

Called to Human Fraternity



Visit of Fr. Thomas Hendrikus (second from left) to a Mosque in Antwerp, Belgium.

Contrary context

I thought that my desire to work in the field of interreligious dialogue came to an end when I accepted to begin a new missionary adventure in Belgium in 2015, a year after my Arabic and Islamic studies in Rome. A big question came to my mind whether my studies are still applicable here. The only thing that I could say through my limited point of view about Belgium is that it is a country with a long and illustrious history of

Catholicism, where many missionaries, including my CICM confreres, came from and were sent to missions all over the world. This first confrontation brought me to a contrary reality that I have experienced in Indonesia which is the country with the largest Muslim population in the world and where the Christians are a minority and sometimes have difficulties in certain issues in their dealing with Muslims. I always thought that it is probably more reasonable for me to work for interreligious dialogue in Indonesia than in Belgium.

However, after one and half years of preparation in the CICM House in Schilde, I

came to know that the city of Antwerp itself, which will later be our missionary base. Antwerp boasts a remarkable diversity which represents different nationalities, cultures, and religions. This multicultural society is also growing strongly along with its secular characteristics. Everyone is free to express himself or herself in public but not for issues related to religions or religious activities. The crisis brought about by the massive influx of migrants in Europe during the last decade and the concomitant problem of integration have eventually created a need to preserve a national identity in the so-called super-diversity. This multicultural entity becomes more and more divided and polarized. In front of these situations, I need to *see* and experience the challenges and later try to *judge* and *act* (Cardinal Cardijn's method: *see-judge-act*) through the responsibilities bestowed upon me in my pastoral work, especially in interreligious dialogue.

From “Dialogue of Community Life” to “Dialogue of Peace” in the City

Mother Theresa once said that “peace begins at home.” This saying reminds me that doing something valuable must always begin at home or in a community. In our community in Deurne (in the suburbs of Antwerp), we share our religious life amid cultural diversities. Everyone is free to express himself, but we have to respect each other even if we have different opinions about something. Everyone also takes his own initiatives to contribute according to his own capability or his passion to the community and to support one another out of a genuine attitude without pretension and domination. In the community we are actually learning from each other. For example, I learned to be friendly from Ghislain who likes greeting people and asking a simple thing like “How is your day?” I also learned to be more

flexible and available like Fabio who easily adapts to all new situations and conditions around him. Moreover, we are learning authentically to be ourselves in spite of our differences. This *modus vivendi* certainly makes our community more solid and dynamic. Strikingly, it is recognized by people around us who are very curious to know about our community.

This good reputation of our presence in Deurne is seen by Msgr Johan Bonny, Bishop of Antwerp, as another sign of hope for the birth of a new pastoral unity. However, the bishop has warned us that our pastoral work will not be easy for us, especially when we have to deal with local Flemish people. Nonetheless, he gave us his full trust as well as the freedom to find our own way in doing missionary work in Deurne by the witness of our community life among the people, animating them to work together with all basic communities and organizations, and with those adherents of different religions present in our pastoral area. I then focused on my missionary desire to work for interreligious dialogue.

On the one hand, the first reaction to my proposal was very positive. It came from Bart Paepen, the Episcopal Vicar, who was eager to have a project on promoting peace in the city with the Muslims on the level of his vicariate. He recommended me for this kind of work. The preference to work with Muslims has its reasons. The number of Muslim communities in Antwerp is steadily growing every year coupled with the problem of Islamophobia after the suicide bombings in Brussels in 2016. From the beginning, Bart said to me that we would restart this new initiative from zero because there has been no commitment to work for interreligious dialogue with Muslims in the diocese of Antwerp for quite a long time.

On the other hand, I knew that there are many obstacles to start with. First of all, my command of the Dutch language was not yet sufficient. Secondly, I did not know any person who had been long involved in interreligious dialogue. Thirdly, pluralism could create tensions and would make people

live in their respective cultural ghettos if integration did not succeed. To overcome these obstacles, I needed to be determined to do it out of love and believed that there would always be a way to solve every problem.

Think Globally, Act Locally

In the era globalization and the advent of social media, we should know a common principle: “think globally, act locally.” This principle has helped me to carry on my new missionary adventure in Antwerp. According to a survey made in 2019, Antwerp has at least seventy-five (75) Muslim communities, more than in any other city in the entire region of Flanders. We can also find all kinds of Muslims here in Antwerp. They belong to various traditions, namely Sunni, Shia, Ahmadiyyah, etc. They came from different countries, namely Morocco, Turkey, Pakistan, Senegal, Bosnia, Egypt, etc.

