

## CHRISTIANS IN THE ARAB WORLD AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

I would like to thank Fr Frank Ryan for his invitation to speak to you, and to thank you all for turning up to examine this theme of the situation of Christians in the Arab World. Pope Francis often complains about indifference towards the plight of Christians. Your presence this afternoon shows that you are not indifferent.

I have given a rather general title to this talk. Let me explain. We are dealing with what some call the MENA region, this is short for the Middle East and North Africa which covers the whole of the Arab World. Neither of the terms “persecution” or “suffering” enter into the title. I do intend to say something first of all about the ways in which Christians are suffering, and then go on to ask the question: What can interreligious dialogue do in a context where there is persecution?

So first let me describe some of the sufferings that Christians are enduring in this region. It is, I think, useful to make a distinction between persecution perpetrated by the State and violence against Christians carried out by individuals or groups. Of course, to those who are undergoing suffering, whether or not it is to be termed “persecution” is a purely academic question. We should also be aware that when different States are considered, there are considerable differences. In fact, although we may talk in general about the persecution or the suffering of Christians, no two situations are exactly the same.

Let me point out first of all that the suffering of Christians is not confined to the MENA region. In **Pakistan**, Christian communities exist and are allowed to function, even if they form only a small minority of the population. Here particularly it is the Laws against Blasphemy which give rise to problems. These laws can be invoked for many reasons, and public opinion is easily aroused against those who are accused of defamation of the Prophet or of desecration of the Qur’an. Many people, both Christians and Muslims, are advocating the abolition or at least the amendment of these laws, but no Government has been willing to tackle this question.

**Nigeria**, particularly in the North of the country, has in recent years been witnessing multiple attacks against churches. These would appear to have been carried out by Boko Haram, an Islamic movement opposed to Western culture which it considers to be destructive of Islam. This movement is in favour of the strict application of *shari’a* law, already introduced in a number of northern States. The Federal Government is blamed by some for negligence and weakness in opposing Boko Haram, but it cannot be accused of persecution of Christians.

Then there is the example of **China**. The Government of the People’s Republic of **China** protests that it is not against the existence of different religions, and indeed Buddhist, Christian and Muslim communities exist within this vast country. What it aims to do is to exercise control over these

religions. This is why the Uigurs, Muslims in Western China, are being subject to “re-education”. It is also the reason why the Government set up the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association to govern the affairs of the Catholic community. The main objection of the Government is the recognition of the authority of the Holy See, particularly with regard to the appointment of bishops, since this is considered as foreign interference in national affairs. Those Catholics who wish to maintain the link with the Holy See and obedience to the Holy Father, especially Church leaders such as bishops and priests, often find themselves in prison or subject to “re-education”. Yet in China churches do exist, and communities are able to gather for worship.

By way of contrast, in **Saudi Arabia** the public practice of Christianity is forbidden and no churches are allowed to exist in the country. The official line is that Christians are free to practise their religion in private, but no public gathering for worship is permitted. A prominent Saudi, a member of the Shura (the King’s advisory Council), told us some years ago that his sister, a Muslim like himself, was not allowed to speak in public because the authorities were afraid of her influence over people, especially women. Although there are millions of Christians present in Saudi Arabia as foreign workers, technicians or traders, any public manifestation of Christianity is prohibited, and people are put in prison if they are found with bibles or religious publications in their possession. At present, through the influence of Muhammad Ben Salman (MBS), the Crown Prince, the religious police have lost some of their power.

Saudi Arabia is in fact an exception. In the other countries of the Arabian Peninsula, whether **Bahrain**, or most of the **Gulf States**, the **Emirates**, as well as **Qatar** and **Oman**, and also **Yemen**, Christians are allowed to gather for worship. In a number of these States, such as **Dubai** and **Abu Dhabi**, the rulers have granted land for the construction of churches. I was in Abu Dhabi in October 2016, and it is in fact amazing to see the thousands of people who attend the Catholic Church there. The congregations are made up mainly of Indians and Filipinos, but there are also Arabs, Europeans and Americans. The cathedral, built in 1983 to hold about 800 has proved to be too small. A second, larger church has now been built in the same compound, but even when the two churches are being used at the same time there is not enough room for everyone, and many remain in the courtyard, following Mass on large screens. Over the week-end, from Friday to Sunday, some fifteen Masses are celebrated in English, and about the same number in a variety of other languages. Within the compound the Church is free to act as it wishes, organizing catechism classes, holding meetings for different groups, but Christians are not allowed to propagate their religion in these countries. Nevertheless there are schools run by women religious which attract many pupils, the majority of whom are Muslims. Attention was drawn to Abu Dhabi last year by the visit of Pope Francis, and his signing of a joint agreement with Dr Ahmad al-Tayyeb, Sheikh al-Azhar. Pope Francis was allowed to celebrate Mass in public, in the stadium, for about 150,000 people, among whom were a good number of Muslims. This was an absolute first.

