

# Duc in Altum

## Vincentian Journey of Dialogue from Fatqa (1999) to Pacet (2011)

Eko Armada Riyanto, C.M.

Jesus said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch”. Simon answered and said, “Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing, but I will do as You say and let down the nets. When they had done this, they enclosed a great quantity of fish, and their nets began to break” (Luk 5:4-6).

Jesus’ words “put out into the deep water” (*duc in altum*) encourage each one of Vincentians gathered together in Pacet, Indonesia 2012 to make more efforts to journey in path of interreligious dialogue of which the late Pope John Paul II called as “path of a must”. In Vincentian tradition, our Holy Founder Saint Vincent de Paul has indicated clearly providential relationship with Muslims since the beginning of his apostolate adventure as evangelizer of the poor. It would not be surprising that members of the Vincentian families who are working in Islamic contexts spreading from Arabic countries (Middle East), Africa, Europe or even North America to Southern Philippines, India, and Indonesia (Asia) are in good number. Vincentians works vigorously in various ways in Muslim countries (with Muslims) not only because of the providential call of the mission in the Church but also of the very charisma sprung from the person, Saint Vincent de Paul. From experience of mingling with the fellow Muslims we believe that even Islamic societies long for good news too. In this sense our commitment to interreligious dialogue with Muslims has long history, and is definitely and worthily to be continued, cultivated, and explored in a more beautiful ways in the future.

The history of the Vincentian journey of interreligious dialogue with Islam – in worldly level so to speak – has two wonderful “stops” of reflection and study. The first is in Fatqa, Lebanon (1999), the second one in Pacet, Indonesia (2011). This article wishes to highlight briefly both what we learn and discover in Fatqa (1999) and what we dream in Pacet (2011).

## WHAT WE LEARN IN FATQA (1999)

*The beauty of Panorama.* It was Fatqa, the chosen city to host the first gathering of Vincentians reflecting on dialogue with Islam. The dates set up were from July 26 to August 5, 1999. Fatqa is blessed by God with beautiful scenery of nature. It locates in a hill from which the beauty of panorama is humanly provoking. Yet, above all, Fatqa was the chosen city in which deepening of our understanding of Islam has been taken place for the first time (in the sense of theological and spiritual level) and strongly promoted and fostered. Participants were 49 (28 CM and 21 DC sisters). They came from Austria, Barcelona, Eritrea, Indonesia, Salamanca, Napoli, Toulouse, Paris, Philippines, Slovenia, Torino, Belgium, Granada, Pamplona-Zaragosa, Madrid-S. Vicente, Sevilla, Marseille, Paris, Suisse, England, and North Africa. I was one of the fortunate participants who did not only enjoy the atmosphere of brotherhood and sisterhood but also was inspired by both studying the materials in the House of Sisters Maronite and mingling a bit with friendly and generous people of Lebanon.

*Reconciliation is always possible.* Lebanon has been experiencing a lot of suffering (as have other countries) caused by religious conflicts and tensions. But the people of Lebanon have also witnessed the possibility of reconciliation. Though it has been said by experts that conflicts among people were not caused by religion but rather politics or social issues, we cannot deny the fact that religions or at least religious people have often fallen into misunderstanding, prejudices, miscommunication, tensions, and, worst of all, conflicts that turn to bloodshed. The Vincentians could feel the beautiful atmosphere of reconciliation among Muslims and Christians. Lebanese people were and are exemplary ones in successfully turning conflict into peaceful coexistence.

*Dialogue as sharing of appreciation.* The presence of Hisham Nashabé was a generous share. "How I, as a believing and practicing Muslim, look at the Christian faith" by Hisham Nashabé was one of the candid way of speaking about a personal historical experience of living together with Christians. Hisham did not represent any Islamic group so that we had him as he is. At the beginning he was underlying the importance of freeing religion from any political trap and of being tolerant. No doubt, one of striking messages put forward by Hisham was an invitation of working together hand in hand to transcend difficulties and obstacles.

