story about Mary which we also find in the Christian tradition. In fact in the Qoran we find that when Jesus was born beneath a palm tree, the angel told Mary to shake the tree and obtain nourishment from the dates which fell off. According to Muslim tradition, the palm tree blossoms only during Ramadan. This little story is also to be found, with some differences, in the apocryphal Gospel according to Matthew.

Qoranic Mariology is so interesting that there are those who think that, within certain limits, this book is the only apocryphal source of lost Christian traditions. Indeed although the Qoran does not recognise Mary as the “Mother of God” since it does not accept the divinity of Christ, still it contains information about Mary which is more plentiful than what we find in the four canonical Gospels put together².

In addition, Muslims also have the book known as “*The Arabic Gospel regarding the childhood of Jesus*” which includes a number of traditions from the Christian East. Here too Mary is presented as a mediator and collaborator in the miracles worked by the boy Jesus. One such case is the “miracle of the bandage” with which Jesus heals a boy possessed by a devil; or the case when Our Lady healed a sick boy with some of the water with which she used to bathe Jesus.

Devotion to Mary is quite widespread among Muslims. It is normal in Egypt (Matariya), Turkey (Efesus), Jordan, Lebanon and Syria for Muslims to go in pilgrimage to sanctuaries dedicated to Our Lady and to join Christians in their devotions to Mary. In the orthodox cathedral of Sednaya in Syria there is an image of Mary which is said to have been painted by St Luke: Muslim women believe that if they spend the night in prayer before this image, they will obtain the gift of motherhood. Because of this devotion, this city receives the greatest number of pilgrims after Jerusalem. One can appreciate the importance of these pilgrimages if one considers that the only obligatory pilgrimage is the one to Mecca – other pilgrimages are practically considered idolatrous! And yet there are all these pilgrimages directed towards Marian sanctuaries!

² Cf. B. PIRONE, *La tradizione dei testi evangelici nell-ambiente formattivo di Muhammad*, 2000.

Images of Mary were dear to Arab peoples long before the arrival of Islam. It is said that when the Muslims took the city of Mecca, they found many images in the sanctuary which later became the Kaaba. Among these images there was one of Mary with the Child Jesus in her arms. The Prophet ordered all the images to be destroyed except the one of Mary, and it is said he protected it with his own hands to save it from destruction!

All this goes to show that Mary is the common heritage of Christians and Muslims and so devotion to her helps to foster a spiritual harmony between us³. If we discard the fanaticism which historically we find in both religious traditions, we will find that the Muslim, like every believer, is open to the supernatural and the spiritual. That is why dialogue helps to foster among us greater respect, tolerance and friendship. May this Marian year provide an opportunity for grace so that while helping our Muslim friends to take care of their spiritual life, and in particular their devotion to Mary, we will continue building significant relationships with them. The fact that we Catholics embrace certain truths about Mary which are not found in Muslim belief, should not scare us from building bridges between us. As St Thomas Aquinas teaches, as its final goal our faith has reality itself and not abstract formulae. And in our case this is the person of Mary herself. That is why popular piety addressed to Mary, both Catholic and Muslim, can be a providential tool so that together, and full of hope, we may sustain our dream for a better future.

Given today, from the Bishop's Curia, Victoria, Gozo, on the feast of the Visitation of the Blessed Mary, 31st May 2019.

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³ Cf. the Letter by the Congregation for Catholic Education regarding *The Virgin Mary in intellectual and spiritual formation*, (25.03.88), paragraph 14.