

## Islam and Mission

### People of dialogue, not builders of new walls



PISAI, 18 October 2019, opening of the Academic Year with the participation of Cardinal Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and former President of PISAI (Fr. Cucarella at the right of the Cardinal)

Dear brothers and sisters, greetings to all of you from Rome.

Last Monday, most of Italy including the capital was declared a “red zone”. Although the restrictions are less strict than a year ago, they remind us that the pandemic is not yet over and because of this I would like to begin my intervention today with a thought for those who have suffered, and continue to suffer, the effects of the worldwide coronavirus pandemic.

I also would like to express my gratitude to the leadership of SEDOS for having chosen the topic of “Islam and Mission” for this webinar and for having put together this wonderful group of speakers, who shared their knowledge and experience with us today. I feel honored to have the opportunity to offer the closing remarks.

I will proceed as follows. **Firstly**, I would like to share with you something about myself and the institution where I work at present. Then I will say why I think that learning about another religious tradition, (in this case, Islam, also applicable to other

religions), is primarily beneficial for our own Christian identity and commitment. **Finally**, I will reflect on why a serious attention to the religious tradition of the people among whom we live should be an essential element of our missionary vocations. I acknowledge with joy the presence of some Muslim brothers and sisters among us today, but my remarks will mainly be addressed to the Christian participants.

As you have seen in the program, my name is Diego Sarrió Cucarella and I am a member of the Missionaries of Africa, also known as the White Fathers. Because of our origins in North Africa, the Missionaries of Africa have kept until now a particular interest in Islam and Christian-Muslim relations. There is much that could be said about it, but today I will briefly focus on an institution which exemplifies this unique vocation of the Missionaries of Africa for the world of Islam. I am referring to the PISAI, which is the Italian abbreviation for Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies, an institution with which I have been associated for more than seventeen years now, first as a student, then as a visiting professor, then as permanent member of the faculty and Director of Studies, and now as President. One could say that the PISAI is unique in that it is the world’s only Pontifical Institution of Higher Education entirely devoted to the study of Islam.<sup>1</sup> The PISAI

---

<sup>1</sup> For a longer presentation of the history and mission of the PISAI, see Diego Sarrió Cucarella, “The Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI). Mission, Heritage and Influence on Christian-Muslim Dialogue”, in *Christians in the World of Islam. Dialogue - Mission - Witness*, edited by Eugeniusz Sakowicz and Bogusław Żero, Misjonarze Afryki (Ojcowie Biali), Natalin k/Lublina 2021, 77-86.

seeks to prepare its students for active engagement in the field of Christian-Muslim dialogue, either in the academic milieu, in the pastoral field, or in civil society at large. The Institute offers a specialized education in Arabic and Islam, as well as in the history and the main issues of Christian-Muslim relations. The conviction that motivates the PISAI is that Christian involvement with Islam must be grounded not only on good will but also on objective knowledge of the other religious tradition.

The PISAI began modestly, and nobody could have imagined at the time its future development and transfer to Rome. It was founded under a different name at Tunis in 1926 by the Missionaries of Africa to train some of their members for apostolic work among Muslims. The purpose originally envisaged for this training period was to provide not so much a scientific study of either Arabic or Islam, but rather a practical study, suitable for enabling the missionaries to forge relationships with the local people in a climate of respect for their cultural and religious background. The Institute very soon began to attract others who were also interested in the apostolate among Muslims. The first non-White Fathers who came to study at the Institute were Father René Voillaume and one of his first companions in 1932. The next year, Father Voillaume founded the community of the Little Brothers of Jesus inspired by the life and writings of Blessed Charles de Foucauld.

As it grew in size and importance, the Institute felt the need to offer academic diplomas to its students and to be recognized by the ecclesiastical authorities. Steps were taken to this end, and by a decree of the Sacred Congregation for Seminaries and Universities, it was established as a Pontifical Institute in March 1960.

Four years later, in 1964, this Institute was transferred to Rome. The Second Vatican Council was then in progress. On Pentecost Sunday of that year, Pope Paul VI had instituted a special department of the Roman Curia for relations with peoples of other religions, known at first as the *Secretariat*

*for Non-Christians*, later renamed *Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue*. Pope Paul VI also promulgated his first Encyclical Letter, *Ecclesiam Suam*, in August 1964, which set out a whole programme for future dialogue between religions. Then there came the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*; the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*; and the Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes...* all these Council documents suggested to the Institute new reasons for continuing along the path of its first inspiration, as it saw itself more clearly as being at the service of the Universal Church. Today, almost 60 years after its transfer to Rome, the PISAI has become fundamentally a centre of study and research, which is also frequented by lay students and, in this sense, very different from its origins as a training house for missionaries. You may say that it has become more of an academic institution. Nevertheless, Christian reflection and prayer are still an important part of the Institute's life. A special moment of prayer is the midday Friday Eucharist, celebrated in the chapel of the PISAI at the end of the week's work and at the time when practising Muslims are praying in their mosques.

The aim of the Institute is not simply producing experts in Islam, but forming



Chapel of PISAI, 14 June 2019, solemn Mass for the closing of the Academic Year 2018-2019, presided by Cardinal Angelo De Donatis, Vicar of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Diocese of Rome

witnesses to Christ among Muslims. The PISAI provides those who are called to this particular vocation with a knowledge and appreciation of the religious heritage of Islam that will help them, without in any way diluting the Gospel, to announce it in a way that will find an echo in the religious culture of Muslims. It was with great emotion and a profound sense of reverence that we celebrated the beatification of seven former students of PISAI among the 19 Martyrs of Algeria, on 8 December 2018.

