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“Dialogue in a time of violence: a reading of Human Fraternity from the ground”

Introduction

The brief given to me:

"Focus your presentation on relations with Muslims in the era of global terrorism.

What is the current situation in France and what is the role of religious leaders in facing these challenges?"

I have been asked to speak about the French context, hence I wish to make these remarks in my introduction:

- Acts of violence and murders have been committed in the recent months and years: an attack in Nice on 14 July 2016, killing 87 people and injuring 434; the murder of Father Jacques Hamel, a priest celebrating Mass, on 26 July 2016; the murder of a teacher leaving his school on 16 October 2020; and the murder of two women in a church in Nice on 29 October 2020. They were committed by individuals who claim to be Muslims.
- But while terrorism and violence occur regularly in France, we cannot state that we live in a context of violence or fear of terrorism on a daily basis.

I would also like to include in my introduction the testimony of a friend, a second generation Algerian born in France, married to a practising Catholic with 3 children, whose wedding I performed. They belong to the Groupe des Foyers Islamo-Chrétiens (the GEFIC) or Group of Islamic-Christian households. He holds important responsibilities in a public sector structure, the Louvre Museum in Paris, and is the first deputy mayor of a district in the northern suburbs of Paris.

In the 1980s, at primary and secondary school, in the northern suburbs of Paris, we were in classes with pupils from all over: Poland, Senegal, France for several generations, and some of them were friends. I was born here second generation Algerian. Our differences were not emphasised at all; it was a question of family belonging. It was a matter of discovery and more than anything it was a richness for us. There were never any problems. The perspective was that of integration into French society. The time the French team won the World Cup in 1998 was a very strong symbol of the French model of integration: France "Black, Blanc, Beur" meaning "Black, White, Arab" It said something about the way things worked and about an ideal.

Then two events shook things up and called everything into question: first the attacks of 11 September 2001 in New York, then the riots in Clichy-sous-Bois in France. These events revealed a deep malaise in French society.

I will first address the specific French context from the point of view of Muslims in our society, then I will address possible places of encounter, exchange and dialogue to then examine what hinders dialogue and conclude on our role as religious leaders in this context.

1. In what context are we called to embody fraternity in France?

➤ Liberty, equality, fraternity

Perhaps we should start by reminding you of the motto of the French Republic, which all French citizens hold dear, whatever their religion, their origins or their social background: liberty, equality, fraternity. And we know that in order to establish and enforce freedom and equality, laws are drafted and passed, but fraternity cannot be decreed. It is an ideal that depends on the responsibility of each citizen. I would like to say that it is our double responsibility as citizens and as Christians, since we believe that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God and that Jesus Christ revealed this to us.

It is worth quoting the first sentence of the Declaration signed by Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayyeb in Abu Dhabi on 4 February 2019: *"Faith leads the believer to see in the other a brother to be supported and loved."*¹

➤ A long and complex history of France and its Muslims

France had a colonial empire in countries where almost the entire population was Muslim, the Maghreb countries were colonised by France, in the form of a protectorate in Tunisia and Morocco, and assimilation in Algeria, which was a French territory where the inhabitants of Muslim faith were not considered as citizens except for serving in the army.

To this day, the Algerian war of independence from 1954 to 1962 has left wounds on both sides. The memories remain vivid and painful almost 60 years after independence.

Today, in a country of 68 million inhabitants, people of Muslim tradition represent about 5 million people, i.e. nearly 8% of the population, (noting that religious statistics are forbidden in France). More than 2/3 of them have French nationality, whereas for many of our compatriots, Muslim = immigrant = Arab, sometimes even = extremist or worse terrorist. A certain racism towards Arabs and black people exists in France.

People with a Muslim background are represented in all socio-professional categories, but in much higher proportions amongst labourers or low-skilled occupations.

Because of this situation at the bottom of the social ladder, many Muslim families live in working class neighbourhoods on the outskirts of our cities, where many difficulties and problems arise primarily for social and political reasons.

➤ Religions and Secularism in 21st Century France

Secularism is a French specificity that is difficult to explain outside our borders, as the word itself is often untranslatable into English, German or Arabic! Secularisation must be identified, which affects many contemporary societies and is often linked to modernity. Secularisation refers to a process in which whole areas of social life no longer depend on the Church (schools, hospitals, etc.), and in which very important aspects of people's lives are no longer linked to religion. In this process, religion risks losing its place in society and being confined to the private sphere

Secularism is a legal framework that defines the reciprocal non-interference of the State and religions: The State does not intervene in the affairs of the Church (in 1905) or of other religions and vice versa.

But many Muslims, including imams, confuse secularisation with secularism and attribute the fall in religious practice in France to secularism.

Moreover, alongside the legal framework of secularism, a "secular mentality" and a "secularist" ideology has developed in France over the last century, which is opposed to the visible and social dimension of religions, starting with Islam.

¹ On Human Brotherhood, for World Peace and Common Coexistence, Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayyeb, Abu Dhabi, 4 February 2019

➤ **Islam and Muslims in France: a mosaic**

The Muslim community in France is not unified but crossed by multiple currents, some of which are linked to the countries of origin and the powers that be: Algeria (which appoints the rector of the Paris Mosque), Morocco, Turkey; these countries attempt to control their populations and the mosques.

