

THE DIALOGUE OF SPIRITUALITY FROM *ECCLESIAM SUAM* TO POPE FRANCIS A Tree That Has To Become a Forest

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Abstract: The article critically examines the developments in Catholic-Muslim dialogue since the publication of *Ecclesiam suam* of Pope Paul, which inaugurated a new era of dialogue among Christian churches, religions and the world. The author presents a dialogue of spirituality that could bring the two communities to come closer together. In a creative way he presents how Pope Paul VI sows seeds, Pope John Paul II cultivates the sapling into a tree, and Pope Benedict XVI prunes the tree, and he hopes that Pope Francis would revive the tree and enlarge it to a forest. Undivided love for one God and charity towards one's neighbour are the characteristic of both Islam and Christianity. Though there are differences of faith and worship, both Muslims and Christians can pray together and enhance Catholic-Muslim relations.

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Keywords: Benedict XVI, Dialogue, John Paul II, Paul VI, Spirituality.

1. Introduction

It is at the table of sinners that I learn best of all to become a sign ... of the promised mystery of the communion of saints. The multiplied loaves that we Christians and Muslims are given to break together are the bread of absolute trust in the mercy of God alone. When we accept to discover each anew in this sharing, doubly brother: both prodigal and pardoned, there can be a celebration among us something of the feast ordained from all eternity.³

The paper focuses on the 'spirituality of dialogue' between Islam and Catholicism, recognizing that both are based on the revealed Word of God, a Word that is intimately remembered, silently pondered and creative of deeper insights. Herein lies the similarity of method: Catholics with the Bible, Muslims with the Qur'an. For both Catholics and Muslims this is a path to holiness, to ever deeper union with the One Revealing God. My over-riding theme is that a Catholic-Muslim dialogue of spirituality should underlie other forms of dialogue so well outlined in *Ecclesiam Suam*. To provide a framework, I describe this as a good seed planted by St Pope Paul VI. St John Paul II was the genius who made it grow into a beautiful tree; Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI pruned it back to an extent it almost died. But current signs suggest Pope Francis is not only reviving the tree but encouraging it to become a forest.

2. Paul VI: *Sowing the Seed*

St Pope Paul VI with his encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* made a dialogical turn in Catholic Church's relations with the rest of the world with the call for dialogue with religions, cultures and all people of good will, promoting mutual fellowship and harmony of life. The term dialogue was used seventy-seven times in the encyclical and two-thirds of the document was devoted to its

³Christian Salenson, *Christian de Chergé: Theology of Hope*, Nada Conic, trans., Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press 2012, 129-130.

meaning and application. He wanted "to demonstrate with increasing clarity how vital it is for the world, and how greatly desired by the Catholic Church, that the two should meet together, and get to know and love one another"⁴ and suggested dialogue as the preferred and natural means for such an encounter and living together in harmony.⁵ The encyclical speaks about dialogue in four concentric circles, beginning with the whole human race in the outermost circle and the members of the Catholic Church in the innermost circle. The second circle consists of people who believe in God, including Judaism, Islam and Afro-Asian religions. *Ecclesiam Suam* shows a characteristic change of language towards Islam: "worthy of our affection and respect... the adorers of God according to the conception of monotheism, the Moslem religion especially, deserving of our admiration for all that is true and good in their worship of God."⁶

Learning from *Ecclesiam Suam* Vatican II made a paradigm shift in Catholic Church's relations with the rest of the world, especially with the followers of other religions, with the call for dialogue with religions, cultures and all people of good will, promoting mutual fellowship and harmony of life. *Nostra Aetate* of Vatican II confirmed the positive attitude to Muslims:

Upon the Moslems, too, the Church looks with esteem. They adore one God, living and enduring, merciful and all-powerful, Maker of heaven and earth and Speaker to men. They strive to submit wholeheartedly even to His inscrutable decrees, just as did Abraham with whom the Islamic faith is pleased to associate itself. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor

⁴Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964, 3 <http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam.html> (15 May 2014)

⁵Jose Nandhikkara, CMI, "Vision and Mission of Dialogue in the Vatican II: Investigations after Wittgenstein," *Revisiting Vatican II: 50 Years of Renewal*, Vol. II, ed. Shaji George Kochuthara, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2014, 322-334.

