

Interreligious Dialogue with Islam: Contexts, Vision and Action

Synthesis Statement by Symposium Attendees
(Pacet, Indonesia, 7-17 August, 2011)

SIEV Symposium Participants

We, the 57 participants of the International Symposium on Interreligious Dialogue with Islam, coming from 38 different countries and representatives of different Provinces of the Congregation of the Mission, Daughters of Charity, other Vincentian religious orders and lay partners – all members of the Vincentian family, gathered in Pacet, Indonesia on August 7-17, 2011, during this time of the holy days of *Ramadhan*. Together with the call of prayer from nearby mosques, we also feel God is calling us “to put out into the deep” (Luke 5:4), to be immersed into the lives of our Muslims brothers and sisters.

We spent days of study and readings, of interacting with Muslim and Christian speakers. We also listened to witnesses, both Christians and Muslims share their pastoral experiences of interreligious dialogue from different contexts. In workshop groups, each one was given the chance to share his or her own personal and pastoral experiences. We also visited places where Muslim-Christian collaboration happens in Indonesia – Vincentian seminaries and a theological-philosophical school, a Muslim *Pesantren* (Islamic boarding school), an Islamic university, and *Bhakti Luhur* – a large Vincentian network all over Indonesia that takes care of persons with disabilities – Muslims and Christians alike. We also attended multi-cultural liturgies and presentations in local parishes and schools as we were introduced to indigenous Indonesian cultures. Our creative liturgies, common recreation and meals add meaning to our cherished stories and realizations. All these encounters, limited as they were, helped shape our present feelings, convictions and resolve to uphold interreligious dialogue, especially with our Muslim brothers and sisters.

We present here what transpired in those days but we know that our words could not capture how the Spirit moved us during these days of encounter.

A. 'SEEING' OUR DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

It was twelve years ago, in 1999 at Fatqa, Lebanon, when the Vincentian family first gathered to look into its ministry in a Muslim context. Many things have happened since then. Through the help of our speakers, we endeavoured to “see” and examine our new contexts. Since we are in Indonesia, we found it helpful to first understand the Muslim and Christian relations in Indonesia. In the workshops, however, we also found out that some general developments are also present everywhere albeit in different ways and expressions. We also realize that Islam is different in every context where it finds itself since it is significantly influenced by the culture and the socio-political situation of its practitioners.

On the one side, we see some problematic areas: the growing radicalization of the Islamic movement; the intensive promotion of fundamentalist readings of Islam; the growing imposition of *Shariah* laws in some places and the seeming denial of freedom and human rights that goes with it; the violent riots or kidnapping-for-ransom cases allegedly done by radical Muslim groups resulting in a consequent culture of fear and silence; poverty and marginalization of many Muslim groups which can breed such violence; the stereotyping of Muslims as “terrorists” and the widespread ignorance about the Islam religion itself that begets prejudices and mistrust. We understand, however, that many of these biases and stereotypes are misplaced, fired up as they are by factors other than religious ones. But we recognize that religion can be used for the elite’s political, economic or ideological agenda.

We say this because we have also seen and heard from many moderate Muslims who are open to dialogue, to the humanistic readings of Islamic texts, and to collaborative efforts with Christians and other faiths. We see many signs of hope in Christian-Muslim relations: the increase of educated young people who have critical and open minds; the empowerment of women in both Muslim and Christian contexts; the numerous initiatives for peace and dialogue in the ‘official’ and grassroots levels; the humanitarian interventions and socio-cultural events done in common; many concerted efforts to uplift economic conditions; and the experience of mutual respect and friendship among Muslim and Christians in their everyday lives.

We spent some time listening to testimonies of our pastoral ministries that promote a culture of interreligious dialogue and peace. We see great signs of hope in the field of pastoral care, education, health care, social development, relief and humanitarian aid, and work among migrants, to cite but a few examples. In particular, we were struck by the work of *Bhakti Luhur* and its way of reaching out to Muslims and Christians alike; we are happy to hear about the initiatives of the Daughters of Charity and Vincentians of Indonesia, Chad, Libya, Iran,

Philippines, Algeria, Lebanon, etc. in their work of collaboration with our Muslim brothers and sisters. On a more personal level, we also see in our own journeys openness to Islam as we encounter Muslim friends in the context of work and personal relationships.

As we see this good news among us, we also feel that there is still much left for us to do. We realize that sometimes our own personal, professional, theological training do not help foster an inclusive and dialogical approach to life. For some of us, there have been so much doctrinal absolutes and exclusivity coming from our rigid formation, education and community structures that led to insensitivity, elitism and arrogance. Most of us realize that we need to know more about Islam in order to quash our own prejudices and biases. Beyond intellectual knowledge, however, there is also a felt need among us for more interpersonal encounters with Muslims and peoples of other faiths.

B. REFLECTING ON OUR COMMON VISION

After seeing the lights and shadows of our experiences, we tried to envision what God is inviting us to do. We discerned what it takes to follow the command of Jesus to “put out into the deep” and cast our nets (Lk. 5:1-11). With the help of our speakers, we learned of Christian and Muslim resources on interreligious dialogue and tried to understand them in our contexts.

