

RABITA COMMISSION AND CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM DIALOGUE IN PAKISTAN

James Channan*

Pakistan is a country where people of different faiths live together. Predominantly it is a Muslim country and Christians are a tiny minority. Christians and Muslims have been living together in this country since its inception in 1947 or rather even before it came into existence. We have just celebrated the 51st birth day of our nation. Our forefathers worked jointly for Pakistan movement and its independence. We, as Christians, are putting our full contribution for the progress, prosperity and integrity of our beloved home land at all levels, be it social, religious or political. There have been ups and downs in our Christian-Muslim dialogue. We have seen many glorious events as well as sad. Sad because there are times when we, as Christians, feel that we are reduced to a status of second-class citizens because of some existing discriminatory laws. For example, there is a system of separate electorates, minorities are not represented in the Senate, Christians do not hold even a single key post in the country. It is sad and a matter of grave concern.

In spite of all this we, as Pakistanis, feel that there are many problems which are common to all citizens whether, Christian, Muslim or Hindu. For example, there is mass poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, lack of basic housing, sanitation and clean water facilities. We are also faced with serious problems of drug abuse and fanaticism. We need to fight these problems together and make a better Pakistan. We need to create a sense of solidarity and one nation as Pakistanis. There is a grave need to create a sense of tolerance, acceptance, recognition, appreciation, equality, justice and freedom of religion. This was the dream of Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, father of the nation, which still need to be realized.

For the purpose of bringing harmony and mutual respect among Christians and Muslims through interfaith dialogue several efforts have been made by the Christians, both Catholics and Protestants, and by the Muslims as well. Since it is not possible to consider all these perspectives in one

*Rev. Fr. James Channan, OP is the Secretary of "Rabita Commission", Pakistan.

article. I have limited myself mainly to what the Catholic Church is doing in the field of Christian-Muslim dialogue.

Both Christians and Muslim believe in revealed religions, they are the largest religious groups in the world. Christians are 34% and Muslim 19% of the total world population. Followers of both Christianity and Islam are present all around the world and they are leading lives according to their believes. Both of these religions preach religious freedom, justice, tolerance, respect for human life, and help for the poor, needy, widows and orphans. They expect their followers to perform acts of charity, prayer, almsgiving, recite and read holy books: Quran and Bible. Both are missionary religions. Although there are a couple of doctrinal difference between them they have many common beliefs and values. So there is a need to emphasize those things which are common rather than those which divide us. That is what leads to interfaith dialogue in Pakistan.

Very often people ask, "what is dialogue?" In the words of Cardinal Francis Arinze, President, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Vatican, interreligious dialogue is fundamentally respect for the human person and respect for God. It is a positive opening of believers to others to listen, to respect, to grow and to look for the greater truth. Dialogue is a must because there are many religions in the world. There was no need of such dialogue if all peoples were of one faith. Inter-religious dialogue is to accept the reality that others exist. The same is true about the situation in Pakistan. There are people of different faiths here and most of them are either followers of Islam or Christianity. Christian-Muslim dialogue activities have been going on in Pakistan for the past few decades. These encounters take place in different cities and villages through different associations who are engaged to promote dialogue.

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Pakistan established National Commission for Christian-Muslim Relation in April, 1985. Most. Rev. Bishop John Joseph was the Chairperson and the writer was appointed as an Executive Secretary. I will confine myself to the Christian-Muslim dialogue activities performed through this commission. First of all let us begin with the aims and objectives of this commission, which are:

1. To encourage more contacts among Christians and Muslims
2. To deepen understanding of the basic beliefs of both Christianity and Islam
3. To publish findings and efforts of dialogue
4. To give lectures in different cities to encourage Muslims and Christians to create better relations and understanding on all levels of life.
5. To organize seminars on the national and international level
6. To invite Islamic and Christian scholars from Pakistan and elsewhere to give lectures
7. To motivate Christians to work with Muslims on all levels of life; be it academic, social, theological, religious or daily living

The National Commission for Christian-Muslim Relations, Pakistan is commonly known as, Rabita Commission. There are two members from each diocese for this commission. The members of this commission have arranged and participated in several meetings, seminars and conferences which took place throughout the year. All members of this commission engaged themselves at different levels be it academic, social, religious and informal dialogue particularly at grass-roots level. Religious greetings were exchanged, feasts celebrated, voice raised against injustice and efforts for peace made. Some members of the Rabita Commission were also visible both at Asian and international scenario.

I would like to mention, however, that it is not easy task to carry on such dialogue encounters. There are some persons who are not in favor of this and they do not want to have any sort of dialogue with each other. In spite of such difficulties and lack of conviction from some, we carry on the mission of dialogue.

