

Called to Live Together, but How?

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*The reality is not homogeneous...
Differentiation and undifferentiated work constantly,
the inhabitant is the model of balances in imbalances.
fault and adjustment.
There is movement, everything is relative.
In a world of widespread movement of property and persons,
ideas and cultures.*

(MICHEL, 1994)

A "REAL" TALE

It is November 7, 2010 and we are in the convent of the Redemptorists of the Melkite Catholic rite. P. Sami, at least eighty years old, always smiling and with a bright voice, serves as our guide in the convent Museum, the Chapel, and finally we end the trip on the terrace which provides a partial view of the Lebanon Mountain and South of the country. Valleys and mountains reflect the invasion of architecture modern, but in disarray; it was not so long ago, this was all oak forests, olive trees, vines, fig trees and umbrella pines.

And we ask the question: are these new buildings and homes for Christians or Muslims? Seeing our faces anxious in fear of an answer not to our liking, he looks at us and smiles by saying: **May Allah build with them! They are many, are they not also created by God?**

Is he serious or is it a joke? Does he really understand what he just said? Did he just say this to ease his Christian conscience and answer the call to love our enemy? Or is he saying this because really he believes it? The concern of this response gives each of us pause, as we experience a wide range of confused feelings, before which, a respectful and contemplative silence arose in honor of the white beard of this man. He has suffered during his life from persecution that obliged him and his community to escape from the convent to save their lives, and that was the reality of his story...

HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE REALITY?

The situation in Lebanon, as in the Middle East, is rather complicated and any attempt to capture it in a short article will result in failure. Who can explain what is happening currently in Egypt, Libya, Syria, and in many countries of the Middle East and Africa?

Dr. Kabbara (1994) said that the possibility of living together is possible with equality and the balance between the existing forces, sharing the same territory. The absence of such a balance results in a power dominating the other, limiting freedom and making the dictatorship possible and maybe inevitable. Thus, for the author, the key to coexistence between Christians and Muslims in Lebanon is guaranteed by this balance between the two forces, living in mutual respect for the freedom of the other.

This view of the situation is enough to show that if the only guaranty is the balance of the forces on both sides, results become very diminishing. But still, it is difficult to maintain this balance for the rapid and continuous increase ratio of Muslims, as to the Christian and Catholic youth emigrating faraway in search of better life conditions. Georges Corm (1994) proposes the urgent need to move from the simple idea of coexistence into the elaboration of the modern concept of citizenship and Social Justice.

Corm saw in the 1990s what had happened to Lebanon, in light of the international and regional context in the Middle East: the new generation of political men in the country represented different religious confessions, taking into consideration the equilibrium of the external forces more than the interest of the Lebanese people. Corm invites the creation of an awareness of citizenship in a state of law to safeguard the national unity out of a system of the politicized groupings. This is a call for a cultural rebirth, capable of orienting not only Lebanon, but also all the Arab world to authentic democracy and social justice. But in reality, we are far from the rebirth and the realization of this project of true national unity in the country.

In Lebanon, my country, there are many people – be they Christian or Muslim, priests or imams, different members of the clergy – who think as P. Sami did. Sami believed that despite years of destructive war, pain and martyrdom experienced by so many Lebanese families wounded in history and the flesh, the memory of an entire country and the fabric of a society which, by some miracle is still standing. The worst part is this deadly ignorance on the identity of the other/enemy who inevitably lives by my side and the label “Christian” or “Muslim” would be sufficient to create among the two – with exception of P. Sami – (the evidence to the contrary) a clear reluctance and refusal of the difference. This narcissistic form of belief and of

loving only ourselves drowns the Lebanese in his own limited and egocentric being.

Ad intra, the herd is divided, attached to opinions and lives in the confusion following different political confessions with the same religious title “we are the Maronites” but belonging to different flag colors and different political policies (Forces Geagea Lebanese – Frangiyé – Tayyar of Aaoun, Marādah Kata’eb of Gemayel, etc.). Hatred and resentment remain as a practical joke, but we are incapable of forgiveness, although we all have had communion from the same bread. However, each group assigns to himself and expresses itself as savior of the Maronites in Lebanon. Is all that hope or decline?

- How to speak to Muslim of Christian forgiveness, if all he sees is hatred between Christians and the lack of mercy?
- How to preach to the Arabic/Muslim world that Christ has saved us, and it is the reason why we are free people, if we are still slaves of flags, colors, and political systems?
- How can we say that the Church of Jesus is that of the poor, when most of our educational institutions are existing exclusively for the rich?
- How can we talk about our nationalism and citizenship, if we Christians are the first to leave the country in search of better opportunities of life beyond the seas?
- Furthermore, how can we tell Christians to remain, at the time where we are facing an economic war, where the prices of basic necessities (home, food, etc.) are out of reach?
- And worse, how can we be witnesses of faith, if it is always rooted in the law without growth and the experience of a second baptism, which fills us with Christ who makes us new creatures able to be salt and light?
- How not to have fear of some groups of Muslim fanatics that are infiltrating Christian villages and in a short time emptying them of their residents because of a high population growth and the purchase of houses and land at frightening prices?