⁶Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 107.

Mary, His virgin mother; at times they call on her, too, with devotion. In addition they await the Day of Judgment when God will give each man his due after raising him up.⁷

Significant here are the remarks of Pope Paul VI relating to 'prayer' and 'worship', repeated again saying that the Muslims "enjoy special spiritual kinship with our faith,"⁸ then elaborating this 'spirituality' by linking it to the moral order. "All those who worship the one and only God are called to establish an order of justice and of peace on earth."⁹ A couple of years later he takes another line, saying "we feel sure you join in Our prayer to the Almighty, that he may grant all African believers the desire for pardon and reconciliation so often commanded in the Gospels and the Koran."¹⁰ This invitation to become one in prayer was a step forward from *Nostra Aetate*.

3. Pope John Paul II: Nurturing the Sapling into a Large Tree

Pope John Paul II developed this teaching; changing the language and using his personal charisma. To the Catholic Community of Ankara, Turkey he said on 29th November 1979:

As a result of this faith in God the Creator and transcendent, one man finds himself at the summit of creation. He was created, the Bible teaches, 'in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:27); for the Koran, the sacred book of the Muslims,

⁷Vatican II, "*Nostra aetate*, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," 3 <http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html> (16 February, 2014).

⁸Paul VI, "To the Faithful at the Angelus," 17 October 1965 <https://w2.vatican.va/content/paulvi/it/angelus/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_ang_17101965.html> (5 March 2014).

⁹Paul VI, "To Representatives of Muslims in Turkey," 25 July 1967 <https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/fr/speeches/1967/july/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19670725_comunita-musulmana.html> (7 March 2014).

¹⁰Paul VI, "Address to Islamic Communities in Uganda," August 2nd 1969 <<http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/ecumenical-and-interreligious/interreligious/islam/vatican-council-and-papal-state-ments-on-islam.cfm>> (1 March 2014).

although man is made of dust, "God breathed into him his spirit and endowed him with hearing, sight and heart," that is intelligence (Surah 32:8).¹¹

By placing the two Scriptures alongside each other John Paul II was suggesting an equality of value arising from the deep commitment of each community to their own revelation from the One God. A bridge was built, mutual recognition raised and a step to sharing spirituality had been taken. Many Muslims felt affirmed.

A similar affirmation was offered to Muslim Leaders in Kenya. The Pope said on 7^h May 1980: "The Catholic Church realizes that the element of worship given to the one, living, subsistent, merciful and almighty Creator of heaven and earth is common to Islam and herself and that it is a great link uniting all Christians and Muslims," adding that the "the honor attributed to Jesus Christ and his Virgin Mother"¹² strengthened the link and reveals a desire for greater intimacy, derived not so much from doctrine but from sharing in the experience of God through prayer, received as gift from the One God, the 'life' of the spirituality.

This shows the language and experience of spirituality builds a relationship of 'love' with the One God, Creator, Guide, Merciful Forgiver and Host to Eternal Life in Resurrection. This is the path for a journey into the holiness of God, a holiness available respectively to each community, for both are walking in faith side by side to the One God, using different modes of transport.

¹¹John Paul II, "Address to the Catholic community of Ankara," Turkey, November 29, 1979 <<http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/ecumenical-and-interreligious/interreligious/islam/vatican-council-and-papal-statements-on-islam.cfm>> (1 March 2014).

¹²John Paul II, "Meeting with the Muslim Leaders," Nairobi, Wednesday, 7 Mai 1980 < https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1980/may/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19800507_musulmani-kenya.html> (9 March 2014).

