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Islam and Catholicism

Towards a Dialogical Mission



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Prologue

At the beginning of my reflection on “Mission in Islam and Catholicism” which is the common topic of today’s seminar, allow me to raise a few difficult questions as a point of departure: Are Islam and Catholicism missionary religions? What does mission mean? Is it imposing one’s own faith on others? Can there be dialogue between missionary religions? How can Catholics and Muslims understand their missions in the contemporary world to serve peace and unity?

No doubt that both Christianity, including Catholicism, and Islam are missionary religions. Both can look back on the history of their expansions to various parts of the world, which commenced more than 2,000 years ago for Christianity and more than 1,400 years for Islam. Various historical sources and contemporary witnesses hold diverse experiences in their personal and collective memories.

If Christianity were not a missionary religion, it would never have left Israel, where it was born, to be present in the entire world. If Islam were not a missionary religion, it would not have been possible to expand beyond the Arabian Peninsula; it would never have taken the way through the Balkans and into Europe, from Africa to Spain and France, from the silk road that started in Asia Minor to China and finally to the rest of Asia.

Without going into the details about the spreading of these two great world religions, it is important to acknowledge that both religions have always had a strong missionary nature which perdures to this day. Yet, our path into the future depends on grasping how each of them understands the nature and purpose of mission. It is also crucial to know how Muslims and Christians seek to present this understanding of mission to others. In fact, Islam and Christianity use different methods and terms, but also have some commonalities.

The Burden of History

Generally speaking, the Christian term “mission” faces much skepticism among Muslims, in part because mission is associated with past colonialism. It is a historical fact that in some parts of the world, the rise of nationalism and religious radicalism during the colonial era went hand-in-hand. Today, anti-colonialism propaganda is still used and instrumentalized to trigger hatred, discrimination and intolerance towards minority Christians in various parts of the world.

This is based on the argument that Christians are colonial minions, and Christianity is the religion of western colonialists. This attitude is due, among other things, to the history of missions in the period of colonialism, tragically marred by the linking of “the 3G” (gold, glory and gospel), as the saying goes. Also, some Muslims mistakenly claim that Western is, automatically, Christian, and Christians outside Western environments are, therefore, foreigners with no right to exist.

In some other parts of the world, Christian mission is considered with suspicion as a strategy for converting people who do not believe in Jesus Christ. This misunderstanding happens along with lack of knowledge about various denominations within the Christianity, leading to a short-sighted generalization that all people who believe in Jesus and wear the cross are one and the same. It is imperative that this be corrected, because various denominations have different understandings and practices of mission based on different interpretation of the sending commissions initiated by Jesus and recounted in the Holy Bible.

In Islam, *da‘wah* is the rough equivalent of mission in Christianity. *Da‘wah* activities are aimed, in some parts of the world, to counter and neutralize Christian missionary efforts. In Indonesia there is, for example, the Muslim Muhammadiyah mass organization that claims around 50 million followers in the country and preaches an orthodox Sunni Islam. It was established on 12 November 1912 in conscious resistance to Christian influences at the same time, and it imitated methods of social assistance used by Christian missionaries. Theologically, *da‘wah*, however, does not play nearly as important a role in Islam as mission does in Christianity, where it is one of the basic theological principles. I will return to this key difference momentarily.

Catholic Mission: Post Conciliar Paradigm Shift

The reality of mission in the Church is based on Jesus’ commandment in the last chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. Its practice has evolved over time, up to the present moment, which is imprinted by the paradigm shift of the Second Vatican Council.

Jesus ended His three years of proclamation by instituting the universal mission that He Himself gave to the disciples, and thus to Christians in all generations. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And look, I am with you always; yes, to the end of time” (Matt. 28:18-20).

The Second Vatican Council’s Document on Mission Activity, “*Ad Gentes*,” states the very nature and goal of the Catholic Missions, saying: “*Divinely sent to the nations of the world to be unto them “a universal sacrament of salvation,” the Church, driven by the inner necessity of her own catholicity, and obeying the mandate of her Founder (cf. Mark 16:16), strives ever to proclaim the Gospel to all men*” (AG 1).

Furthermore, quoting from article 6 of the Document “*Ad Gentes*:” “*Missions is the term usually given to those particular undertakings by which the heralds of the Gospel, sent out by the Church and going forth into the whole world, carry out the task of preaching the Gospel and planting the Church among peoples or groups who do not yet believe in Christ... The proper purpose of this missionary activity is evangelization*” (AG 6).