To visit and meet them in their respective communities is quite easier than to bring them together; it is a similar problem that I have with our basic communities in our Catholic pastoral unit. But for me it has been the only way as the first step of dialogue: making friends and visiting them as much as possible. And I started this task with my neighbors who belong to our pastoral unit. As a delegate of Belgian Bishops’ conference for the relationship between Muslims and Christians in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium), I did not need to handle these activities all alone around Flanders, because there are many experienced persons or other confreres who



Visit of Fr. Thomas to the Turkish Imam

have been already inspiring and animating people and communities in their place to build a good relationship with Muslims. Fortunately, they are present in almost every province and diocese in Flanders and I take every opportunity to visit them, share with them my own experiences, and learn from them on how they work and deal with similar problems. I am enriched by my regular contact with these people. I have come to know also that every place has its own unique context and the way of working is different from place to place. Despite the differences we are yet strongly connected by a common purpose to promote peace between the two religions (Islam and Christianity) in Belgium. At the same time, we are trying to give positive images of religion in general and avoid all the prejudices against any religion in the society at large. We also strengthen our networking in all Flanders by being in contact with non-governmental organizations or NGO's in the country which share the same spirit, purpose and direction to work for interreligious dialogue, justice and peace; and also to promote cultural diversities. Some of these NGO's are Orbit, Pax Christi, Tau Franciscan, VOEM, ROMC, and Welzijnszorg.

With the same vision and mission, we also started to inspire and animate people in our Pastoral Unity of Saint Christopher (PUSC) in Deurne and Borgerhout *extra muros*, which consists of 14 parishes. There are four Muslim communities around the PUSC: three Moroccan and one Bosnian. In the beginning, it was very challenging and difficult to get in contact with them. I still remember that once I went to a Moroccan Muslim community with one of the colleagues from PUSC. He was shocked because at that time we were rejected and sent out of their mosque in an unfriendly way. This bad experience made me and my colleague a little bit discouraged. After trying all things, we have become aware that it would take time to win their trust. There was perhaps another serious issue which created a big problem for them and for us as

well, like the problem of language we used to communicate. Sometimes it was very difficult to start a good conversation and we just ended up in misunderstanding. My colleague later decided not to take another risk because of the previous experience of being rejected. I respect his decision but also remain hopeful that one day he can be ready enough to face all the risks in our missionary commitment for interreligious dialogue with the Muslims in our PUSC. As for myself, I accept all difficulties as a learning process not because I have to do that as a person in-charge of interreligious dialogue in the vicariate of Antwerp, but first of all, as a missionary called to love our neighbors, especially those who are recognized as strangers and foreigners in our society. The experiences of being refused or rejected are something unwanted. However, as Christians we have faith in Jesus who had also a lot of experiences of rejection, even by his own people. He was not discouraged in such situation. He accepted and faced it consistently with his never-ending love for people and for those who hated him, even until death on the cross.

Interreligious Dialogue as a Call to Human Fraternity

We mentioned previously some anthropological, social and political challenges; and its opportunities in order to reach the Muslim communities and to build a genuine strong relationship of friendship with them in Antwerp. Working in interreligious dialogue brings me to another perspective to understand a biblical passage in the New Testament. In Rom 1:18-32, Paul describes the consequences of unbelief as manifested in the lifestyle of the Gentiles and his negative verdict against those who have failed to recognize God in his creation and fallen into idolatry and depravity. However, in Acts 17:22-34, Paul shows his positive attitude towards the Gentiles by praising their religious spirit and acknowledging the "unknown God" whom they revered.

As a missionary Paul knew how to deal with others. He learned their culture and spoke their language. By his adequate understanding of others, he could get rid of any misunderstandings, problems, difficulties and troubles among the people with whom he lived. He did not isolate himself in a comfort zone. He preferred to go outside of himself and the community, proclaiming and sharing the Good News with others, full of respect and openness. This Christian attitude of Paul also resonates in the philosophical thoughts of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas emphasized the importance of reaching out to ‘*Thou*’ with empathy and sensibility as a positive experience of otherness, foreignness or exteriority. Only through this way we can be fully and truly ‘*I*’ in the dynamic dialogue with ‘*Thou*’.

In the context of interreligious dialogue, we gradually practice this value in order to break all prejudices and fear about the other (*Thou*) and minimize all skepticism and pessimism in our divided and polarized society without losing our own identity (*I*). Moreover, opting for interreligious dialogue becomes indeed a missionary work and also a Christian call to human fraternity because our world, more than ever, is now on the brink of losing peace, love, hope, and joy (cfr. *Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi*).

Long time ago, Francis of Assisi met the Sultan of Egypt al-Malik al-Kamil on his way to the Holy Land. The 800th anniversary of the meeting of these two great persons was celebrated in 2019 with the new document entitled *Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, which was signed in Abu Dhabi by Pope Francis and Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar. This fraternal declaration underlines a common concern of Christians and Muslims to work together with dignity and

determination to “see in the other as a brother or sister to be supported and loved.” We, the 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.” To end this short article, I quote Al-Muhasibi who said: “Your best friend is the one who -- seeing him or her reminds you of *Allah*, speaking to him or her increases your knowledge, and his or her actions remind you of the hereafter.”

Wassalam!



Attending the feast at the end of the Ramadan with Bosnian Muslims and Bishop Msgr Johan Bony from Antwerp