The following year on 20 February 1981 in the Philippines Pope John Paul II went further suggesting that the two were travelling alongside each other:

Is it not right to think that, in the Philippines, the Muslims and Christians are really travelling on the same ship, for better or worse, and that in the storms that sweep across the world the safety of each individual depends upon the effort and cooperation of all? ... We Christians, just like you [Muslims], seek the basis and model of mercy in God himself, the God to whom your Book gives the very beautiful name of 'al-Rahman', while the Bible calls him 'al-Rahum,' the Merciful One.¹³

Within the framework of mercy both see the necessity of prayer. The next day he laid the foundation for closer relationship by focusing on the necessity of prayer:

Muslims adore the one God and associate themselves with Abraham, revering Christ and honouring Mary, professing esteem for moral living, prayer and fasting. What seems to bring together and unite, ... [is] the need for prayer as an expression of man's spirituality directed towards the Absolute.¹⁴

Later that year to the Bishops of North Africa on 23 November he said, "Not infrequently a grace of prayer and contemplation is attached to life. For many Muslims the Church is the sister: they are happy to see the holiness of the Church in their features."¹⁵

¹³Meeting with Muslim representatives at the Airport of Davao (February 20, 1981) <https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1981/february/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19810220_davao-comunita-musulmana.html> (9 March 2014).

¹⁴John Paul II, "Address During his Visit to the Auditorium of Radio Veritas Asia," Manila, 21 February 1981 <https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1981/february/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19810221_manila-auditorium.html> (15 March 2014).

¹⁵John Paul II, "To Bishops of North Africa on Their *ad Limina* Visit, Vatican, November 23, 1981<https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1981/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19811123_north-africa.html> (15 March 2014).
Journal of Dharma 43, 4 (October-December 2018)

At a Symposium on "Holiness in Christianity and Islam," he said on 9 May 1985:

All true holiness comes from God, who is called 'The Holy One' in the sacred books of the Jews, Christians and Muslims. Your Holy Koran calls God 'Al Quddus', as in the verse: "He is God, besides whom there is no other, the Sovereign, the Holy, the [source of] Peace" (Q 59:23). The prophet Hosea links God's holiness with his forgiving love for mankind, a love which surpasses our ability to comprehend: 'I am God, not man: I am the holy One in your midst and have no wish to destroy" (Hosea 11:9).

In a second parallel he states: "Be holy, even as your heavenly Father is holy" (Matthew 5:48) and compares it to Qur'an 2:177, which the Pope summarizes:

The Koran calls you to uprightness, to conscientious devotion, to goodness and to virtue which is described as believing in God, giving one's wealth to the needy, freeing captives, being constant in prayer, and keeping one's word and being patient in times of suffering, hardship and violence.¹⁶

These paragraphs show a dramatic shift. It is through spirituality that Catholics and Muslims can come closer together. Their shared belief in the One Communicating God provides the path to holiness, shared by Muslims and Christians: not a skill to be acquired, but a gift to be accepted. On that journey the adversaries of the past, come closer together. One God affirmed by each, communicating through different languages, different anthropologies and different methods of prayer, but with the same goal.

A little over three months later on 19 August 1985 Pope John Paul II again moved the agenda to another level. While among a

paul-ii/it/speeches/1981/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19811123_vescovi-nordafrika.html> (16 March 2014).

¹⁶John Paul II, "To The Participants in the Colloquium on «Holiness in Christianity and Islam», Vatican, 9 May 1985 <https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1985/may/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19850509_partecipanti-simposio.html> (3 March 2014).

crowd of Young Moroccan Muslims he spontaneously led them in prayer:

O God, you are our creator. You are limitlessly good and merciful. To you is due the praise of every creature. O God, you have given to us an interior law by which we should live. To do your will is to perform our task. To follow your ways is to find peace of soul. To you we offer our obedience. Guide us in all the steps that we undertake on earth. Free us from evil inclinations, which turn our heart from your will. Do not permit that in invoking your name we should ever justify human disorders. O God, you are the One alone whom we adore, do not permit that we should separate ourselves from you. O God, judge of all mankind, help us to belong to your elect on the last day. O God, author of justice and peace. Grant us true joy an authentic love, as also a lasting fraternity among all peoples. Fill us with your gifts for ever. Amen.¹⁷

It is truly astonishing that a Catholic Pope could lead thousands of young Muslims in prayer using a language and imagery that both would recognize and affirm. Surely this was another special moment.

