

Spirituality as a Path to Our Common Humanity: Pope Francis' Interreligious Dialogue of Encounter, Accompaniment and Friendship

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Ramadan Mubarak!

It is indeed a pleasure to be with you this evening. My thanks to the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago for this gracious invitation to join you here at the Islamic Foundation in Villa Park for the 22nd Annual Muslim-Catholic Iftar. For more than two decades we have gathered at this special time of the holy month of Ramadan to share in the breaking of your fast and to deepen our understanding and friendship with one another. We are blessed to be with you tonight.

The theme of this evening – *Spirituality as a Path to Our Common Humanity* – is a timely one. For we are challenged daily by the increasing tensions in our communities, across our nation and our world. It seems to me that our first reaction these days is often to take sides in opposition to one another. We have lost the sense of common space where true dialogue can flourish, where we can speak and be heard without shouting, where

we listen with respect to those with whom we may disagree. There has been an increasing erosion of civility in the public square that now seems to demand everything be done 'my way' and the very thought of compromise as a way forward is considered shameful surrender. Those who shout the loudest with a mean and ridiculing turn of phrase get the most attention. And so, we may even feel shocked and stunned in disbelief as hateful rhetoric and violent acts have become almost the norm.

We live in challenging times.

And yet, I believe there is a longing in our hearts to truly know one another. For we are here this evening in a gathering of friendship, across religious and cultural divides. As Christians and as Muslims we believe in the one, true, merciful God. The God who calls us together this night to recognize each other as sisters and brothers. The God who calls us to walk together on the path of our common humanity as a way of life.

As we consider a spirituality of this path we are invited to look deeply into our hearts for what we know is good, true and beautiful. Christians understand the word spirituality as referring to how we describe and live out our relationship with God. What is the essence of our foundation for being? From what grounding do we choose our actions and

our words? Guided by our God we realize that we cannot reduce 'spirituality' to only a sense of morals and ethics. For while we do not dismiss them, spirituality is rather a profound understanding of what it means to be truly human. For we, women and men alike, are "made in the image and likeness of God" as we find in the first chapter of Genesis.¹ The foundation of our very being rests in the heart of God. A generous heart overflowing with love and tenderness, mercy and forgiveness. This is our common heritage! This is our path! This is our example of how to live our own lives with dignity and how to live with one another. For as we remember God we remember the very sacredness of our humanity.

Jesus (PBUH) gave us two commandments.

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these." ²

Treating each other with respect and dignity, caring for each other's needs, tending to the sick and suffering, walking with those who are alone,

¹ Genesis 1:26.

² Mark 12: 30-31

striving for justice – all this we are called to do and be – from our very nature being created in the image of God. As Cardinal Cupich noted last March in his remarks on the ‘Joint Declaration of Pope Francis and Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb: Document on Human Fraternity’ – ‘the Catholic Church teaches that the love of one’s neighbor is inseparable from the love for God ³ which is also hinted at in the Qur’an, which says: “People, we created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that *you should get to know one another.*”⁴

Pope Francis consistently raises the importance of getting to know one another through interreligious dialogue. He cites three main approaches – encounter, accompaniment and friendship.

As a path to our common humanity he promotes a ‘culture of encounter’ cultivating goodwill, recognizing each other as brothers and sisters and grounding our actions and our speech with human dignity. We begin with tolerance and move to a deep level of respect for one another, encountering each other with a spirit of openness. We welcome differences and do not fear the other. We speak our faith and listen to others who

³ CCC, 1878

⁴ al-Hujurat, 49:13

believe differently, allowing our hearts to be opened by what we recognize as “a ray of that Truth which enlightens all people”⁵ as noted in the Declaration of the Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*. True encounter also means we look to the margins with real purpose, with intentionality as we welcome the stranger, going out of our way to travel to meet those whom we do not yet know. As perhaps we did this evening. Encounter requires from us a certain humility. Of admitting that we know that we do not know. And that we have much to learn.

Pope Francis also speaks of ‘accompaniment’ as a hallmark of interreligious dialogue. To accompany each other is to walk together the path of our common humanity. That is - a pilgrimage -a journey undertaken with a spiritual intent. To accompany each other as we seek a path of our common humanity is to be on pilgrimage together. As we walk along this path we listen to each other’s stories. We share meals and may walk for awhile in silence. On our pilgrimage we may stop and notice the beauty of the earth. Look with wonder to the night sky. Laugh. We may cry together. To truly accompany each other opens our hearts as we genuinely

⁵ NA, 2

share our human journey. We allow ourselves to become vulnerable and to trust each other. We become friends.