The Document also emphasizes clearly the missionary character of the Church, explaining “*The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father*” (AG 2).

Therefore, from the beginning, Christians have tried to fulfill this mission of Jesus in various ways, and they continue these efforts today. If they did not, they would be unfaithful to the mission of Jesus. The Church firmly believes that Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh and Son of the Father, has an absolutely unique role in the salvation of the world. Christians are continually being called by God Himself to continue Christ's saving mission.

Two things stand out here: First, the mission of the Church is strictly based on theological grounds and derived from the inner-trinitarian sending process. Secondly, mission is not an additional task of the church that can be assigned arbitrarily among its members; rather, mission is an essential characteristic of the community of followers of Jesus and is included in the comprehensive task of the church, a salvation-mediating sign of relationship with God and the unity of the entire human family. It finds its concrete form in the proclamation of the Gospel everywhere on earth. Christian mission is the evangelization of peoples. Accordingly, "evangelization" is the new name of the Christian mission today. Developing the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI elaborates on this theme in his Apostolic Letter *Evangelii nuntiandi* of December 8, 1975.

According to this ground-breaking Letter, missionary activity and preaching consist initially of a "testimony without words." (cf. EN 21) Evangelization takes place through the lives of Christians, inspired and based solely on love and truth. Through testimony without words, the Christians awaken in the hearts of those who see their lives irresistible questions: "Why are they like this? What - or who - is it that inspires them? Why are you with us?" Indeed, such a testimony is a silent but powerful and effective preaching of the Good News.

This new paradigm is, in fact, different from the way the Church had usually understood and practiced missionary activity before the Second Vatican Council. However, this way of the evangelization is rooted in the Gospel,

as we see in the parables of the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt. 5,13-16), and of the leaven (Matt. 13,33). Because it is based on love and fraternity, it is truly effective. It is, in a nutshell, about the efforts of the disciples of Jesus to be, as expressed in "Ad Gentes," "one with men of every condition, but especially with the poor and the afflicted. For them, the Church gladly spends and is spent (cf. 2 Cor. 12:15), sharing in their joys and sorrows, knowing of their longings and problems, suffering with them in death's anxieties. To those in quest of peace, she wishes to answer in fraternal dialogue, bearing them the peace and the light of the Gospel" (cfr. AG 12).

Following this paradigm, mission in the Catholic Church is neither forced conversion nor proselytism, neither imperialism nor hegemony, but a life testimony and acts of charity in the spirit of Gospel, carried out in respectful way, keeping the inviolable human dignity of every person, personal freedom and human rights.

In fact, mission in the Catholic church is inseparable from inculturation, which denotes the presentation and re-expression of the Gospel in forms and terms proper to a local culture. It results in the creative reinterpretation of both, without being unfaithful to either. Evangelization respects culture as part of the human phenomenon and as a human right. The Church is aware that the manipulation or oppression of culture is, therefore, an abuse. The Church is much more convinced, and it is its real experience, that the preaching of gospel is enriched by the adaptation of the values of Gospel with the local cultural elements. This helps people to recognize that the Good News of God has to do with their concrete life. Imposing foreign cultures and way of life incorporated in the religion into a local culture will create social segregation, alienation and lead, at the end of the day, to a new colonialization in the name of religion.

To conclude this section on a new paradigm of mission, one could say that the Catholic Church has a code of conduct concerning missions, based on at least the following

three documents of the Second Vatican Council:

First:

The Second Vatican Council's Decree on the Mission Activity of the Catholic Church, *Ad Gentes*, gives a sound explanation about the reason of its missionary activity emphasizing particularly on the principle of divine love, saying: "*Christian charity truly extends to all, without distinction of race, creed, or social condition... For as God loved us with an unselfish love, so the Church is also one with men of every condition, but especially with the poor and the afflicted... sharing in their joys and sorrows, knowing of their longings and problems, suffering with them in death's anxieties. To those in quest of peace, the Church wishes to answer in fraternal dialogue, bearing them the peace and the light of the Gospel*" (AG 12).

Secondly:

Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra aetate*, says: "*The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions.... "The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that 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, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men*" (NA 2).