The Assisi meeting in 1986 required a special justification due to the wide variety of religions participating. St John Paul II offered this clarification. During the General Audience on 22 October 1986, he said: "It will be a day of prayer, fasting and pilgrimage. I trust that, by the Lord's grace, it will really be a high point of that 'movement of prayer and peace' that I hoped for on the threshold of 1986." These religions show:

... 'rays' of the truth. Among these there is undoubted prayer, often accompanied by fasting, by other penances, and by pilgrimage to sacred places held in great veneration. We respect this prayer even though we do not intend to make our own those formulas that express other views of faith. Nor

¹⁷John Paul II, "Address to Young Muslims," Morocco, 19 August 1985 <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1985/august/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19850819_giovani-stadio-casablanca.html> (16 March 2014).

would the others, on their part, wish to adopt our prayers. What will take place at Assisi will certainly not be religious syncretism but a sincere attitude of prayer to God in an atmosphere of mutual respect. For this reason the formula chosen for the gathering in Assisi is 'Being together in order to pray.' Certainly we cannot 'pray together', namely to make a common prayer, but we can be present while others pray.¹⁸

This led to some 'discussion'. Cardinal Ratzinger issued three criteria by which a Christian could judge whether he/she could join in the prayer. First, all should agree that God is Creator, One, Transcendent, with a personal interest in each person. Second, there should be agreement about the content of the prayer, for which, he offers the 'Our Father' as a model. Third, the one praying must recognize that Jesus Christ, the unique Saviour of all, is clearly articulated as active in that prayer. He adds, "If the non-Christian should be able to see the participation of a Christian as the relativizing of faith in Jesus Christ, the Saviour of all, or be bound to see it thus, then such participation cannot take place."¹⁹

This needs careful interpretation when applied to Muslims and Christians praying 'together.' The monastic tradition has recited the Psalms as the structure and content of its spirituality. In themselves they contain no reference to Christ, but assume those who pray them are able to 'imply' his presence, in that way bypassing the 'explicit' mention. Both Muslims and Christians can pray them, even together, allowing for their respective interpretations to be understood. Christian Troll SJ added: "common prayer of Christians and Muslims in its various forms and on various occasions can create something

¹⁸John Paul II, "General Audience," Vatican, 22 October 1986 <https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/audiences/1986/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_19861022.html> (9 March 2014).

¹⁹Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance, Christian Belief and World Religions*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004, 109.

lasting. It will promote the quality of the Christians' and Muslims' living together as neighbors."²⁰

Undeterred St John Paul II explicitly stresses the importance of prayer in a letter to Cardinal Cassidy on 10 September 1992:

Praying side by side, although not glossing over differences, shows the strong bond, which makes all of us humble searchers for peace, turned toward the only one who can give it as a gift to mankind. In my last message for the World Day of Peace, I said that we must "reaffirm the need for intense, humble, confident and persevering prayer, if the world is finally to become a dwelling place of peace"... Prayer is the bond which most effectively unites us. Through prayer believers meet one another at the level where inequalities, misunderstandings, bitterness and hostility are overcome, namely before God, the Lord and Father of all. Prayer as the authentic expression of a right relationship with God and with others, is already a positive contribution to peace.²¹

Looked at from a Muslim perspective, this is an enthusiastic commitment to the validity of prayer focused on the One God, Creator, Guide, Forgiver and Rewarder.

These themes are repeated several times in the years that follow, for example he spoke to the Islamic community of Sarajevo on 13 April 1997: "It is my hope that the communities of Islam, a religion of prayer, can join in the prayer which all people of good will raise to Almighty God, to implore, with unity of purpose, an active peace which enables peoples to live and work together effectively for the common good."²²

²⁰Christian Troll, *Common Prayer of Christians and Muslims*, 376 <<http://www.con-spiration.de/texte/english/2008/troll-e.html>> (5 April 2014).

²¹John Paul II, "Letter to Cardinal Edward Idris Cassidy, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity," Vatican, September 10, 1992 <https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/letters/1992/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_19920910_card-cassidy.html> (3 April 2014).