A conference called 'Asian Journey' was organized in Mulatan in January 1997 where 36 participants came from 10 different countries. All delegates were very actively involved in promoting Christian-Muslim dialogue in different countries of Asia and elsewhere. All members of the Rabita Commission took part in it and brought other representatives with them and arranged exposures for the international delegates. This conference

brought diversity of cultures from Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand, Australia, Germany, The Netherlands, The Vatican and Italy. Due to visa difficulties some participants were not able to come from Japan, Philippines and India. Personal experiences were shared which empowered participants to continue in this challenging field of dialogue. The discussion was complemented by the input of both local and foreign Christian-Muslim dialogue experts.

An important part of this Asian Journey was the two days' exposure to Pakistani life. In small groups, the participants went to different parts of the country. Some went to rural areas, others to cities from Islamabad in the north Karachi in the south. The delegates were exposed to different social backgrounds. They were exposed to the poverty of the slums and what is being done to alleviate the suffering. They were also reminded of the country's glorious past and priceless heritage and the possibility of its future by the awe-inspiring palaces and forts and exquisitely beautiful mosques and shrines.

There were meetings of interreligious discussions and Bible and Quran groups in which the delegates took part with other Muslims and Christians. The opportunity was also provided to meet members of various NGO's who work together for or with Pakistan's poor, some had an opportunity to meet respected leaders of the Muslim spiritual movements.

During this Asian conference we were reminded of some of the problems we face daily and how we can cope with them. For example, interfaith marriages are becoming an increasingly significant fact of life. Positively, interfaith marriage can be a way of practicing the dialogue of life and serve as a bridge between communities. However, it can be socially unacceptable. A partner can be influenced to change religion and the religious upbringing of the children be compromised. It is a delicate matter so we have to be very careful in approaching such cases, whereas, at the same time learn how to deal with such situations. The Pakistani society is also faced with this situation. A careful study is needed for such encounters and marriages.

It is a fact that there is a lot of stress on interfaith dialogue. However, at the same time there is a grave need of ecumenical dialogue for there are many Christian groups in Pakistan. Several efforts have been made in this

regard, here in our country with the situation we are living in and the social, religious and cultural problems we are very often faced with daily. Therefore, it is imperative to have an ecumenical dialogue. It is obvious that for the past decade or two Catholics and Protestant churches have fought for their rights jointly. They feel that it is very much needed that we work jointly, otherwise, our survival will be at stake. As a result several ecumenical dialogue groups are working jointly to have dialogue with Muslims. These groups are present in Lahaore, Rawalpindi, Faisalabad, Toba Tek Singh, Gojra, Multan and Karachi to mention a few.

Dialogue activities which have taken place through Rabita Commission. Mr. Peter Nisari, who represents Archdiocese of Lahore, continues Christian-Muslim dialogue through the school where he teaches and also in Bahar Colony where he resides. During the first week of September, 1997 about 200 Muslim and Christian gathered near Bethlehem Chowk in Lahore and discussed common problems faced by them and their possible solutions. It was an occasion to show harmony and solidarity with each other.

A memorial service was held for late Mother Teresa at St. Francis Church, Bahar Colony, Lahore in which hundreds of Muslims and Christians participated and paid rich tribute to the services of Mother Teresa for suffering humanity. Another memorial service took place in Lahore Cathedral where big numbers from both communities took part. It was a manifestation of Christian and Muslim dialogue in prayer.

There was a Pakistan Golden Jubilee seminar held on 25th of July, 1997 in Lahore in which over 120 Muslims and Christians participated. In Nisari's parish Fr. John Joseph, OFM Cap., the Parish Priest, laid a lot of stress and preached about Christian-Muslim relations at all levels. Fr. Abid Habib OFM Cap. gave a lecture to more than 150 Muslim students at Minhajul Quran, a Muslim institute for religious studies. He responded confidently to several questions posed by them on the personality and teachings of Christ, including some difficult questions, e.g., what do we mean when we call him Son of God? Fr. Patrick McInerney has taken part in several Christian-Muslim dialogue programs in Lahore and other cities. He has also given lectures to different groups of laity and sisters and seminarians on Islam and interfaith dialogue

Fr. Mohan Victor and Sr. Nasreen Daniel from Hyderabad diocese participated and arranged several seminars, meetings and events which took

place in the whole diocese of Hyderabad to promote Christian-Muslim and interfaith dialogue. In this diocese there are over two million Hindus. There are also Bahais and Zoroastrians. So in this diocese there have been more interfaith dialogue meetings. For instance, on October, 11, 1997 Insan Dost Organization along with the collaboration of the Idara Amn-o-Insaf (Justice and Peace Commission) organized a seminar on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of Pakistan. Dr. Mubarak Ali, Rochi Ram and Aslam Memon presented papers.