I would like to say a word now about **North Africa**. In **Morocco**, as in other countries of **North Africa**, churches exist but are confined to foreigners. In Morocco, in particular, any form of Christian propaganda is severely prohibited, being considered as a form of proselytism. Yet Morocco too has welcomed Pope Francis. In Algeria and Tunisia there are some local Christians, the majority of whom are Protestants. Their existence appears to be tolerated, yet converts to Christianity are nevertheless liable to be prosecuted and punished. At the moment it is difficult for foreign priests and church workers to obtain visas for Algeria and this makes the work of the Church more difficult. The government of Algeria has stipulated that worship can only be held in officially recognized buildings. This makes it difficult and even dangerous for any celebrations to take place where there is no church. The Government of Algeria nevertheless welcomed the Beatification of the Martyrs of Algeria on 8 December 2018, and the ceremony went off very well. Mention was made of the numerous Algerians who lost their lives in the same “dark period”, including over 100 imams.

With reference to religious liberty, it is worthwhile noting that Morocco and Tunisia both have small, but officially recognised, Jewish communities.

In **Libya** too, the Christian communities are made up of foreigners. There were many Filipinos, men and women, engaged in the medical services, as also a good number of Polish Catholics working in different fields. Because of the civil war that has been raging since the fall of Gaddafi, many of these Catholics have been forced to leave. Yet the Church, served by the Franciscans, is still present.

In the countries of North Africa, as in the Gulf, Christians are almost entirely expatriates, but in the other countries of the Middle East there are indigenous Christian communities whose origins pre-date Islam. **Egypt** is the country with the largest number of Christians, estimated to be about 10% of a population of over 90 million. The majority of these Christians belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church. In Egypt one could say that though Christians and Muslims have been living side by side for centuries, ever since the advent of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, sectarian violence has been almost endemic. When disputes occur, they often taken on a religious colour.

I happened to be serving as Nuncio in Egypt at the time of what has been called the Arab Spring. In an attempt to describe this “Arab Spring“, I underlined three main grievances which brought people to demonstrate against their governments: oppression by dictatorial regimes; tight control of information; the increasing gap between the rich and the poor. To these grievances corresponded “the desire for a greater possibility of political involvement, for greater freedom of expression and for a better distribution of wealth”<sup>1</sup>. These revolutionary movements, initiated mainly by young people, and in Egypt by Muslims and Christians together, were not religiously motivated, nor were

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Michael L. FITZGERALD, “The Arab Spring outside in”, *Islamochristiana* 39(2013) pp. 161-173, here p.162.

they ideological. They aimed at obtaining greater freedom, more justice and true respect for human dignity.

Since the forced resignation of President Mubarak, the rise to power of Islamists, and then the army intervention to depose President Mohammad Morsi, a Muslim Brother, there have been many attacks against Christians, with the destruction of churches, shops and dwellings. The world was appalled by the public slaughter of Coptic workers on the shore in Libya, and 2017 saw the Palm Sunday bomb attacks on two Coptic churches with considerable loss of life. This violence, carried out by Islamist groups, is condemned by religious leaders, both Christian and Muslim, and also by the Government. Here is a case where it would be wrong, in my opinion, to speak about persecution. President Al-Sissi has shown great respect for Christians, and yet Christians complain that the forces of order do not give them sufficient protection. They also complain of discrimination. Freedom of worship exists, and the churches of the various Christian communities are well frequented, but it could be said that there is no freedom of religion in the sense that it is very difficult, if not well-nigh impossible, for an Egyptian Muslim to embrace the Christian faith and to be officially recognised as a Christian.

There are also legal dispositions which go against Christians. For instance, if a married Christian man converts to Islam, his children will automatically be considered to be Muslims. A case occurred while I was in Egypt. Two young boys, twins aged about 12, whose father had become a Muslim and had abandoned his Christian wife, had to sit the exam on religious knowledge. They were presented with a paper on Islam. Each of them refused to answer the questions, writing on the paper *Anâ masîhî*, "I am a Christian". They were made to sit the exam again, and the same thing happened. With the support of their mother, they held out, and eventually were allowed to proceed to the next class without taking the exam.