Thirdly:

Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*, emphasizes that freedom of religion is to be granted to all equally (DH 6). By saying this, the Catholic Church renounces every kind of proselytism and forced conversion which are against human dignity and human rights.

Islam and Da'wah

The discourse on "mission" in Islam is linked to the term *da'wah*. The Arabic word *da'wah* (دعوة; plural *da'wāh*) expresses the sense of "call" or "invitation". It derives from the verb *du'ā'*, which means "to call" and leads to word "*dā'ī*, the active participle form which means "one who calls or invites".

The most quoted qur'anic verse to legally authorize *da'wah* is Surah al-Nahl (16,125) "Invite all to the Way of your Lord with wisdom and kind advice, and only debate with them in the best manner. Surely your Lord 'alone' knows best who has strayed from His Way and who is 'rightly' guided". *Da'wah* is, therefore, an invitation to goodness or to something good.

In conjunction with the meaning of Islam, which is surrender or submission to Allah, *da'wah* is understood to mean inviting someone to the way of submission and surrender to Allah.

As a matter of fact, there is no single meaning of *da'wah* in Islam. It can mean merely sharing information, inviting Muslims and non-Muslims, as well (centrifugal), towards a better understanding of the Islamic faith, leaving it up to the listeners to make their own choices. *Da'wah* can also indicate efforts of believers (centripetal) to help fellow Muslim better understand the Islamic teachings (as represented mostly by the contemporary Muslim scholar from Egypt Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) and his Syrian disciple, Rashid Rida (1865-1935). Lastly, there are the outward efforts through territorial expansions to convert others to Islam. The latter seems to be represented by traditional-conservatives who are a tiny minority within Islam.

Muslims, generally, do not like to talk about Islamic "mission" because God's messengers (missionaries) are understood to be the most important prophets, not every Muslim believer. With the sending of Muhammad, the "seal of the prophets" (*khatam an-nabiin*, Sura 33,40) and the revelation of the Koran

(*al-nuzūl al-Qur'ān*), the divine mission has come to an end.

Nevertheless, Islam is a “missionary” religion in the sense that it is designed to spread. It claims universal validity that “most people do not know”, as we read in the *qur'an*: “We have sent you ‘O Prophet’ only as a deliverer of good news and a warner to all of humanity, but most people do not know” (Surah Saba 34:28). Its goal is the establishment of the Islamic order all over the world and over all areas of life. This is accomplished through “*tabligh*” (preaching), “*khutbah*” (sermon), “*nasehat*” (advices), and “*fatwa*” (a formal ruling or interpretation on a point of Islamic law, given usually by a Mufti). Some scholars tend to categorize the ways of *da'wah* under two forms of “*jihad*”, which are the minor and major efforts for the cause of Allah (*fī as-sabīlillāh*).

“*Da'wah*” is a form of jihad; both major and minor jihad. In the context of Islamic law, “*Da'wah*” is the call or invitation to individuals or groups of people to accept Islam or to submit to Allah. According to the Islamic understanding, they are asked to return to Islam, since all people are actually born as Muslims. As mentioned above, Surah An-Nahl 6,125 speaks about a general invitation to all, but with wisdom and kind advice.

Towards A Dialogical Mission

The future mission and *da'wah* activity of Christians and Muslims need to move from rivalry to dialogue in two ways: first, among the Christian and Muslim missionaries (*dā'ī*) in the mission areas; secondly, between the Christian and Muslim missionaries and the local people. The transformation from rivals to partners in the mission depends on the understanding of interreligious dialogue for both partners. Both Christians and Muslims define interreligious dialogue as an encounter in an atmosphere of freedom and openness, to promote, develop and enhance good relations and sincere friendship. It involves the attempt to listen to the other and to understand his/her religion in a respectful climate, hoping to find opportunities for constructive collaboration.

It is our common understanding that a genuine dialogue is not a one-way street, but a reciprocal communication on the basis of three principal elements: openness, listening and active participation. This understanding emphasizes a fundamental aspect: learning from each other. People who enter into encounter keep in mind that the partner of dialogue has something good to offer and something valuable to share.

Learning from the other is the result of listening with open mind and open heart, perception, and respect. Claiming truth and questioning the position of the other in an oppositional way will not be pre-eminent if mutual understanding is to flourish.