²²John Paul II, "Address to the Representatives of the Islamic Community, Sarajevo, 13 April 1997 <<https://w2.vatican.va/content/>
Journal of Dharma 43, 4 (October-December 2018)

Pope John Paul II reiterated the importance of the common pilgrimage that humanity must undertake in one of his General Audiences: "Human docility and openness to God's will is translated into an attitude of prayer which expresses the existential condition of every person before the Creator.... The common pilgrimage to eternity must be expressed in prayer, fasting and charity, but also in joint efforts for peace and justice."²³

These passages focusing on Pope John Paul II's determination to develop a dialogue through prayer enlarges the footprint of Catholic-Muslim dialogue. The One God Who Reveals opens the way to a communication through prayer, which adds a new dimension. Suddenly walls come down. It is less important that there are two versions of this revelation; that the role of Jesus is quite different in each; that places of pilgrimage are located in different places; that the annual periods for self-discipline rarely coincide; that the language of God is different; that the respective doctrines about the One God are clearly different; that the respective 'economies' of salvation have nothing in common; that there are similar obligations to the moral life; that the ability to repent enables both to dream a life fulfilled after death. So through prayer both are united in these ways through faith in the One God and the revelation of similar values in the way each of us lives.

4. Benedict XVI: *Pruning the Tree Down to Size*

The election of Pope Benedict XVI ushered in a new phase, perhaps a pause to allow the enthusiasms of the previous decades to settle down. An important consequence was his change of approach. No longer were there any references to a dialogue of spirituality. The agenda was firmly set on a dialogue of/through reason, focusing on moral issues where differences

john-paul-ii/en/travels/1997/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_13041997_islamic-community.html> (8 March 2014).

²³John Paul II, "General Audience," Vatican, 5 May 1999 <https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_05051999.html> 8 March 2014).

had negative consequences and appeared as infringements of human rights. He developed ideas concerning the role of conscience and focused on issues concerned with the freedom to accept or reject a particular faith. In some ways he remained silent about the nature of 'religion' outside the Judeo-Christian world. He always spoke in a sensitive, rational and friendly way, but the message was quite different; he wanted to radically prune the participation of the Vatican in inter-religious dialogue in areas of spirituality.

A typical example was his address to Muslim representatives in Cologne during World Youth Day on 20 August 2005:

I turn to you, dear and esteemed Muslim friends, to share my hopes with you and to let you know of my concerns at these particularly difficult times in our history. I am certain that I echo your own thoughts when I bring up one of our concerns as we notice the spread of terrorism. I know that many of you have firmly rejected, also publicly, in particular any connection between your faith and terrorism and have condemned it. I am grateful to you for this, for it contributes to the climate of trust that we need ... Interreligious and intercultural dialogue between Christians and Muslims cannot be reduced to an optional extra. It is in fact a vital necessity, on which in large measure our future depends.²⁴

Let me make four comments: First there is no reference to *Nostra Aetate*; second, he uses this moment to speak of 'terrorism', which might appear inappropriate to the young who would have little influence controlling it. Third, the use of 'many' might be interpreted that some of those present were somehow involved. Fourth, by highlighting those who have publicly condemned it, he implies that those who have not are less worthy of respect. There is no reference to things 'spiritual'; let alone any idea of praying together.

²⁴Benedict XVI, "Meeting with Representatives of Some Muslim Communities," Cologne, 20 August 2005 <http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/august/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20050820_meeting-muslims.html> (8 March 2014).

But when he speaks of ethical/moral issues his words are well chosen as in this address to a meeting with the President of the Religious Affairs Directorate in Ankara 28th November 2006. After quoting *Nostra Aetate's* reference to Christians and Muslims belonging to the same family who believe in the one God, he continues,

As men and women of religion, we are challenged by the widespread longing for justice, development, solidarity, freedom, security, peace, defense of life, protection of the environment and of the resources of the earth ... The best way forward is via authentic dialogue between Christians and Muslims based on truth and inspired by a sincere wish to know one another better, respecting differences and recognizing what we have in common.²⁵

It is clear that his 'Regensburg' speech surprised him and the officials around him. In Jordan in an address to members of the Diplomatic Corps and Rectors of Universities he spoke firmly and clearly about how Muslim and Christian academics should dialogue around the theme of 'Creative Reason', indicating that the way to greater mutual understanding comes through theological discourse, not spiritual accompaniment. He spoke on 9 May 2009 in the Mosque of al-Hussein bin Talal, Amman, Jordan: "... [reason] continually draws the human mind beyond itself in the quest for the Absolute, poses a challenge; it contains a sense of both hope and caution."²⁶ Later he developed it in his address given during his courtesy visit to the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem three days later on 12 May 2009, Mount of the Temple, Jerusalem, "Reason opens the mind to grasp the shared nature and the common destiny of the human family, while freedom

²⁵Benedict XVI, "Address to the President of the Religious Affairs Directorate," Ankara, 28 November 2006, <http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedictxvi/en/speeches/2006/november/documents/hf_b-en-xvi_spe_20061128_pres-religious-affairs.html> (8 March 2014).

