

## Homily at the Opening Mass

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Vicar General

Dear brothers and sisters:

Blessed be Jesus Christ now and forever. Blessed be His Holy Name above all now at this meeting about Islam that we begin today. We are now together to live a deep period of Vincentian communion. Those of us that are present today come from different countries and cultures. However, among us there is a fundamental circumstance: we are all followers of Jesus in the same manner of Saint Vincent de Paul. We are members of Saint Vincent family and as such we are to proceed during the next journey. During these days of togetherness we are going to share: group study and dialogue and the mutual communication of experiences concerning our personal and community relationship with Islam. We are going to share liturgical celebrations and the time dedicated to community prayer. We are also going to have the opportunity to know this country, Lebanon, where the Vincentian family has been present for many years. Finally, we are going to accept the hospitality that the Vincentian brothers and sisters as well as those responsible for this house offer us. As of now we assure them our sincere gratitude.

The Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles upon narrating matters concerning the appearances of the resurrected Christ and the early period of the Church point out the moment and the place when the event occurred. We are meeting in a country that was very lucky to listen very early to the news of the Gospel. On this land, Lebanon, the message of Jesus was heard soon after the death and resurrection of the Lord. Jesus had said to the Apostles: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes down on you; then you are to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, yes, even to the ends of the earth.” (Act 1,8).

We are immensely lucky to be able to celebrate the Eucharist on this Lebanese land where the first Christian communities met, just as we do today, to pray together, listen to the word of God and share the bread.

Today we celebrate the memory of St. Joachim and St. Anne, the Virgin Mary’s parents. There is nothing so appropriate than to apply to both saints the words taken from the Ecclesiastes. St. Joaquim and St. Anne were two “persons of good will”. The Lord God had announced to his people the coming of the Messiah. St. Joachim and St. Anne were live instruments used by the Lord to make the ancient promise a reality. Through them a daughter was given who was to be the

Mother of Jesus. The collective prayer contains this thought: “Lord, you gave St. Joachim and St. Anne the grace to bring to this world the Mother of your Son”. St. Joachim and St. Anne were two indicators placed by God on the road to show humanity the proximity and the fact of the Incarnation of the Son of God. For this reason this assembly gives thanks to God and gathers under the intersection of these saints. Again we borrow the words from the collective prayer. “Give us oh Lord through the prayers of these saints the salvation that you have promised your people”. Salvation that in effect became a reality by means of St. Joachim and St. Anne and their daughter the Blessed Virgin Mary. Salvation that Jesus the Christ and the Messiah brought to us in person.

In the following days we are going to reflect together on the relationship between Christianity and Islam. Helped by experienced persons we are going to try to know as best as possible what concerns Islam and at the same time we will try to outline the most adequate methods to announce the Gospel in the midst of the Muslim world. I invite you to actively participate in this journey. Each time the places where we Christians have to coexist with men and women of different beliefs are more numerous. The majority of those of us present here, for one reason or another, are in touch with Muslim believers. On the other hand, our frequent relationship with Islam and other beliefs has to be accompanied by reflection and clarification of concepts. It is not enough the physical proximity and the simple coexistence with one another, of Christians with Muslims. Today it is essential to study in order to act with wisdom when the time comes to interpret religious pluralism, to act with coherence with our Christian faith and to coexist with persons from other beliefs in a climate of freedom and mutual respect. Vatican Council II in its Declaration *Nostra Aetate* subscribed to these words: “The sacred Council exhorts all who forgetting the past, try sincerely a mutual understanding, defending and promoting together social justice, moral good, peace and freedom for all men” (NA 3)

Lord, we ask you that this journey enrich those who have come from near and far away places. May this meeting about Islam be a favorable time for a better understanding of our Muslim brothers. May it also be a time of prayer, study, reflection, dialogue and, finally, a healthy coexistence in fraternal communion.

This Eucharist reminds us and brings to the present the Paschal Mystery of the death and resurrection of the Lord. Together with the offering that the Lord makes of Himself to the Father, we offer Him the time of this Encounter that begins today.

(JAMES G. WARD, C.M., translator)