For 35 years, the government has sought to have a representative body of Muslims with whom to discuss matters of worship. But they have not succeeded. The CFCM (Conseil Français du Culte Musulman or French Council for the Muslim Faith) is not legitimate in the eyes of at least 80% of Muslims living in France!

➤ **Where does the violence come from?**

In France, violence, particularly in working-class neighbourhoods, is not primarily religious or committed in the name of religion. The most visible violence is that linked to trafficking, in particular the drug trade, which brings in considerable sums of money and is considered by some politicians as what ensures "social peace" in neighbourhoods where unemployment and precariousness would lead to explosive social consequences.

It is also a kind of cry or response from people who are destabilised by globalisation and see no future for themselves in this new world.

In France, violence thus arises from people who feel forgotten by the Republic, excluded from the circuits of educational and social success. Violence arises in neighbourhoods that are becoming 'lawless' areas from which public services have gradually withdrawn. As a result, 'mafias' are taking over the law and, for example, control the entrances and exits of the neighbourhood, to the point that the police no longer go there.

Religiously motivated acts of violence are very few compared to the daily violence suffered by poor people who, for social reasons, are often of Muslim tradition.

2. What are the places or times where Christians and Muslims specifically meet in France, and particularly in Marseille?

Marseilles: second largest city in France in terms of number of inhabitants, almost 850,000, of whom nearly 300,000 are Muslims, 80,000 Armenians and 60,000 Jews. Where do Christians and Muslims meet?

In the life of the working-class neighbourhoods of Marseille: but the social, cultural and religious mix is on the way to disappearing. Some of these neighbourhoods have become almost completely Muslim, except for a few Christian families or one or two communities of nuns or monks, often elderly.

In Catholic educational establishments: in Marseille, the Church has chosen to support schools in these working-class neighbourhoods. As a result, some Catholic schools, whether primary or secondary, have between 60% and 90% pupils of Muslim faith. Maintain these schools and support them with a perspective of living together, mutual knowledge, intercultural and inter-religious dialogue.

In the services of prison and hospital chaplaincies: to guarantee freedom of conscience and worship, the 1905 law provided for chaplaincies in all closed places that prevented a believer from going out to worship. Catholic and Protestant chaplains were the first to arrive in these places, often

visiting sick people or Muslim prisoners, while respecting their faith. Often, they were the ones who helped their Muslim colleagues discover the importance of listening to the sick or detained, and the importance of being with them as bearers of God's mercy.

At Muslim-Christian marriages: these are often delicate situations but, in France, more and more couples are being formed with differences in religious and, often, cultural affiliations. This is less of a problem when it is a Muslim man marrying a Catholic woman, but it can become very difficult or even impossible when it is a Christian man who wants to marry a Muslim woman. Family pressures are sometimes strong enough to force a Christian man to become a Muslim. Nonetheless, such couples do exist.

Without waiting for the Church, but with its support, the GFIC, Groupe de Foyers islamo-chrétiens or Group of Islamic-Christian Households, has existed for more than 30 years in France, a place for sharing experiences, accompanying young couples and reflecting on the religious education of children.

An imam/priest group in which a woman of Muslim faith and one of Christian faith participate, has been meeting for 10 years in Marseille. The reason for this group is to get to know each other and to exchange ideas. Thus, as the meetings progress (5 times a year), bonds of trust have been established. This group reflects on themes, introduced by an imam and a priest. These meetings build trust, and shift each others intellectual and even theological positions. Because of the trust and friendship that has developed between the members, it is possible to discuss "controversial subjects" without any spirit of controversy or competition.

Fraternal group "gatherings" between Christians and Muslims:

At a national level, I can draw attention to two initiatives that have existed for years: SERIC, Semaine islamo-chrétienne or Christian-Muslim Week, organised by an association of Christian-Muslim friendship (GAIC, Groupe d'amitié islamo-chrétienne), which organises events in many cities in France and in other European cities.

"Together with Mary", which has been proposing exchanges, meetings and moments of celebration thanks to the figure of Mary for the past seven years, is an initiative that originated in Lebanon and has spread throughout France by the Efesia association.

In Marseille, a discussion group of Christian and Muslim women have launched an initiative for a convivial and spiritual day, open to all Christians and Muslims who wish to participate. For the last four years, this day in spring, gathers families with children and teenagers for a time of sharing around a meal, moments of prayer and discussions on a current theme. Spread by word of mouth, this initiative brings together more than 300 people. It is prepared many weeks in advance by a group that brings together Christians and Muslims.

Acts of solidarity carried out together:

For several years now, Muslim and Christian charities have been working together on joint operations to help people locally in precarious situations, for example in Créteil in the south-eastern suburb of Paris, where the Catholic parish and the mosque carry out food distributions when the other organisations are on holiday.

The Covid crisis and the confinement measures have led many families into precarious situations and even poverty. In Marseille, in one neighbourhood, social organisations, Christians and the Muslim collective joined forces to help more than 300 families each week who could no longer feed their children after the 15th of the month. It was the state school teachers who alerted one other.