Pope Francis speaks of interreligious dialogue as leading to true friendship – authentically being present for each other. In good times and in bad. In real friendship our Christian and Muslim communities have come together recently to support one another after horrific acts of violence. The attacks at mosques, churches and synagogues here and across the world compel us to raise our voices and stand together for peace and in peace. We stand together – in solidarity – in prayer, listening to one another, being present with reverence for the sacredness of human life. At times we also challenge one another because we must! And we can. Because in the strength of our relationships, that’s what good friends do. Help me to understand! I see you! I hear you!

Virtues we cultivate on our path, our pilgrimage together – humility, mercy, generosity, forgiveness, love – also help us live a life filled with joy and wonder each day. For we are then enveloped within the one quality that is the hallmark of profound faith – kindness. It takes strength to be kind. Being kind to one who is kind to us is how we begin. Offering kindness in response to a harsh or cruel word or action takes strength. And

courage. It takes great love, humility and compassion. Being kind to one who is cruel opens the door for change – and the possibility of an outcome of peace. It allows us to see in our brothers and sisters the woundedness from which cruelty springs. Kindness carries the possibility to halt the cycle of hatred and violence and invites us into a new world where the sacredness of our common humanity is lived.

A spirituality, a way of living that reflects our relationship with God, that offers kindness to the world, builds us up. Our faith in a loving and merciful God radiates through us and out into the world creating peace. Our kindness to one another shows God's face to the world, one that is filled with love and possibility. Kindness is the great sign faith being lived. Kindness empowers us to live with meekness – which is the ability to willingly take a step back so that another may take a step forward. It sustains us on the path of encounter, accompaniment and friendship.

Approaching the conclusion of this reflection, I would like to offer two thoughts. First, 800 years ago, in the spring of 1219 and in the height of war, Francis of Assisi made a pilgrimage to Damietta and met Malek al-Kamil, the sultan of Egypt who, instead of having him killed, welcomed him and his friends with grace and kindness. Francis and his followers

stayed several days and enjoyed the Sultan's hospitality. While no actual record of their talks exists, it is known that each was transformed by their encounter and spoke of their faith, this Christian and this Muslim. So astonishing was this visit that it is remembered today in story and even in films. A path of peacemaking thus emerged – encounter the 'other' face-to-face, learn how another's experience of God animates their life, allow your love of God to be revealed in your own actions and words.⁶ Today St. Francis of Assisi is known and beloved by Christians for his gentleness, kindness, and love of God who embraces all of creation. I would like to offer this prayer which is attributed to him. While we know he did not actually write it, it reflects his faith and his relationship with God. It is an example of his Franciscan spirituality, a path to our common humanity.

Prayer of St. Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
 Where there is hatred let me sow love;
 Where there is injury, pardon;
 Where there is doubt, faith;
 Where there is despair, hope;
 Where there is darkness, light;
 Where there is sadness, joy.
 O Divine Master,
 Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;

⁶ "Pope looks back 800 years to St. Francis's dialogue with Muslim sultan," Cindy Wooten. [Catholic News Service](#), January 31, 2019.

To be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive.
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned.
It is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

And finally, I believe that our gathering here tonight is pleasing to God. For we have chosen to be together. We have chosen to recognize each other's great dignity as brothers and sisters, created in the image of God. And so, I would like to ask all of us to stand – right now, wherever we are at our tables or elsewhere in the room.

Let us look around see this place, filled with the shining faces of those beloved by God. Let us stand together, here, now – in solidarity with one another. Together we stand for peace. Together we stand for those who are suffering in every way. We stand for immigrants and refugees. For those without a home who live on our streets and at our borders. We stand for those who are ill in body or mind. We stand for those right here in our communities, who are in need of food and for the children who go to bed hungry at night. Together we stand for those who face violence every day in their neighborhoods. Together we stand for those who grieve the loss of family and friends through violent attacks. Together we stand for those

who have died. We stand for those working for peace in every family, every neighborhood and every nation on earth. We stand for those who are lonely. And afraid.

Together we stand with love for our very presence is prayer. We stand together in peace and for peace. We stand together now - for a few moments - in silence...

Salaam. Peace and Every Good. Thank you.