The current conflict in **Syria**, a conflict which has been going on for so many years now, has brought immense suffering to Christians as to other citizens of this country. Already in November 2014, Pope Francis and Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, in a joint statement, said: "Many of our brothers and sisters are being persecuted and have been forced violently from their homes. It even seems that the value of human life has been lost, that the human person no longer matters and may be sacrificed to other interests. And, tragically, all this is met by the indifference of many. As Saint Paul reminds us, 'If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together' (*I Co 12:26*)" A group of Jesuits involved in the Middle East wrote, in June 2016: "according to OCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs), 13.5 million Syrians (out of an estimated population of 22 million in 2010) need humanitarian aid, 4.8 million have already left the country to seek refuge in neighboring countries or in Europe, and 6.6 million are displaced within their own country because of

violence.”<sup>2</sup> The majority of these suffering people are Muslims, but there are many Christians among them. If Christian churches and other properties have been targeted, it is often because they have been taken over by armed forces and used as bases from which to engage in combat. It is also true that the strongly Islamic character of many of the forces of opposition has led them to acts of violence against Christians. When areas of Syria have been taken over by Islamist groups, they have often imposed a strict interpretation of Islamic law, including the payment of *jizya*, a special tax levied on those who refuse to embrace Islam. Yet life goes on in Syria, and in some areas reconstruction is under way, and the Christians are playing a leading role.

In **Iraq** also, where the Catholic Chaldean Church was the largest Christian body, attacks are being carried out on Christians by different groups, particularly of course by the so-called Islamic State. 2014 was a particularly difficult year, since Christians were driven out of their traditional and ancient homelands in the north of the country. This was the work of the forces of the Islamic State or DAESH. Though it would be difficult to blame the Government of Iraq for these attacks, Christians do feel that they are not sufficiently protected. Many have sought refuge in the area run by Kurds. More recently, following the defeat of these forces, in Mosul for example, Christians have been able, and are being encouraged, to return to their homes in the Nineveh valley. There is an immense work of reconstruction to be undertaken.

In the **Holy Land (Israel, Jordan and Palestine)** the proportion of Christians is as follows: Israel, about 250.000 (2.5%); Jordan, between 220,000 and 225,000 (3%); Palestine, 50.000 (1.2%). These communities form a mosaic of Churches, the most important being the Greek Orthodox, the Latin Rite Catholics (Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem) and the Greek Catholic or Melkite Church. A distinguishing feature of the local Christian communities in Jordan and Palestine is that their members are Arabs and are thus fully integrated into society (the situation of course in Israel is different). Archbishop Maroun Lahham, a former Auxiliary of the Latin Patriarch in Amman, in a talk delivered in Paphos in March 2017, explained that the Christians in Jordan and Palestine know very well that they constitute minorities in their countries. They do not really like to use this term, preferring to speak of being few in number, but their historical experience has forged the mentality of a minority: an exaggerated sense of their own identity, a tendency to seek protection from outside, fear of engaging in the public square, over-emphasis on perceived discrimination. On the other side, the Muslim majority tends to dominate and does not always pay sufficient attention to the rights of the minority. In Palestine, particularly in the occupied territories, the Christians suffer from the limitations on freedom of movement imposed by the occupying power<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Text of a group of Jesuits involved in the Middle East, written at the request of the Superior General of the Society of Jesus (June 2016); the original French version of this text has been published in *Oeuvre d'Orient* no.786 (Janvier, Février, Mars 2017) pp.20-26; English translation, no.2 (subsequently referred to as “Jesuit text”)

<sup>3</sup> Maroun LAHHAM, « La Liberté de Religion en Jordanie », paper presented at a conference organized by MISSIO in Paphos, March 2017.

During the demonstrations provoked by the closure of the *Harâm al-sharîf*, Catholic priests were exhorting the member of their parish communities not to resort to violence. They understand the frustration which continued Israeli occupation arouses, but they teach that violence has no part in the Christian way of life and they promote non-violent means of protest.