During reciprocal hospitality initiatives: how else to overcome the fear of others, if not by meeting one other?

Reciprocal visits to places of worship: In many places this leads to reciprocal visits to the different places of worship where the rites are explained.

Muslim speakers training in Catholic universities. For example, at the Institut Catholique de la Méditerranée, we offer a specific training course over the course of a year, for the Muslim-Christian encounter with Muslim speakers invited, and courses with two voices one Christian and one Muslim on the same theme.

3. What are the obstacles to dialogue today?

The clash of ignorance

It is not the clash of civilisations that we are facing but the clash of ignorance. We see in France that, particularly in the younger generations, people are ignorant of each other's religion and of their own religion.

In the name of secularism, there is no place for religions in the subjects taught, except through history or French literature classes. The fear of proselytising in schools leads to the religious dimension being ignored. And teachers in state schools do not know how to react to Muslim students who participate in class. They are entrenched in neutrality, which slides into silence.

The absence of Muslim scholars

We often talk about imams, but in fact what is cruelly lacking in Muslim communities in France is the lack of training for their religious leaders. Secularism does not allow for theological training in the framework of university as in Germany. Each movement develops its own training centre, but most often, it is imams who have studied abroad or even come to France from Algeria, Morocco or Turkey to serve for a few years.

The influence of extremism

We have to call things by their name.

There is a very small minority tempted by what the media call "jihadism", a few hundred individuals out of the 5 million Muslims. No dialogue is possible with them since they call all the others "*Kouffars*", i.e. unbelievers, not only Jews or Christians but other Muslims!

Beyond that, what is more worrying is the development of trends inspired by Saudi Wahhabism, i.e. a very rigorous conception of Islam, a literalist reading of the Koran, a rejection of any critical reading and the use of reason in religious matters. This Wahhabism has spread to sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb and thus also to Europe. This religious ideology is transmitted via Internet networks and videos from clerics living in the Gulf States, who have no idea of the context of life in Europe.

In working-class neighbourhoods, the same young people may be tempted to follow this strict ideology while participating in the numerous trafficking operations, including drug trafficking, which supports a parallel economy and does not hesitate to use violence.

Available theologies and/or philosophies

Amongst the barriers of dialogue among Muslims as well as Christians, there may be a view of others proposed or, sometimes, imposed on those different from me by culture, origin or religion. The adage "outside the Church there is no salvation" has led to people ignoring those of other religions or even converting them at all costs so that they can be saved. What kind of theologies of salvation and of the Church are proposed, taught and disseminated today? By both Christians and Muslims.

What kind of approach towards the mission is this? It is no coincidence that Pope Francis repeats "No to proselytism" in his speeches (twice in Rabat, for example).

Theology and philosophy: what is at stake is the conception of truth. Too many people function by saying "I have the truth", with the consequence that the other is in error, forgetting the Christian conception of truth, recalled by Benedict XVI: "*Certainly, it is not we who possess the truth, but it is*

the truth that possesses us: Christ, who is the Truth, has taken us by the hand, and on the path of our passionate search for knowledge, we know that his hand holds us firmly. Being inwardly supported by the hand of Christ makes us free and at the same time secure. »²

It is clear that, at present, for a large majority of Muslims only faith in God practised on the path of Islam leads to salvation. Hence their desire that we all become Muslims, in order, in the best case, to be saved.

4. What is the role of religious leaders in this context?

➤ Within Christian communities

- To raise awareness in the Christian community: Work on a theology of dialogue and its foundations in biblical revelation;
- To make known to Christians the teaching of the Magisterium on dialogue and encounter;

➤ For all religious leaders

- Engage themselves, on the ground, in meeting and dialogue; there is no dialogue without a prior meeting; the two must be combined;
- To give priority to the field of education in all its forms and to develop initiatives and pedagogies in this field (from school to university and the training of ministers of religion and pastoral agents);
- Each in his community, in his tradition, implement this statement signed by Pope Francis and Sheikh Al-Tayyeb: *"Faith leads the believer to see in the other a brother to be supported and loved. »*

➤ Together

- To work together, e.g. imams and priests, to re-read our Scriptures and Traditions.

To conclude

A spiritual attitude conveyed by Christian de Chergé, Prior of the Notre-Dame de l'Atlas monastery in Tibhirine, caught up in terrorist violence, after the face-to-face meeting with the terrorist leader on Christmas Eve 1995:

- *"I cannot ask the Good Lord: kill him. But I can ask: disarm him. Then I said to myself: do I have the right to ask: disarm him, if I don't start by asking: disarm me and disarm us in our community. This is my daily prayer, I simply entrust it to you".³*
- *"The Word became BROTHER, brother of Abel and also of Cain, brother of Isaac and Ishmael at the same time, brother of Joseph and of the eleven others who sold him, brother of the plain and brother of the mountain, brother of Peter, of Judas and of both in me".⁴*

² Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia, 21 December 2012.

³ Christian de Chergé, *Invincible Espérance*, Paris, Bayard, 1997.

⁴ Christian de Chergé, Homily on Holy Thursday, 1995.