However, an honest questioning on the informative level can help to clarify the message and avoid misunderstandings. The questioning in dialogue neither leads to denying the truth claim of the other, nor to emphasizing or relativizing one's own claim to truth. Rather, the competition of the truth claims become the starting point for interreligious learning.



Being together and dialogue with a Jewish Rabbi and a Sikh Leader

A clear reference for interreligious learning can be found in the Council document *Dignitatis humanae*: “Truth, however, is to be sought after in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. The inquiry is to be free, carried on with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue, in the course of which men explain to one another the truth they have discovered, or think they have discovered, in order thus to assist one another in the quest for truth. Moreover, as the truth is discovered, it is by a personal assent that men are to adhere to it”.

(*Dignitatis Humanae* 3)

Learning from each other could raise the question of whether one’s own revelation or religious truth is basically incomplete. It is just a matter of learning through others and from other religions, what would have been learned in one’s own religion, but has not been learned. It must first be assumed that every revelation has its full claim to truth. God is perfect, but man is not. Human limitedness in understanding God’s revelation should make him or her more aware about the importance of mutual learning and enrichment on the path of life towards the absolute truth. All believers are Truth seekers, not finders of the Absolute Truth.

Here are some examples of *reciprocal learning*:

- Muslims help us better understand the importance of prayer, fasting and almsgiving in everyday life;
- Hindus urge us towards meditation and contemplation;
- Buddhists give us witness to detachment from material goods and of respect for life;
- the disciples of Confucius encourage us to respect elders and ancestors and to exercise filial piety;
- Taoists accompany us in the search for simplicity and humility;
- the followers of non-Christian religions also find aspects of Christianity that can help their own spiritual growth: the concept of a God who has human face, a God who calls us by

our name, a God who is interested in our lives and who became a man;

- the unity and universality of the Catholic family, spread throughout the world, holds open the door of hope and spreads love without exceptions.

Islam strives, as taught by *al-Qur’an*, to do good and to avoid evil (*amr bi al-ma’rūf wa al-nahī ‘an al-munkar*, Surah 4:110) or to compete in good things: “So compete with one another in doing good” (Surah 2:148). Based on mutual learning, Christian and Muslims are partners in the mission, sharing good with people by respecting their rights and inviolable dignity.

In this sense, mission and *da’wah* have to be dialogical which means that our faiths encounter the local or indigenous cultures, habits, customs and faiths in an atmosphere of openness, mutual respect, and understanding. We strive to communicate the Good News and the commandments of God to others without compulsion and any kind of violence, keeping in mind that dialogue cannot replace mission nor can mission replace dialogue. (cf. *Redemptoris Missio: On the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate*, Pope John Paul II, 7 December 1990).

The Catholic Church states clearly in the Document “Dialogue and Proclamation,” published by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in 1991, that dialogue and proclamation are very closely linked to one another: “Both “are authentic elements of the Church’s evangelizing mission... intimately related, but not interchangeable” (DP p. 208). The dialogical method of the mission will enhance the sincerity of the reasons of our missions, support reciprocity in giving and receiving for mutual knowledge and enrichment.

Some Concluding Remarks

As we pursue this challenging dialogic method, there are several bedrock principles to keep in mind that lead to best practices.

First, both the Bible and the Qur'an speak of God as the One calling and sending, and the believers as the ones responding actively and obediently. Having this in mind, both Christians and Muslims must allow God to be in the center of the missionary activities and deny all kinds of human interests. Neglecting God's supremacy in the mission will lead to the instrumentalization of mission for private agendas that will destroy relations with God and others.

Secondly, the future of Christian-Muslim relations requires a decolonization of the mind and the creation of a new mental map in which Islam and Christianity increasingly co-exist in shared geographical, cultural, social, economic and political spaces. The Document "*Human Fraternity for Peace and Living Together*," signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, *Dr. Ahmad al-Tayyib*, pleads with us not to use the terms "majority" or "minority," because in front of the law each and every person is a full citizen of the same country with the same rights and duties. Moreover, labelling Muslims as Arabs and Christians as Westerners is incorrect and divisive.

Thirdly, Christian mission and Islamic *da'wah* should not utilize self-serving apologetics by addressing the weak points in other religions or quarrels and hostilities from the past, but, as emphasized by the Document *Nostra Aetate* "*to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom*" (NA 3).