*Dialogue as learning other doctrines.* Fatqa was filled with beautiful efforts to have more knowledge and understanding about doctrines, especially with regard to Islam. Samir Khalil Samir, S.J. contributed two important topics: "*Monotheism and Trinity: The problem of God and Man and its implications for life in our society*" and "*Is the Koran Revealed? Is Muhammad a Prophet? A Christian point of view*". Father Samir's expertise and passion on Islam brought some light of knowl-

edge and understanding. Yet, such knowledge is to be regarded as initial one. It is however somewhat apologetic if we put as a material of learning religion. Dealing with dialogue (with any religious believers) I think one should have a proper understanding of his own religion in such a way that others may not only be regarded as those subordinate to us. Fr. Samir's opinion definitely provides knowledge to prevent such an attitude. "Revelation and Inspiration in Christianity and Islam" by Emilio Platti, O.P. was one of careful study on Koran in connection with Christianity. This contribution is valuable to us who need an understanding based on proper knowledge. Father Khaled Akasheh gave us "*The Theological Foundations of Interfaith Dialogue*". Khaled's talk is simple in presentation and yet most valuable in message of urgency of having dialogue in the life of the Church.

"*Various Trends in Contemporary Islam*" by Jean Landousies CM depicts Islamic movements inspired by Mohamad Kassab (Algeria) and Sayyid Qutb (Egypt) as well as in the contemporary Europe. Islam is both unified and diverse. Father Landousies' account on trends of contemporary Islam is to be followed up in more thoroughly sociological and political point of view. It is a rare study among Christians, since we have often equated that understanding Islam means understanding Koran. To mention a simple example, Islam in Indonesia is not just one in terms of sociological structures as well as spiritual way of living out the doctrines. Dialogue with Islam cannot be stuck in only a mere understanding of who Muslims are or what category they belong to. Dialogue needs studying cultural contexts that blend into ways of being religious and living out faith. I regard that Father Landousies understanding of various trends in Islam (in dialogue) is like an urgent invitation to go back to experience of people themselves who embrace religion of Islam in diverse contexts of countries in the planet (not only to delve Islamic doctrines). The heart of dialogue is not merely on possession of proper knowledge or understanding, but also on commitment and love to mingle with the people themselves.

*Dialogue with Muslims was in the heart of Saint Vincent.* One of the most interesting studies in Fatqa was that of Father Yves Danjou, "*Saint Vincent and Islam*". Fr. Danjou's study imposed awareness that our journey of dialogue with Islam can be regarded to have its very start in Saint Vincent himself. Well, Saint Vincent has never had an experience of dialogue with Muslims (in the modern sense), yet he showed at least an ardent interests of Islam in his contemporary point of view. It would not be exaggerated to understand that interreligious dialogue could be, to some extent, part of charisma and spirituality of our Founder. *Quid nunc Vincentius?* What St. Vincent would do now when dealing Muslims in our contemporary time? This is a discerning question that guides us to journey in dialogue with Muslim brothers and sisters in Fatqa 1999 and Pacet 2011.

“We did learn a lot of beautiful things”, Jean Landousies CM, member of the Preparatory Commission, wrote in “Conclusions” indicating at first experiencing the joy of *being together* as one family of St. Vincent and St. Louise. That joy was immense, simply because our confreres and DC sisters in Lebanon were witnesses of being truly Vincentians by making tireless efforts at dialogue with Muslim brothers and sisters, regardless of painful experiences.

Fr. Ignacio Fernandez de Mendoza CM, vicar general of the CM at that time, in his remark of end of the meeting in Fatqa said, “We have discovered a somewhat surprising fact: the C.M. missionaries and the Daughters of Charity that live in missions in contact with the Muslim world are very numerous. We have received first hand information on the relationship between Christians and Muslims. But above all, our personal and group sensibility about this problem, after what we have heard and seen, is very different from what it was before the Encounter”. And, at the meeting in Fatqa, Fr. Robert Maloney CM, then the Superior observed, “By such study and by simple presence, we can grow in knowledge of Islam and the Church’s teaching about interreligious dialogue, especially as it relates to Moslems. It will also be important for us to foster a basic understanding of Islam, especially in our houses of initial formation and in our ongoing formation. The Congregation should also form some experts in Islam and interreligious dialogue [commission]”.