We realized that despite the impression of its rigid structures, there have been attempts within the Catholic Church itself to include those ‘outside its walls’, in its own frame of life and salvation. This theme was already reflected on by some Church Fathers, medieval theologians, many saints, the Popes, and the Church’s most recent documents. But we are also made aware that the same dialogical direction is also present in the Islamic texts from the *Qur’an*, its interpreters and theologians, to Islam’s most recent invitation to dialogue with Christianity, *A Common Word* (2007). We are happy to affirm recent developments initiated by the Vatican to dialogue with Islam – i.e., the Catholic-Muslim Forum – under the auspices of the Pontifical Council on Interreligious Dialogue. We realize that documents and ‘official talks’ are very different from the ordinary events of everyday life. We can only hope that the openness among the international leaders of both religions can cascade to their respective members and be put into action in grassroots communities where Muslims and Christians live together.

Together with the voices of many witnesses placed before us, we proclaim our vision and convictions on interreligious dialogue.

1. Dialogue is not a strategy; it is a way of life, and spirituality. Since dialogue could not be tactically prepared, we could not also program its aims and results. In interreligious dialogue, we leave it to the Spirit to lead us.
2. Interreligious dialogue starts with interpersonal encounters in the context of personal friendships. We are convinced that dialogue first happens in the 'dialogue of life' and 'dialogue of action' within the interpersonal and grassroots levels. When basic trust is established among friends, we will then have the courage to dialogue on the levels of faith, theology and religious experience.
3. Interreligious dialogue is not a denial of our own faith convictions. It is being fully rooted in its foundations so much so that I can face the other in total openness and honesty. If we could not agree on one area of the dialogue of faith, there are still many other areas in practical life that we can talk about and collaborate. We believe that our differences serve as the basic foundation of our unity.
4. These are the personal and communal attitudes necessary for interreligious dialogue: presence among the peoples of other faiths, the courage to risk, openness of mind and heart, mutual trust, patient waiting, sensitivity to people's needs, and ultimately, the utmost humility to let go.
5. Interreligious dialogue comes from deep within our Vincentian calling to be in solidarity with the poor of our times many of whom also belong to peoples of other faiths. We believe that charity is the foundation of interreligious dialogue.

C. TOWARD COMMON LINES OF ACTION

To fulfill our vision, we commit ourselves and recommend the following lines of action.

1. On the Level of Local Communities

1.1. AWARENESS

- Create awareness promotion by reading documents of the Church and of Islam on interreligious dialogue.

1.2. FORMATION

- Intensify formation programs on interreligious dialogue at all levels and ministries e.g. schools, parishes, communities, houses of formation and publications.

- Develop a deeper knowledge of the language and of the culture of the country.

1.3. FRIENDSHIP

- Develop a dialogue of life and friendship among believers.
- Visit communities of other believers on their feast days.
- Invite Muslim people of good will to our activities, especially our social/charity work for a true collaboration.
- Make our activities simple, so that contacts with ordinary people are possible.

1.4. REVISION OF LIFE AND ACTIVITIES

- Take time to heal the wounds experienced in the past, so that a climate of trust can be created.

2. On the Level of the Provinces

2.1. FORMATION

- Organize Provincial gatherings and symposiums on interreligious dialogue with Islam.
- Foster on-going formation on interreligious dialogue e.g. by inviting experts.
- Provide a common preparation to priests and sisters assigned to specific missions before taking on any pastoral work. Offer the same preparation to priests and sisters who work with immigrants from Muslim countries.

2.2. MISSION PRIORITY

- Make apostolate on interreligious dialogue a Provincial priority.
- Be willing to send priests, sisters and collaborators to Muslim majority countries in the spirit of interreligious dialogue.

2.3. NETWORKING

- Create concrete Provincial lines of action to enter into dialogue with Muslims, underlining the importance of dialogue of life and collaboration.
- Build contacts with Episcopal commissions on interreligious dialogue.

3. On the Level of the Congregations

3.1. COMMISSION

- Form a permanent international commission on interreligious dialogue. This commission will include our VF members.
- Write a letter of support to the Muslim communities for Ramadan.

3.2. FORMATION

- Set up another Vincentian gathering, also at continental level, without waiting another 12 years.
- Articulate the aspects of interreligious dialogue in relation with our charisma of evangelizing the poor.
- Include Islamology in our formation courses.

4. On the Level of the Worldwide Vincentian Family

4.1. COMMISSION

- Create an international team on interreligious dialogue.

4.2. AWARENESS

- Establish a Vincentian day for interreligious dialogue.

4.3. FORMATION

- Promote collaboration among Vincentian universities and faculties in research and academic programs on interreligious dialogue.
- Organize international conferences on interreligious dialogue.

In the end, we remind ourselves with the words of St. Vincent to our confrere, Anthony Fleury, when he was sent to the mission in Saintes:

“[You must] be convinced that God asks of you only that you cast your nets into the sea, and not that you catch the fish, because it is up to him to make them go into the nets... To this work of patience, you must join humility, prayer, and good example: then you will see the glory of the Saviour” (6 November 1658).

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May the Lord bless the work of our hands!