On 9th of November, 97 Muslim and Christian Students Federations organized a rally against pollution in Sanghar. Hundred of teachers, students and businessmen participated in this rally. The speakers emphasized on working together against pollution. On November 23, Most. Rev. S.K. Dass, newly elected Protestant Bishop of Hyderabad diocese, offered full support for Christian-Muslim dialogue and appreciated the efforts made by Fr. Mohan and Sr. Nasreen for this noble cause. Sr. Nasreen organized programs in Sukkur and Hyderabad along with Idara Amn-o-Insaf for the cause of promoting tolerance and goodwill among Christians, Hindus and Muslims in their areas.

Fr. Archie deSouza wrote many news items and editorials on Christian-Muslim dialogue in "The Christian Voice", weekly newspaper from Karachi. He also gave lectures in several institutes on Christian-Muslim dialogue and also participated in couple of meetings which were arranged by the Christian Study Centre, Rawalpindi. He presented papers in these seminars. In December he gave a lecture to Karachi Goan Association on Christianity today in the light of socio-cultural situation. He met young priests of Karachi in February to speak about and elaborate the Asian Synod to take place in April-May, 1998. In different parishes interfaith Bible Services have taken place. Interfaith Bible and Quran sharing keeps in taking place on regular basis in Karachi.

A combined seminar for Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Balmikies was arranged in Rawalpindi in which 200 persons participated. There was a youth program arranged in Ayubia where Fr. James was invited to give one day seminar to both boys and girls youth groups while Mahboob gave seminars on human values.

He shared that persons should get an idea of dialogue. He feels that this commission needs to be known much more than it is at present time. All of us need to work for it. Fr. Shafiq Hadayat has conducted a couple of dialogue

programs in his diocese. He also organized a peace procession in Gojra in which hundreds of Muslims and Christians participated. There was also one joint pilgrimage arranged to the shrine of our Lady. In July, 1998 he organized a large meeting in Kushpur village where several Muslims and Christians gathered and spoke on how they can promote dialogue and good will among Christians and Muslims in that area. Fr. Khalid Rashid Asi from the same diocese is working in a Christian-Muslim dialogue Committee to bring about understanding and harmony when situations of crises arise. Recently after the death of Bishop John Joseph he organized a meeting of Christian and Muslim clergy to bring peace in Faisalabad.

Myself as an Executive Secretary of the Rabita Commission, have regular contacts with different associations who are working to promote dialogue on national and international level. I was invited by the Islamabad International University to a three day seminar in Islamabad from 4 to 6 October 1997. In this seminar 40 Muslim and Christian scholars came from 11 countries to present papers and reports on "Western Perceptions of Muslims and Muslim Perceptions of the West". I participated as an observer. I gave short communication from time to time to the international participants on the efforts of the Vatican and Rabita Commission in the promotion of interreligious dialogue. During this dialogue I noted that several Muslim delegates lauded the efforts of the Catholic Church for the promotion of inter-religious dialogue. The name of His Holiness Pope John Paul II was very explicitly mentioned several times. This conference was inaugurated by Farooq Ahmed Khan Leghari, President and concluded by Muhammad Nawaz Sharif, Prime Minister of Pakistan. This conference was a good opportunity to know many dialogue encounters which are taking place all around the world. The difficulties and fruits of dialogue were discussed in detail. There were many signs of progress in Christian-Muslim dialogue in the world.

Rabita Commission arranged Golden Jubilee Seminar on July 25, 1997 in Lahore. In this national seminar 120 persons, Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Balmikies and Sikhs participated from all over the country. The Rabita representatives from Lahore, Rawalpindi, Multan, Faisalabad and Hyderabad diocese were present. All diocesan Directors took a very active part in making this seminar a success. There were Muslims and Christians speakers

who highlighted joint efforts of Christians and Muslims in the Pakistan movement, independence and to the present year.

Late Bishop John Joseph, Chairman of the Rabita Commission participated in many social, religious and cultural activities of dialogue. He participated in conferences on national and international level. Many Muslims belonging to different walks of life such as professors, journalists, human rights activities and social workers, used to visit him with the view to promote Christian-Muslim dialogue encounter. He gave a lecture to a big group of audience in Australia on Christian-Muslim dialogue and the possible danger for this important apostolate. Bishop keeps on giving a lot of support, cooperation to make the dialogue results fine and fruitful.

The Rabita Commission is also aware that we will always find fundamentalists both among Muslim and Christians. So we should not be surprised. One possibility is meet the individual or a group who did it and discourage such attitude. We will find many Muslim who will agree with us. So solve this problem along with them. There is no need to retaliate but we must remain calm.