As President of PISAI, it is for me a source of pride to see that many individuals deeply involved in promoting better understanding between Christians and Muslims in recent decades have passed through a period of training at our Institute, including three of our speakers today: Fr. Markus Solo, Fr. John Mallare and Fr. Thomas Hendrikus. Also Dr. Rukmana followed some courses at PISAI during his studies at Rome in 2010.

There is an essential point which I would like to share with you, and which is not just theory, but something that most students at PISAI and in other institutes where Christians study other religions have verified over the years, namely, that learning about another religious tradition in a spirit of openness and understanding is highly beneficial because it leads, first of all, to the purification and intensification of one's own religious commitment.<sup>2</sup> Let me explain what I mean. Learning about others – and this is particularly true for both Christians and Muslims – clears up misconceptions and false ideas inherited from centuries of conflict and polemics and, in doing so, it changes our self-image, it purifies the truth about ourselves, because this truth is always connected with the way we think about others. Secondly, when we learn about others, we find that our own religious tradition is not the only one that is reasonable, committed, or open to God. After this discovery, if we choose to remain in our own original

tradition, this now becomes a real choice in the face of real alternatives, and not only of distorted representations of the other.

I move now to the last part of my remarks, which is a reflection on why a serious attention to the religious tradition of the people among whom we live and work should be an essential element of our missionary vocation, as essential, I dare to say, as our commitment to Justice and Peace. I am sure that many of you must have heard of Raimon Panikkar (1918-2010), one of the greatest scholars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the areas of comparative religion, theology, and interreligious dialogue, born the son of an Indian Hindu father and a Spanish Catholic mother. I like what he once said when asked why Christians should be interested in meeting believers of other traditions and trying to know them. Panikkar said quite simply that knowing the other is an essential requirement for the Christian who wants to live Jesus' commandment of universal love, since, as he put it, "we do not love what we do not know".

Missionaries are those who, by vocation, under the impulse of divine Love, leave their home, their familiar surroundings, to venture into another place, another country, another culture, to meet the other, with the mission of loving them, on behalf of a God whom Christians confess to be a loving Trinity. Each time we arrive in the country of another as missionaries, we discover that in fact there were several 'others', some more fragile and vulnerable, others stronger and better off. This loving Trinity that has set us in motion in the first place calls us to give preferential attention to the most vulnerable other, the one whose life and dignity are threatened. In my own missionary experience, one of the greatest difficulties has been to accept that even that most fragile 'other' also needs to love, to give, to share. However, to learn to receive is much more difficult for most of us missionaries than giving! Those who have worked in development and assistance projects know very well how what should be a free expression of human solidarity and

---

<sup>2</sup> Here I draw from the insights of Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders*, Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester 2010, 155-157.

Christian charity can easily become a top-down paternalistic action, where the roles of “benefactor” and “beneficiary” are mutually exclusive: either you are the one giving or the one receiving, but you cannot be both!

In recent times, Pope Francis has warned Catholics against proselytism, that is, against using any type of pressure to convert someone, reminding us of the need always to consider the other, even the most destitute, as my equal in dignity and as the host who welcomes me and not the passive subject of my missionary zeal. This is, I believe, the great challenge, at least on the spiritual level, of our missionary vocations: to care for the wounded other, yes, not to walk past them insensitive to their suffering, but without losing the deep desire to know them, to listen to them, to discover their true face, which is often disfigured by the wounds in their bodies. We are called to love them because of who they are in the deepest part of their identity and not simply because of what has happened to them. This is why, I would like to believe, the Samaritan in the parable intends to come back to the inn where he leaves the man who had fallen into the hands of robbers. He returns to listen to him and to know him better, not just to repay the innkeeper for the extra expenses!

When approaching the religious other, missionaries should seek to establish a relationship of equals where all can be givers and receivers. Each of us is immersed in a culture, a tradition, a religious heritage in which we have been formed and to which we have contributed. Our Christian conviction is that God, the Father of Jesus Christ, is not a stranger to these cultures, to these traditions. On the contrary, it is God who is at the origin of all that is true, just and beautiful in them. Moreover, the Church invites us, “through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life”, to “recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values” found among people (*Nostra Aetate*, 2).

I would like to conclude by quoting some inspiring words of Pope Francis in his recent Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti*:

*As religious leaders, we are called to be true ‘people of dialogue’, to cooperate in building peace not as intermediaries but as authentic mediators. Intermediaries seek to give everyone a discount, ultimately in order to gain something for themselves. The mediator, on the other hand, is one who retains nothing for himself, but rather spends himself generously until he is consumed, knowing that the only gain is peace. Each one of us is called to be an artisan of peace, by uniting and not dividing, by extinguishing hatred and not holding on to it, by opening paths of dialogue and not by constructing new walls (FT 284).*

Let us welcome with joy this call to be authentic mediators, not intermediaries, to be artisans of peace and not of division, to be people of dialogue and not builders of new walls.

I thank you all for your kind attention.



Library of PISAI, 21 March 2019,  
“Georgetown Lecture on Contemporary Islam” by  
Patrick J. Ryan, S.J., entitled: *The Call to Jihad and  
the Lure of Prosperity: Contemporaries Polarities in  
African Islam and Christianity*