²⁶Benedict XVI, Address, Mosque al-Hussein bin Talal - Amman, 9 May 2009 <http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20090509_capi_musulmani.html> (8 March 2014).

moves the heart to accept the other and serve him in charity. Undivided love for the One God and charity towards one's neighbor thus become the fulcrum around which all else turns."²⁷

The Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Verbum Domini* was a moment when something might have been said, given the Word of God in the Holy Qur'an was central to Muslim belief. He said: "We acknowledge that the Islamic tradition includes countless biblical figures, symbols and themes,"²⁸ but there was no acknowledgement of the Holy Book of Islam. Simply to use the phrase 'biblical figures' and be silent about their source is eccentric, leaving the reader with the question what value does the Pope put on the Holy Qur'an of Islam? A question that was not answered.

Pope Benedict's papacy from the perspective of dialogue of spirituality with Islam will be seen as a significant retreat from that of his predecessor. By drawing hard lines, it enabled those who had come slowly to the table of dialogue to stand back.

Of course different leaders have different agendas, but sometimes these differences will have reverberations well beyond the walls of the Catholic community. He undoubtedly made Muslim-Christian dialogue more difficult, perhaps empowering Christian and Muslim extremists. The very opposite of what Pope Paul VI intended in *Ecclesiam Suam*.

5. Francis: Reviving the Tree and Perhaps Planning a Forest

It is still early to see precisely what Pope Francis will achieve in dialogue with the Muslim world. What has happened suggests that the well pruned plant will start to grow again. His record of

²⁷Benedict XVI, "Address to the Gran Mufti, Mount of the Temple," Jerusalem, 12 May 2009 <https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20090512_gran-mufti.html> (8 March 2014).

²⁸Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, Vatican, 30 September 2010, 118 <http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini.html> (16 March 2014).

dialogue with the Jewish community in Buenos Aires gives ground for optimism and the priority he gives to meeting people suggests the plant will grow well again.

Four significant points can be made about the post-synodal exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*. First he acknowledges that our relationship with the followers of Islam has taken on great importance, since they are now significantly present in many traditionally Christian countries, where they can freely worship and become part of society.²⁹

He continues,

The sacred writings of Islam have retained some Christian teachings: Jesus and Mary receive profound veneration and it is admirable to see how Muslims both young and old, men and women, make time for daily prayer and faithfully take part in religious services. Many of them also have a deep conviction that their life, in its entirety is from God and for God. They also acknowledge the need to respond to God with an ethical commitment and with mercy towards those most in need."³⁰

There is a profound sense of the 'spiritual' behind those remarks. Stressing personal behaviour guided by the Word of God, including significant commitment by Muslims of all ages to daily prayer whose sincerity is shown by a high priority given to caring for those in real need and the conviction that each human life finds its fulfilment in God, all show a profound understanding of the faith alongside a commitment to living it out each day.

Second, he acknowledges Islam gains his respect because its teachings and obligations are lived each day by ordinary people, perhaps a hint that Catholics have something to learn from Muslims.

Third, he points out that Christians need a proper formation in Islam, "not only so that they can be solidly and joyfully

²⁹Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 252 <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html> (1 March 2014).

³⁰Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 252.

grounded in their own identity, but so that they can also acknowledge the values of others, appreciate the concerns underlying their demands and shed light on shared beliefs."³¹ This is indeed a call for balanced and accurate formation in the theology and spirituality of Islam so that "We Christians should embrace with affection and respect Muslim immigrants to our countries in the same way that we hope and ask to be received and respected in countries of Islamic tradition."³² Given the inbuilt prejudice in so many places this is an urgent priority.

