

CONCLUSIONS

*by Jean Landousies, C.M.
Province of Paris*

At the end of the session, the working groups replied to two questions. Here is a summary of their replies:

1. The most important things to share from what we got out of this session seem to be these.

a) First of all we need to *express the joy of having been brought together* as members of the Vincentian Family. We are grateful to Fr Maloney for having given us the opportunity to meet one another. This session in the Lebanon was a time of grace for the Vincentian Family. Here we were able to appreciate the warm welcome of the Vincentian confreres starting with the Provincial. The presence of our confrere His Beatitude Patriarch Stephanos II Ghattas was particularly appreciated.

Our different experiences enabled us to offer much to each other. *The life witnessing* of several among us, like that of the organisers, Christians and Moslems, held pride of place. We were able to be affirmed in our belief that in the mission among our Moslem brothers and sisters we are not alone. Throughout the diversity of our countries and cultures there are many of us working according to the spirit of M. Vincent. This provides strength and encouragement, and gives a new drive for us to continue the mission.

b) The international character of our meeting reminded us that *our mission knows no frontiers* of race or religion. This makes us feel even more responsible for our mission in Moslem countries. We also became aware of the challenge to read the signs of the times leading to a greater openness to all. United by the same spirituality and the same charism we held profitable discussions about the possibility of dialogue with Moslems at various levels.

c) We were led to *take a different view of people*, a view open to development and to knowing others in a more objective way. It is essential to accept the otherness of people and to have the skill of listening. What should guide us is a deep love for Moslems which would enable us to meet them with a favourable mind-set, knowing how to forgive and also how to pray for them. We are convinced of the possibility of living and dialoguing with Moslems.

d) With regard to *theology* we received much from the participants. We know how serious are the difficulties involved in true dialogue. We also believe that truly theological dialogue, which we should never systematically avoid, remains largely

the domain of specialists. But that should not stop us. Dialogue forms part of the Vincentian charism. We had occasion to remind ourselves of the teaching of the Church in this regard, and to put into focus the urgent need of always being authentic witnesses of Love and of building an ever more friendly world. We feel the necessity of distinguishing more precisely the link between dialogue and proclamation of the gospel.

With that in view we were able to come to know Islam better, and the diverse situations in which it is practised. This learning needs always to be kept up for the sake of truth and objectivity.

e) We were also led to be *strengthened in our faith and in our convictions* so as to live by these and bear witness to these. It is important to nourish and mature our own faith in order authentically to encounter others in their faith. And we became aware of how the divisions among Christians cause scandal and how necessary it is to work as much as possible together with other Christians, in a spirit of complementarity.

f) In the course of this meeting we brought into focus *certain spiritual attitudes* which we deem it necessary to develop in order to live in a friendly manner with Moslems. We had a deep experience of how Vincentian spirituality, based on the mystery of the Incarnation, is suited to this mission of meeting and dialoguing. What we are living out is the work of the Spirit. He it is who is urging us towards a spirit of prayer and a humility which enables us to discover the values practised by others. Also the patience to adapt ourselves to God's time which isn't always our time. Likewise trustfulness to live day-by-day sowing without expecting an immediate response. And especially of hope since we don't know the ways of God although we are assured of his active presence in people's hearts. Like M.Vincent we really need to be animated by evangelical prudence which drives us to learn the reality of situations, while giving us the audacity of true apostles and the spirit of discernment which will make us act and speak appropriately for ourselves or through others. This apostolic presence calls for qualities and competences which we have to acquire day by day.

g) At the end of the session we asked ourselves how do we now concretely realise our Vincentian vocation in the world of Islam. We've got to be realistic and admit that there are still many questions for which we have no answer!

2. Regarding the future, some suggestions and propositions.

It is to be noted that these suggestions need to be nuanced according to concrete situations: countries where Islam predominates or has deep roots, countries where there has been immigration, etc.

2.1. In the pastoral sphere

a) Our first wish would be that *a Vincentian presence might be developed* in the Moslem world, whether in Moslem countries or countries with Moslem immigration, and that the communities already existing should be reinforced, by going especially to areas where all has to be done, and in being sensitive to new appeals which are addressed to us. This presence would aim at the building of a peaceful society, by engaging in a dialogue of living together. This would entail the acceptance of others with their differences, and working to have them respected and welcomed even within our communities whom we'd have conscientised regarding how to relate to Moslems.

b) For ourselves as Vincentians it is necessary that we should be reminded at regular intervals that we've got to *make dialogue a part of our pastoral approach*, and that we should be agents of reconciliation in multi-religious societies, not allowing ourselves be enclosed in stereotyped attitudes contrary to the spirit of the gospel. We have to come to a deeper understanding of what mission to Moslems means. This has to be done with an analysis which is rigorous, and an approach which is sensitive to persons by recognising their religious and moral values. In reality it's a question of living out what we teach and witnessing to our faith while working towards the construction of some kind of unity in society, in communities and in families. Thus we show the fullness of life which Christian faith brings to people. To achieve this it is desirable that a new approach in mission should be developed in the spirit of Vatican II and the Magisterium of the Church.

c) We also have a *special role vis-a-vis Christians*, by informing them about Islam, by aiding them to distinguish between Islam as a religion and its being used for power-seeking. Also enlightening them at the level of their faith and strengthening those who live among Moslems. In catechesis with children and adults, it is necessary to help Christians to become clear in their conscience and correct in their behaviour towards Moslems and towards all others who are different from themselves. Likewise stressed, with regard to certain regions, was the urgency of paying special attention to catechumens.

d) *With Moslems* our attitude should allow them to get beyond the prejudices they might have with regard to Christians and thus contribute to a bringing together of both communities. When the occasion arises we need to explain Christianity in terms which the Moslems can understand.

e) Paying special attention to *the quality of relationships between young Christians and young Moslems*, was also suggested, especially in our schools and other places of education. This would allow both parties to come to know one another in a genuine way. The result would be a growth in mutual respect which would assist them in imagining how they could live together and peacefully cooperate.