A Lebanese Christian expresses his concern by saying: “We see us Christians caught between fear and helplessness... since currently Muslims hands are in the power of decision...”. They want us to be weak and under their authority. They have a clear and specific plan: we see them invade the country, the region, the world... They reduce us then as we are reduced and we shiver in fear and anguish... “God it’s terrible...!”.

The Lebanese, and particularly we Christians, have always developed our hope in forces and foreign powers (European or American) to us pull us miraculously from the brink of being destroyed. This will never

happen since these powers are always looking out for their own interests and siding with the most powerful. I am not so sure that they have been, even for one day, protective of the Christians, as they declare up till now. Different political agreements have been made during the last decades between the Muslim and Christian sectors, but they only remain political agreements instead of being a goal for all, a desire to satisfy and also to achieve together a development that is looking for honesty and integrity.

NEW CHRISTIANS, FILLED WITH CHRIST

The current society sees Christian communities marked by the spirit of the Beatitudes. Only a Church within the Gospel has the authority and credibility to show the face of Jesus to the women and men of today. This is what the Orthodox Patriarch Ignace VI said in 1985, when he spoke of the role of the Church and its relationship with the Muslim world. So our Church must cease to be the Church of *reactions*, of ethnic or linguistic features, frozen by the anxiety to survive, so that finally it can be the Church that is spreading as the salt, and seeking its identity in its own mission.

An expert Eastern figure of the Muslim world and the Koran is the Orthodox Bishop Monsignor Georges Khodr (1979). The first thing that he requested for Christians is that they fully convert to Jesus Christ. This brings us to put aside religious pride and the belief that we are superior to the other. The personal achievement of a Christian is the path of humility. When arriving at this point, one might expect that Muslims would discover Christian values, and then be opened to the mystery of God's will for them and for the whole humanity.

Conversion, change of heart... that is what we need. Conversion, or better yet, to be aware of what has always been the life of a Christian: simple, small, fragile and persecuted. It seems to me that we have never understood nor accepted the promises of Jesus concerning persecution, the cross that awaits those who believe in his name, as we do not believe anymore in the strength of simplicity, gentleness and humility.

Conversion is the road to freedom... radical freedom, said Nolan (2007). It is infringement by Jesus to the deepest core of one's being. It is this same freedom that he challenged his friends with, encouraging them to do their best to get to it, and it is also the same challenge that he is throwing at us today, at the time where we walk among the chaos.

The basis of this radical freedom, always according to Nolan, is trust. We're free to the extent we learn to appreciate the way in which God loves us, which leads us to give us entirely and put our trust in Him. This trust in God allows us to have a mindset open and daring, be free

to explore avenues for new thoughts and the unorthodox. We are so free we can even sometimes say honestly: "I don't know". And, most important is that we will be able to say: "In reality, whatever". It is this freedom that allows loving without reserve, to accept ourselves the way we are and to accept all people, including our enemies, the way they are.

There is also the important reality of trust in the other. Trust in the goodness that is inside of this "*angry being*", confidence in the truth that it is inside and confidence in its ability to know good and evil. But images transmitted by the "*other-Monster*" hinder the path to reach this confidence and is crippling it. That is the word: paralyzed. We feel paralyzed, in our policies as we dream and desire to have a better country.

CONCLUSION

Christians and Muslims are all called upon to enter into a process of liberation of the heart from the political yoke of belonging to a master (political leader) who, in the name of religion, subjects the will of the people to his, making them slaves for his own benefit, while leaving some crumbs for their subordinates.

The Lebanese Christian is called in humility to see God's work in religious diversity, a hand that distributes salvation to the Muslim as well as to the Christian and equally for all. Since God is love by excellence, and we all are the masterpiece of God's work of love, it is a call to get off the pedestal, and to reject any deception of superiority upon our brother or sister.

For this, to our East, Catholic and non-Catholic churches should respond seriously, and not only with speeches, ideas and speculations (i.e., 'Synod for the East'), but with hands-on projects for a re-evangelization of all the ecclesiastical pyramid structures inside and out. We want bishops to be shepherds, simple and humble. We want priests who knock on the doors of people's houses and call on each parishioner-well and ill. We want dedicated women and men who are a sign of hope, so that the world can continue to wish for the eternal. We want lay men and women who know the true face of the Son of Man, and experience in their lives the life-giving force of his Resurrection.

We all are a reflection of the society that we belong to, or, to say it another way, these are the same societies that reflect who and what we are. It is time to have the courage to offer our world something new, the novelty of Jesus and his Gospel, our treasure that we need not to hide anymore. Let me share something with you yet.

I was still upset for what is happening in my country, Lebanon: Christians who are leaving; others fleeing their regions and leaving them to Muslims; the invasion of Muslims who are buying land in Christian villages and building huge buildings; the high Muslim birth rate next to Christians with smaller numbers. Yet one day, passing beside a Muslim building in construction, I felt coming out of my soul, a song that had surprised me and here it is:

*Come, dear friends, come
We have something very important to tell you
Something that no one had the courage to tell you
Something that should not be kept from you anymore.
Come, we will share together
The secret of our hope
Come and touch our hearts
Burning of love for you.*

What can I call that? Change, awakening, a conversion? I don't know... but there is only one thing sure: Inside me there are peace and too much of hope.

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