Fourth, Pope Francis focuses on an important practical issue: Muslim immigrants should be embraced "with affection and respect, ... to our countries in the same way that we hope and ask to be received and respected in countries of the Islamic tradition."³³ Significantly he links this to a plea for freedom for Christians to worship and practice their faith "in the light of the freedom which followers of Islam enjoy in Western countries."³⁴ At the same time he obliges Christians to show "respect for true followers of Islam [which] leads us to avoid hateful generalizations, for authentic Islam and the proper reading of the Koran are opposed to every form of violence."³⁵

Those four points provide significant encouragement for Catholics to re-launch Muslim-Catholic dialogue. They encourage Catholics to reopen the door of their heart ever more widely to their Muslim neighbours.

The highly significant visit of Pope Francis to Israel and Palestine in May 2014 included visits to the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque. In his address he alluded to the role of Abraham, the one honoured by Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In that place Pope Francis said:

Nor can we forget that the pilgrimage of Abraham was also a summons to righteousness: God wanted him to witness his way of acting and to imitate him. We too wish to witness to

³¹Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 253.

³²Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 253.

³³Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 253.

³⁴Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 253.

³⁵Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 253.

God's working in the world, and so, precisely in this meeting, we hear deep within us his summons to work for peace and justice, to implore these gifts in prayer and to learn from on high mercy, magnanimity and compassion.³⁶

From that encouragement the Pope urged: "I make a heartfelt plea to all people and to all communities who look to Abraham: may we respect and love one another as brothers and sisters! May we learn to understand the sufferings of others! May no one abuse the name of God through violence! May we work together for justice and peace!"³⁷

The Pope's achievement on that historical occasion was to offer the watching world a new agenda and a new method; three faiths, deeply committed to this Holy Land, a commitment founded on divine revelation, not political expediency, are encouraged to build together through dialogue a strong framework of mutual respect as the only foundation that will bring genuine peace. There followed the invitation to the two Presidents (Peres of Israel and Abbas of Palestine) to make a pilgrimage to the Vatican where they could pray together in the Vatican Gardens. This gesture, carried out with sensitivity and appropriate recollection was a truly unique development: it stirred the hearts of millions of faithful Jews, Christians and Muslim around the world.

By being himself in his words and deeds, Pope Francis has revived hope in Catholic-Muslim dialogue. He has not fear of praying with Jews and Muslims suggesting that this is truly a dialogue of spirituality, the essential dimension underlying all other forms of Christian-Muslim dialogue.

6. Conclusion

I conclude with remarks about the world context as the foundation for future developments.

³⁶Pope Francis, "Address to the Gran Mufti of Jerusalem," <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco_20140526_terra-santa-gran-mufti-jerusalem.html> (16 March 2014).

³⁷Pope Francis, "Address to the Gran Mufti of Jerusalem" [online].

The legacy of Pope Benedict XVI will not go away quickly because first, many Catholics are deeply committed to his view and, second many Muslims will conclude the Catholic Church is not really serious about dialogue with Islam.

An important way of balancing the dialogue is through a dialogue of spirituality. Our respective revelations are articulated in what each of us believe is a 'Divine Word' obliging each to ponder, pray and repeat. This opens up an opportunity for Muslims and Christians to share their respective 'Revealed Word of God'.

In this way we can create a new shared 'spiritual memory', accurate, positive and respectful. That alone is the way to a solid foundation for a lasting peace based on ever-growing mutual respect under the unblinking eye of God.

Let me end as I began with a quotation from Christian de Chergé:

To wish to see or imagine the future is to make a fiction out of hope. ... Obviously, since we do not have God's imagination, when we think of the future, we think of it in terms of the past...When we are in a tunnel, we see nothing, but it is absurd to want the landscape when we come out to be the same as when we went in.³⁸

I will decipher it [that is, the answer to the question concerning the place of Islam in the plan of God] in the dazzling Easter light of Him who presents himself to me as the only possible Muslim, because he is all Yes to the will of the Father.³⁹

³⁸Salenson, *Christian de Chergé: Theology of Hope*, 195.

³⁹Salenson, *Christian de Chergé: Theology of Hope*, 39.