Tribute to Bishop John Joseph

The sudden death of Bishop John Joseph had shocked each one of us. We are all mourning his death. He took his life on 6th of May in Sahiwal as a protest against the blasphemy law known as 295C in Pakistan. According to this law whosoever says anything or writes anything against the Prophet of Islam will receive death sentence. Up to date this law has always been misused and not a single person has been proved committing offense against this law. One Christian called Ayub Mashih was given the death sentence in April by a judge of the sessions court in Sahiwal. Bishop was very upset about it. He contacted several lawyers but no one seemed willing to fight for Ayub. Bishop got so depressed that he took his own life in front of the court where death sentence was announced. The manner of this death has shocked all Christians and many Muslims.

Bishop Joseph was a great leader. He was an ardent promoter of Christian Muslim dialogue. He built one Rabita bridge between two villages where Christian and Muslims were living near Faisalabad. He also gave financial help to several organizations who were working for drug addicts,

child labor and in the field of education for the benefit of Muslims and Christians. Very recently he donated money for a mosque which is built in his native village, Khushpur, near Faisalabad. Bishop John was a man of dialogue, he was a member of several associations including Rotary Club International, Faisalabad where Muslims and Christians meet weekly. He wanted to promote this dialogue much more but some times he felt that some discriminatory laws in the country are a hindrance to such encounters. Therefore, he was fighting for equal rights for all citizens of the country.

We will miss Bishop Joseph very much. We pay rich tribute to all of his services, especially in the field of Christian-Muslim dialogue. He was a very brave man, voice of the voiceless, great promoter of justice and peace. He always longed for harmony, mutual respect and understanding among Christians and Muslims in Pakistan and elsewhere.

After the tragic death of Bishop John some Muslims and Christians have come together and have formed committees to lessen tensions and create an atmosphere of tolerance and harmony among them. A group of Christian and Muslim religious leaders met Mr. Muhammad Rafiq Tarar, President of Pakistan on 18th of May and expressed their desire to create a spirit of harmony. Mr. Tarar gave an assurance to safeguard the rights of all citizens and expressed condolences on the death of Bishop John. On May 19, a group of 50 Muslim and Christian religious leaders and scholars met in Islamabad and shared their views and strong commitment to promote peace and understanding among Christians and Muslims and also how to stop misuse of 295C. The Muslim religious leaders included some prominent personalities such as Maulana Dr. Abudl Qadir Azad, Allama Ahmed Zaheer and Maulana Faizul Qadri.

Government of Pakistan establishes Commission for Inter-Faith Dialogue

Raja Zafarul Haq, Federal Minister for Religious and Minorities Affairs has announced the formation of a Commission for Inter-Faith Dialogue which will consist of 20 members. There would be four Christians in this commission. It is hoped that this commission will bring about some relief to the miseries of minorities and will be in a position to bring about peace and tolerance among people of different faiths in Pakistan.

Here I would like to mention with gratitude a number of Christian-Muslim and interfaith dialogue groups, associations and centers which are fully involve in this field. They include:

1. Christian Study Centre, Rawalpindi.
2. Pakistan Association of Interreligious Dialogue, Lahore.
3. Faith-in-Action Group, Lahore.
4. Dominican Centre, Lahore.
5. Loyola Hall, Lahore.
6. Anjaman Roshan Khiyal Musanafeen, Lahore.
7. Universal Muslim-Christian Brotherhood, Rawalpindi.
8. World Conference on Religion and Peace, Pakistan
9. Insan Dost Association, Hyderabad.
10. Christian-Muslim Dialogue Committee, Multan
11. Pastoral Institute, Multan
12. Rabita Committee, Faisalabad
13. Bible and Quran Group, Karachi
14. National Muslim-Christian Dialogue, Gujrat

Some of our Christian publication such as *Catholic Naqib*, *Shadaab Achah Charwaha*, *Sawan*, *The Christian Times*, *Nai Duniya*, *Jodat*, *Mukashafa*, *The Christian Voice*, *The Minorities Times*, *Ham Sukhan*, *Shalom*, *Tajdeed* and *Ham Ahang* have published several news items, articles and editorials on Christian-Muslim dialogue. The magazines called *al-Mushir*, published by the Christian Study Centre, is entirely devoted to publish articles of interfaith and ecumenical dialogue. All of these magazines are playing an important role to promote Christian-Muslim encounter

At the end of this article I would like to say that interfaith dialogue is a must in our country. There is an urgent need to resolve economic, religious and social issues that we are faced with. When we come together around one table we can present our point of view in a very appropriate way. This helps to clear misconceptions which we might have. We need to promote interfaith encounter at all levels. We need to encourage all those people who are working in this field. This is sign of the time. It is difficult but not impossible.