## WHAT WE DREAM IN PACET (2011)

It is clear that *the dominant atmosphere of the Vincentian gathering in Pacet, Indonesia (August 7-17, 2011) is full of dreams*. The 64 participants (lay collaborators, CM fathers, DC sisters, and some sisters from Vincentian family) are coming from 38 countries, such as USA, Europe, Africa, Asia, as well as Oceania. The Indonesian confreres and sisters woo the heart of participants by doing their best to welcome them in Pacet, a hilly small town in the East Java where the Vincentians have made up a major presence in Indonesia in a cottage hotel (Sativa) owned by the alumni of Vincentian senior high school. The international preparatory commission (Claudio Santangelo CM, Armada Riyanto CM, Franz Kangler CM, Eid Abdo CM, Christian Mauvais CM) suggested the topic of the meeting approved by Fr. G. Gregory Gay, CM Superior General. “*Duc in Altum*” (put out into the deep water). The topic has somewhat been regarded as the “continuation” of the Fatqa (1999).

In Pacet we Vincentians dreamed the following: to have more dialogue as way of life; to dialogue beyond conflicts (regardless of painful experiences) implicating ceaseless human pardons; to be more faithful

in living out Church's teachings; to persevere more in practicing them when working together with Muslims; to have more stories of witnessing exemplary experiences of interreligious dialogue with Muslim brothers and sisters; to explore opportunities to work with Muslim brothers and sisters; and to have concrete plans moving forward, such as a network of collaboration among Vincentian universities and higher education for interreligious dialogue and study. While the Pacet held no formal intellectual study (with regard to Islam or its relationship with interreligious dialogue) as was done in Fatqa, we did review Church documents with regard to dialogue and mission. However in Pacet, we focused on sharing stories and witnessing to ways of concrete collaborations and living together through a series of sharing sessions, group discussion, as well as reflections on films and visits to various sites.

Indonesia is par excellence a Muslim country, but regardless of the population size, it is not constitutionally an Islamic one. It is the biggest Muslim country in terms of population and percentage. Indonesian Muslims make up about more 12% of Muslim population in the planet. And, about 85% of all Indonesian populations are Muslims; Catholics are only 3%. Despite this reality, Indonesia does not consider itself to be a Muslim country, even with over two hundred million of Muslims. Indonesia is a state based on a constitution which promotes freedom of religion. Despite our small number, Catholics have been working hand in hand with others, especially Muslims, to build better future of the society.

*Journeying dialogue beyond conflict.* The journey of interreligious dialogue after Fatqa is not an easy one. In countries where the Vincentian Family is active, political upheavals do occur. However, Islam has been experiencing a "new" face, of which I do regard more as bias. Not to mention an example of the tragedy of 9/11 in New York, Islam has been easily stereotyped as religion closed and related to terrorism. In Indonesia, a powerful bomb blast in Bali was the very beginning of such a stereotypical misrepresentation of Islam in the country. India did experience the same thing in Mumbai terror. The Philippines seems to be relentlessly in trouble in with the instability of the Mindanao region. Nigeria, Kenya, and other African countries have experienced some bitter violence done by Islamic terrorists. The same trouble happened in Europe as well.

Despite troubles connected with Muslims, we should not still link Islam as a religion of violence. We need to remember that violence done by a certain Islamic group has often caused sufferings of other Islamic communities. One must not presume that violence is always directed toward non-Muslim communities. Like other religions, Islam tries to guide its adherents into a beautiful relationship with God. We should not regard Islam from one aspect and deny its contribution to humanity throughout the ages. We have recently witnessing unstoppable "rev-

olution” to democracy in the Muslim world such as in Egypt, Syria, Libya, Tunisia, and other countries. Though some expert conceive that this phenomenon has nothing to do with religious issues but rather political ones, it is indeed still related to new understanding of social and democratic revolution triggered and connected by Islam. Practically speaking this means that the Vincentian Family is now encouraged to find new ways to bridge working together with new realities in the change wrought by the “Arab Spring” in various Islamic countries.