There is much talk in the Western world about Islamophobia. The Holy See has been advocating greater attention to the phenomenon of Christianophobia. Mgr Silvano Tommasi, who at the time was Observer of the Holy See at the UN in Geneva, stated in 2011 that a survey had shown that out of 100 people killed because of religious hatred, 75 were Christian. This figure refers to what is happening around the world, and not only in the Middle East. It is perhaps good to remember this, so that all the blame is not laid on Muslims. In Pakistan, as I said above, Christian communities exist and are allowed to function, even if they form only a small minority of the population. In neighbouring India both Christians and Muslims have suffered at the hands of radical Hindus. In Sri Lanka it has happened that Christian churches have been attacked by Buddhists, in retaliation for the verbal attacks on Buddhism by some Christian preachers. In Brazil and other countries of Latin America, individual Christians are frequently murdered because of their activities on behalf of the poor and oppressed. Other examples could be given, but these are perhaps sufficient to illustrate the complexity of the situations. The question to which we must turn now is to what can be done to remedy matters and whether interreligious dialogue can help in these situations, and if so in what way.

It could be said that the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East in October 2010 had prepared Catholics for this moment. The Apostolic Exhortation that followed this Synod stated that “Catholics of the Middle East, the majority of whom are native citizens of their countries, have the duty and right to participate fully in national life, working to build up their country. They should enjoy full citizenship and not be treated as second-class citizens or believers” (25)<sup>4</sup>. It should be noted that participation in national life is both a right and a duty. The tendency of minorities is to stay out of the fray in order to protect themselves, but this detachment often plays against them. Recognizing the fact that Catholics had tended generally to keep away from politics, the Bishops in Egypt, at the time of the Arab Spring, promoted special lectures and conferences, mainly for young people. The aim was to create greater political awareness, and this included an explanation of constitutional matters so that there could be a true understanding of the importance of the

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<sup>4</sup> Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente*, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_exh\\_20120914\\_ecclesia-in-medio-orientale.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20120914_ecclesia-in-medio-orientale.html); the number in between brackets refers to the paragraph.

referendum to be held on the proposed new Constitution. It was interesting to see that the focus of the Bishops was not on the rights of Christians alone, but on the rights and duties of citizens in general. Unfortunately, the victory in the parliamentary elections of the Islamist tendency, represented by both the Muslim Brothers and the Salafists, and the subsequent election of a Muslim Brother as President, acted as a damper on the enthusiasm of Christians.

The group of Jesuits from the Middle East, referred to above, made the following comment: “After the hopes that the “Arab Spring” of 2011 raised, Christians, and a good number of the inhabitants of the area now live in deep uncertainty. The situation has become relatively stable in Egypt today (this was written before the more recent violence), but it remains volatile and uncertain in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya where military operations have become increasingly international. It is not possible to forget the situation in the Holy Land where the lack of a political settlement creates permanent tensions between Palestinians and Israelis, leading to outbursts of violence from which both peoples suffer.”<sup>5</sup>

These Jesuits call for free speech and for the development of democracy. They state: “Education for citizenship requires genuine familiarity with human rights and reflection about the concept of “laicity” (understood as citizenship that recognizes and respects cultural and religious plurality). Under these conditions, religion will have its appropriate place in the public arena and will be able to make positive contributions to living together.”<sup>6</sup> They insist on the true nature of Christian identity, which cannot be simply defined in opposition, i.e. not Muslim, not Jewish, nor reduced to the observance of liturgical traditions, or considered as a “plus value” in plans being made for migration. This Christian identity is to be based on a true spiritual experience, encouraged and fostered by dedicated pastors. They even speak of “spiritual resistance”, by which they mean “the sense of belonging to Christ in order to find again the meaning of a presence that is sometimes undermined by violence and intolerance, or threatened by individualistic and consumerist trends.” They go on to say that “such spiritual roots will bring renewed impetus to make God’s care, proximity and mercy known in different social realities, especially in education, in healthcare and in development.”<sup>7</sup> To live this Christian identity is not an easy task; in fact it could be considered a call to heroism.