2.2. In the area of social activity

a) It is desirable to *encourage and support activities* where different cultures meet. The social services will be of assistance in developing a peaceful living together with the Moslems. There is an urgency about working concretely to establish a future which is just and peaceful.

b) In social interaction with the poor, Vincentians should have as a primary attitude to *make no difference between Christians and Moslems*. We must address ourselves to all without exception. On the other hand an attitude of humility will enable us, while retaining our Christian identity, to avoid imposing our own culture.

c) In social work with Moslems, this should not be limited to support work. It is important to *know how to work together*, to get the poor themselves to serve other poor, without distinction of religion. Thus they will be moving into a cycle of solidarity involving Christians and Moslems. The creation or support of common projects will also be envisaged. A genuine effort at service will often lead to living with Moslems and working with them to help them to become autonomous and independent.

d) In this regard, particular attention needs to be paid to *Moslem refugees* who are numerous in certain countries; likewise to old people. Also pointed out was the importance of the witness and the work of religious sisters amongst Moslem women.

e) *Collaboration with other members of the Vincentian family*, especially with the laity ought to be strongly encouraged. This collaboration can also extend at suitable times to members of other communities in a spirit of ecumenism.

2.3. In the area of formation

a) *A following up of this session* It was first of all pointed out that this meeting was by way of opening up something which needs to be continued. Great support was therefore expressed for regular meetings of this kind. Once every three years was suggested. It does seem important to follow up the work begun on various themes concerning Moslems and contact with them. In line with this it is suggested that reflexion in common could take place at the level of provinces or regions for all members of the Vincentian family who desire it. The participation of Vincentian laity would be particularly appreciated.

b) *Initial and on-going formation in the Vincentian family*. It is desirable that in the various spheres of formation (seminaries, studies, etc...) there should be imparted a knowledge of other religions and an initiation into inter-religious dialogue. Because

of the importance of Islam in the world of today and of the challenges which it poses, an initiation into this religion ought to form part of theological and missionary studies. For this same reason, it is to be desired that sessions of on-going formation should also be made available at provincial level. In this formation the spiritual aspect ought not to be forgotten. There is a "spirituality of dialogue" which gives a preparation for meeting others! "Give me a spiritual man and he'll be capable of anything!"

c) *The place which meeting with Moslems holds in the Vincentian charism* was well illustrated in the conference of Fr Danjou on St Vincent and Islam. It is therefore a reality of which the Vincentian family should be aware. It ought also be remembered that the Congregation of the Mission has, in the Moslem world, a tradition in the domain of culture (Cf. Fr Bore', schools...) and in that of catechesis to reinforce the faith of Christians in an incultured language (Turkey, Lebanon). This aspect of our charism should also be present in what we do with respect to the formation of priests and laity.

d) *Formation of missionaries in culture, language and religion before they depart.* Particularly appreciated would be the presence of young volunteers. Young Vincentians destined for countries with a Moslem majority ought to receive a formation in the culture, the religion, and the psychology of the areas to which they are going, in order to prepare them for meeting and living alongside the people. Let them be given a clear idea of their mission.

e) In view of the small number who specialise on these questions in the Vincentian family, it is very much to be desired that *experts should be formed in the area of Islam and of inter-religious dialogue.* In the Far-East it might even be possible to envisage the creation of a small study centre.

f) There is a request for a considerable opening up of *collaboration between the provinces.* The aim would be to draw benefit from formation sessions, to promote a sharing of experiences especially in our various media, and to develop links between our provinces and our communities in the Moslem world.

g) Within the Vincentian family we feel the need of much more *information about Islam, inter-religious dialogue and our involvement* in this milieu, as well as meetings which have taken place at the highest level between responsible religious in order to promote dialogue. Numerous possibilities could be made use of, from the Internet to the setting up of a commission which could promote the diffusion of information through our own means of communication (Vincentiana, website...). Also suggesting bibliographies and projects which might help formation and information. In the area of information it is also important to sensitise our provinces to these questions which are becoming more and more urgent for the mission and, by promoting an accurate knowledge of Islam and Moslem culture, help to get rid of prejudice.

h) Finally, it is suggested that at the level of the Vincentian family there should be created *a commission for ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue* in order to arouse and keep alive an interest in friendly and respectful meetings with those who don't share our faith but who are the object of our being sent to all nations as desired by M. Vincent.

In conclusion

These reflexions are being proposed to our superiors and to all of our communities, in the hope that as a result of this meeting, an official document, would be addressed to the Vincentian family. This should stress the importance of mission to the Moslem world for the Vincentians of today and encourage its members to become involved with this in a friendly spirit.

(FR. STANISLAUS BRINDLEY, C.M. translator)