*Journey of dialogue to transcend the limit.* In the case of Indonesia, however, a part of being free country in constitution, non-Muslims have experienced uncomfortable situations. Some even feel being oppressed and persecuted by the majority. In some parts of Indonesia, there is no real religious freedom since, for instance, to build house of prayer (such as churches or the like) is still difficult. In times of political and social trouble some churches were burnt down. But, in Pacet we are **not** discussing religious persecution or conflicts as such. We dare to go beyond all of discontent situation and to transcend our human limit of fear and discourage. In the words of Mgr. Petrus Canisius Mandagi MSC (President of Office of Interreligious Affairs for the Indonesian Bishops Conference and Bishop of Ambon, a place where the bitter conflict between Muslims and Christian Protestants occurred some years ago), “We need to transcend whatever kind of tensions and conflicts we have experienced and to take courage of offering pardons and mercies”.

Our gathering in Pacet was to reflect interreligious dialogue in a more profound way based on living in coexistence, inspired by our Vincentian charism and spirituality. What do we mean by “transcending limits”? To transcend limits is to go beyond our human capacity by recalling our existence as a Christians and persons of deep faith. God gives us faith to go beyond our limits. Faith makes us capable to transcend our history of suffering, pain, and oppression.

*Dialogue is a way of life.* Felix Körner SJ, a professor from the Gregorian University, helped the participants to deal with the recent documents of the Church on interreligious dialogue. It has been suggested by Church that being faithful to the doctrines is to be based not only in proper understanding of them but also to ground such an understanding in the context of the concrete lives. Bishop Mandagi is an exemplary Catholic who is not only faithful but is able to persevere in living out his Catholic faith as a person of peace. “Dialogue is a way of life” is the truth that we need to live out daily life. Our confreres and DC sisters working in Africa, Asia, as well as Indonesia are those who bear witness of the truth that dialogue is indeed a way of life.

*Dialogue with Islam needs broaden horizons of society.* From two Islamic scholars (Prof. Dr. Mudjia Rahardjo and Prof. Dr. Musdah Mulia), we learned that understanding Islam is not simply understand-

ing religion as itself; it must be regarded as Islamic society, politics, culture, and way of life. Learning Islam is not just learning religion of Islam as such. Study of Islam means study of Islamic society with diverse cultural traditions, different ways of life, and hermeneutics of symbols lived and experienced in daily life. Just to mention an example of Muslim Indonesians, it was noted that there is vast number of different styles of being Islam. Indonesian Muslims are not the same with Arabs. Sociologically Muslims living in the northern coastlands of Java (a main island of Indonesia), differ from those who live in the Central area. So, by studying Islam we do not mean merely understanding the Quran and religious traditions or proper hermeneutics. Rather, we need to embrace sociological, cultural, and a philosophical methodology to approach richness and diversity of Islam. To the Vincentian Family, such an understanding helps us to not to take for granted Islam as unified and diverse one, but rather to be fervent in doing interreligious dialogue within sociological and political context.

*More stories and witnesses to share about.* The most interesting presentation – according to the participants – is that of Sister Anna Wiewiek Soepraptiwi DC and her Muslim friends. Sr. Anna and her Muslim friends (Abu Muslich and Nadia) told stories of how they work hand in hand to give relief to victims of tribal conflicts between Madurees and Dayak people. Sr. Anna is the former Visitatrix of Indonesian Province; Abu Muslich is one of the Islamic leaders; and Nadia was young lady, Muslim student, an activist of social movement. Their stories were inspiring and touching simply because Muslims (Abu Muslich, Nadia and friends) and the DC sisters have been able to transcend difficulties and obstacles coming from themselves and some fanatics. A lot of uncomfortable situations are part of their beautiful togetherness. For instance, Nadia told us that it was DC sister who reminded us to go for prayers, whereas most of Muslim friends were keeping busy with services. Abu Muslich was in tears remembering how Sr. Christa DC (an Indonesian sister whom she worked with) was so diligent and courageous in saying that they needed to move forward to help the displaced people of Madura amid problems provoked by fanatics. It is indeed true that similar stories may be found in other countries, as we had similar reports from DC sisters and confreres working in Egypt, Israel, Algeria, Chad, Marocco, Istanbul, Albania, Austria, Spain, and Southern Philippines.

Courage to transcend obstacles sprung from share of Sr. Anna and her Muslim friends left us with a deepening and practical awareness of what we mean by interreligious dialogue. Dialogue is not simply to talk with, but rather to work with in a concrete ways of charity. From seeing, knowing, understanding Islam as a unique and different religion with a set of beliefs, we need to go forth sharing and building up communities of dialogue. The most challenging task is not in how



we learn normative doctrines of Islam but in how we realize our understanding into formation of communities of collaboration and dialogue based on charity.