Many people from the Middle East, including Christians, are seeking to flee from areas of conflict. This is understandable, and the Catholic Church encourages communities and countries to welcome these refugees and help them to integrate into new surroundings. On the other hand, the Church’s wish is to bring an end to the conflicts and to create the necessary conditions for individuals and families to remain in their own countries. In April 2017, Archbishop Paul Gallagher, presently the Secretary for Relations with States (in effect, the Vatican’s Foreign Minister), took part in a meeting in Brussels on the situation in Syria. In his intervention he stressed two things: the need for continuing humanitarian aid to all those suffering from the war, and the search for an inclusive and Syrian-led

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<sup>5</sup> Jesuit text no.8.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* no.12; “laicity” is an attempt to render in English the French “laïcité” which means the secular character of a State taken positively.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* no.20.

solution to the political conflict. He quoted the appeal made by Pope Francis on 9 January 2017 to the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See: *to make every effort to encourage serious negotiations for an end to the conflict, which is causing a genuine human catastrophe. Each of the parties must give priority to international humanitarian law, and guarantee the protection of civilians and needed humanitarian aid for the populace*". Archbishop Gallagher concluded by saying: "Of deep concern remains the vulnerable situation of Christians and religious minorities in the Middle East, who suffer disproportionately the effects of war and social upheaval in the region, to such an extent that their very presence and existence are gravely threatened. As His Holiness Pope Francis has repeatedly recalled, their continued presence can enable them to fulfil their historic and essential role of contributing to the social cohesion of those societies, which will be of vital importance for the future of the entire region."<sup>8</sup>

### *The Role of Interreligious Dialogue*

Let me now examine what interreligious dialogue can do in the situations that we have been considering. First it is useful to remind ourselves of the definition of dialogue as given by the document *Dialogue and Proclamation*:<sup>9</sup>

In the context of religious plurality, dialogue means "all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment" (*Dialogue and Mission* 3), in obedience to truth and respect for freedom. It includes both the witness and exploration of respective religious convictions (DP 9).

One of the aims of interreligious dialogue, indeed one could consider it the first aim, is to allow people of different religions to live together in peace and harmony. This is particularly the aim of the *dialogue of life* "where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations" (DP 42). This is very relevant to our present concern, for where people of different religions live together, not just side by side, but as a single human community where there reigns an atmosphere of respect and trust, it is easier for them to resist outside influences which would arouse sectarian tension and violence. It must not be assumed that such a dialogue of life develops automatically. It has to be worked at; it requires constant effort, to increase mutual understanding, to overcome prejudices, to build up trust. A Christian-Muslim dialogue group on the West Coast of the U.S.A., stated in a report of one of their meetings which took place after the events of 11 September 2001: "Our Muslim friends felt an extra measure of pain because these terrible acts, which clearly violated their faith, were strongly associated with Islam". The partners in dialogue agreed "that accurate introductory information is a first step for overcoming false ideas and negative views of one another and for breaking down

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Vatican Press Office. Bulletin 5 April 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation. Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, 1991; see Francesco Gioia (ed.), *Interreligious Dialogue. The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church from the Second Vatican Council to John Paul II (1963 – 2005)*, Boston, Pauline Books & Media, 2006, pp. 1156-1189. The document is cited as DP followed by the paragraph number.



barriers to understanding.” They noted the fatigue of responding to “false accusations and random placements of blame”, the frustration when encountering bias, yet they also acknowledged their need to confront their own prejudices.<sup>10</sup>

It is also true that projects which unite the different religious communities can be very helpful in creating harmony. This leads us to consider the *dialogue of action*, where people of different religions work together to promote justice, reconciliation and peace. An excellent example comes from Kaduna in Nigeria where a Protestant Pastor and an Imam have been engaged together in missions of reconciliation. Each of them had been actually fighting for his own faction, but each realized that violence would only bring further suffering. They met, became friends, and have since been travelling together, both within Nigeria and elsewhere, to spread their message of reconciliation.<sup>11</sup> In the Middle East there has been the example of Muslims helping Christians to restore a monastery that had been seriously damaged.

In a more official way, the World Conference on Religions for Peace, now called simply Religions for Peace, has been engaged in setting up interreligious councils at national and regional levels. This initiative has been particularly important in places where conflict has taken on an interreligious colour, such as in Bosnia. In some cases, members of such interreligious councils, especially in Africa, have undertaken visits to different countries in order to encourage reconciliation.

There can be interreligious cooperation in opposing legislation which is deemed to be unjust. Mention has been made of the blasphemy laws in Pakistan which often give rise to abuse. Muslims in that country have backed Christians in the call for modification of these laws. Such joint action has been made possible by the fellowship that has developed through the Pakistan Association for Inter-Religious Dialogue.