Fourthly, Christians and Muslims are called to liberate people from various kinds of oppressions and miseries. Our mission becomes more authentic when we can give people back their freedom and their dignity as human beings, created and loved by God. This is an urgent need, as more than half of the believers of both religions live in the so-

called third world, shadowed by bitter poverty and illiteracy.

Fifthly, each religion is by nature exclusive, based primarily on truth claims about the way of salvation. Nevertheless, the mission and *da'wah* should never misunderstand the concept of pluralism. Pluralism does not mean that all religions are equal, that all religions have the same truth, or even that the truth of each religion is relative. Instead, it acknowledges two fundamental facts: *first*, there are various religions and each religion has its own truth; *secondly*, despite various paths towards God, the eternal Truth, each and every seeker of God has equal rights. Pluralism is, therefore, not another word for theological or practical syncretism.



Celebrating the Diversity in Mazara del Vallo, the first place of arrival of Muslim in Sicily

Epilogue

The various biblical and qur'anic sources I have quoted above underline that our religions are about beauty and salvific transcendence, and not about violent ideology against people's freedom and human dignity. On the contrary, our religions can transform the whole of human life in respectful and reasonable ways.

Both sides should learn from each other for mutual enrichment and for common efforts to serve people with all their vulnerability, but not the other way around, in order to make the other an enemy or a stumbling block. It is important, from time to time, to re-clarify and re-assert our goals and our

methodology in order to be loyal to our respective mission and *da'wah* activities entrusted by God.

The Catholic Church, through the Second Vatican Council's Document *Nostra Aetate* states: "*The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men...*" (NA 3). One of the salient commonalities between the Christianity and Islam is the belief in oneness of God (*at-tauhīd*). Various passages of the Holy Bible speak about the oneness of God and the salvific existence of the trinity (see *Isaiah 44:6, Isaiah 45:5–6, Galatians 3:20, 1 Timothy 2:5*). The Apostle Paul explains in the first letter to Timothy: "*Now there can be an intermediary only between two parties, yet God is one*" (1 Timothy 2:5). And the Qur'an mentions very clearly in Surah al-Ankabut 29,46 that we, Christians and Muslims believe in one God: "*Do not argue with the People of the Book unless gracefully, except with those of them who act wrongfully. And say, 'We believe in what has been revealed to us and what was revealed to you. Our God and your God is 'only' One. And to Him we 'fully' submit.'*" (*Wa illāhuna wa illāhukum wāhid: Our God and your God is 'only' one*).

The Church is, however, aware that the theological differences among Christians and Muslims have contributed, in the course of history, to misunderstandings and destructive polemics. But for those dedicated to peace, there is no other way to deal with theological divergences than respectful acceptance, and understanding that differences are part of the exclusivity of religion. More than that, Christians and Muslims are requested to move from endless theological debates towards spiritual and moral improvements of the faith of each believer.

We all are aware that in various parts of the world, many Christians and Muslims are still not able to move on from suspicion about the religious teachings and practices of others, towards the discovery of spiritual commonalities that enrich and open the gate

for mutual respect and collaboration, to jointly give the testimony of love, hope and life to the world what the world really needs, particularly in this period of the health crises due to the pandemic of covid-19.

God the Almighty has given us all, through revelation and the voice of conscience, the sacred duty to stand up for justice and peace everywhere, to eradicate human misery, to combat poverty, to promote education, to foster the virtue of brotherhood, to cultivate the integrity of His creation, called by Pope Francis in his Encyclical Letter "*Laudato Si'*," our common home, and thus to contribute to a more human world according to God's will. It is God's call to each of us and it is our missionary duty to respond to Him in a free and conscious way (cf. *the Message of Pope Francis for World Mission Day, 31 May 2020*).

One day we will have to give an account before God as to whether we have fulfilled our mission together, as we are only divided by the way we believe, yet united in His Oneness. And we will have to give an account of whether we have given a credible witness about faith in Him to the many people who do not believe in God, or whether we have created walls, divisions, conflicts and wars. May God, the All-Loving and Almighty, God of mercy and reconciliation, purify our hearts and minds, keep us away from every temptation to instrumentalize or to abuse God's name in every mission and *da'wah* activity in the world, and help us be His channel of peace, justice, and truth for the good of the entire humanity.

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