Dialogue and friendship are two faces of the same coin. A methodology of interreligious dialogue has been revised extensively, not just in terms of theological hermeneutics, but also in practical language. We have often conceived that dialogue with Islam needs “common words”. It is indeed undeniably important. Dialogue with Muslims embraces diverse and creative languages in that we need to dare to explore a friendly relationship. Working together in pastoral services is one of beautiful friendships. Pacet (2011) reminds us not just of the beauty of being together as Vincentians, but also of new calls of being Vincentians as persons of dialogue.

*More plans and dreams to work out.* Exploring formation of dialogue for the Vincentian Family by strengthening programs of interreligious dialogue for ongoing formation:

- *That strong and solid collaboration among Schools and faculties in the Vincentian family be promoted in concrete ways.* We have School of Philosophy and Theology “Widya Sasana” in Indonesia (in collaboration with Carmelites and others); We run DePaul seminary (theological faculty of Adamson University) in Manila; and the CM’s in the USA have great resources at DePaul, St. John’s and Niagara Universities. All three schools, with different program of religious or cultural studies and many more in the US are a fine resource. A humble dream of Pacet in networking with these schools/faculties of theology and philosophy would be collaboration of research and of making concrete contributions to building up of better life of society especially in Muslim world.
- *That new journal of theology-philosophy as well as inter-cultural study of spirituality, pastoral, as well as religious studies be created.* So, we may journey from superficial understanding of Islam to study and research of diversity of Islamic societies; not mentioning from comforting oneself with prejudices to making effort of theological reflection. Documents of the Church are valid sources of our theological exploration, and yet they need to be revisited in new perspectives that can bring them down to earth. Language of documents is theological, philosophical as well as ontological one of which words and idioms are to be reinterpreted in the history of hermeneutics.
- *That pastoral services and social activities around the globe promoted by Vincentian family be rekindled and fostered* in line with spirit of interreligious dialogue. Personal involvement is mostly recommended. We need to move from seeing the uniqueness to experiencing collaboration with Muslims.



- *A strong and gearing team or commission of interreligious dialogue* consists of members of different countries and continents in the Vincentian Family in their recommendation of the participants of Pacet (and following up on the encouraging letter in 2000 of Fr. Robert Maloney) urgently be formed. The Commission must be a *directed* and *productive* group that proposes and provides forums or seminars for the Vincentian Family to engage in and develop theological, cultural and spiritual reflection on interreligious dialogue.
  - With the priorities and emphases arising from our Vincentian mission and presence in the Islamic countries, in regions where sensitivity of dialogue is mostly concerned.
  - To support and accompany members (sisters and priests) who are working hand in hand with Muslims in such a way that they may not feel alone in their missions.

The Commission should encourage and provide *programs of an ongoing formation in different levels* for the members of the Vincentian family regarding matter of dialogue and working together with brothers and sisters from other faiths (Islam). The Commission should set itself *as a part of the Catholic Church mission* in taking seriously interreligious dialogue providing and contributing theological and vincentian reflections or documentations; in this mission the Commission seeks collaboration with other institutions of the same concern within and beyond the Catholic Church for the benefit of our Vincentian mission. The fact that there are many Vincentians working in the Islamic countries is a *providential call* of the Vincentian family to set this “new apostolate” of interreligious dialogue in better and more appropriate way for the benefit of our mission.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

*Documents of Fatqa* (1999) and of Pacet (2012).

ARMADA RIYANTO, *Dialog Interreligious: Historisitas, Tesis, Pergumulan, Wajah (Interreligious Dialogue: Historicity, Theses, Discourses, and Face)*, Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2010.

PCID, *Guidelines for Dialogue Between Christians and Muslims*, prepared by Maurice Borrmans, New York: Paulis Press, 1981.

FRANCISCO GIOIA (Ed.), *Interreligious Dialogue. The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church (1963-1995)*, Boston, PCID, 1994.

GAUDENCIO ROSALES - CATARINO G. ARÉVALO, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference Documents, Manila, Claretian Publication, 1997.