Joint action is not possible unless there is an agreement on the aim of the action and the means to achieve this aim. This supposes prior discussion, and so we see the need for *the dialogue of discourse*. Over the years, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue has been engaged in meetings that have examined or touched upon different aspects of human rights. For instance, there have been bilateral dialogues with Muslims on the rights of children, and on the use of the earth’s resources, on migrants and refugees, on the place of religion in society, on the role of the media<sup>12</sup>. The Commission for Religious Relations with Muslims made a study on religious liberty, examining the principles of religious liberty according to both Christianity and Islam, and then adding case studies. The papers were discussed with a select group of Muslims before being

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<sup>10</sup> The West Coast Dialogue between American Catholics and Muslims, *Friends and not Adversaries: a Catholic-Muslim Spiritual Journey*, in *Islamochristiana* 30(2004) pp.178-9.

<sup>11</sup> Their experience has been made into a DVD *The Pastor and the Imam* produced with the encouragement of the Movement for Moral Rearmament (now renamed Initiatives for Change).

<sup>12</sup> Reports on these meetings have been published in *Pro Dialogo*, the journal of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

finalized.<sup>13</sup> A multilateral seminar was held on religious sources for peace according to the Holy Books of different religious traditions<sup>14</sup>. Such exchanges may not be entirely satisfactory, and may appear like mere drops in an ocean of conflict, but they contribute nevertheless to creating greater understanding and a will to cooperate to maintain peace.

Discussion and action should be accompanied by prayer. This was the conviction that led Saint John Paul II to invite Christians and the followers of other religions to Assisi in October 1986 in order to pray for peace. It was why he invited Jews, Christians and Muslims to a special week-end of prayer for peace in Europe, especially in the Balkans, and again invited representatives of religions to gather in Assisi as a response to the events of September 2001. At this latter gathering various commitments were taken. Similarly, after his visit to the Holy Land, Pope Francis invited the late Shimon Peres, then President of Israel, and Mahmoud Abbas, the President of the Palestinian Authority, to come to the Vatican to pray for peace. This prayer, at which Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople was also present, took place on 8 June 2014. Pope Francis requested that “a minute for peace” be observed every year on this date. All these activities could be considered as belonging to the *dialogue of religious experience*. They are a way of recognizing that in order for peace to be established and maintained, there is need of the assistance of a Higher Power or, as we Christians would say, of God’s grace.

Prayer should lead to action. Here the final paragraph of the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* is relevant. It contains the following statement:

We cannot truly pray to God, the Father of all, if we treat any people in other than brotherly fashion, for all men are created in God’s image. Man’s relation to God the Father and man’s relation to his fellowmen are so dependent on each other that the Scripture says: ‘He who does not love, does not know God’ (1 Jn 4:8). There is no basis, therefore, for any discrimination between individual and individual, or between people and people, arising either from human dignity or the rights which flow from it (NA 5).

Sometimes, however, the suffering is so great that the words of our prayers seem inadequate and, like Job, we are reduced to silence. Yet even this shared silence can be a powerful incentive to continue to work together to overcome all manifestations of violence.

### *Conclusion*

What conclusion can be drawn from these reflections? One would be that the limitations of interreligious dialogue must be respected. Of itself it cannot eliminate the persecution of Christians or of any other religious minority. Peace can only come about through negotiations, and this means first establishing a climate of confidence. Interreligious dialogue can, however, by contributing to

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<sup>13</sup> *Religious Liberty: A Theme for Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, Vatican City, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> *Spiritual Resources of the Religions for Peace: Exploring the sacred texts in the promotion of peace*, Vatican City, 2003.

greater understanding and mutual appreciation, help to prevent such persecution from taking place. It is perhaps to be considered more as preventive medicine than a cure.

I would like to add one further reflection. We naturally hear much about persecution and violence, because these hit the headlines. The absence of conflict is not considered to be newsworthy. The media have to be encouraged to report the Good News of instances where people of different religions are living together in peace and harmony. Such examples would be a positive way of combating discrimination and persecution.

Since this year, 2019, we are celebrating the 8<sup>th</sup> centenary of the encounter of St Francis of Assisi with Sultan al-Kamil at Damietta, in Egypt, allow me to conclude with the following invocation based on the life of St Francis:

**Almost blind, Francis sang of the beauty of God's creation.**

**In the very heart of war, he recognized God's presence in the heart of the "enemy".**

**Recognizing himself to be a sinner among sinners, he wept at the thought of God's mercy.**

**Through his intercession, may we, despite our blindness, be humble yet grateful peacemakers, and so be worthy children of our God.**