

**Franciscans and Muslims:
Lessons from the Past and Prospects for the Future
Franciscan Federation
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*Day 2: REFUTING the CLASH – REVISITING the COUNCIL***

Good Morning, Good People! May God give you Peace!

One of my earliest presentations on the story of this Remarkable Encounter occurred when Sr. Pat Hutchison, OSF, invited me to come to Neumann University (College at that time!) in Aston.¹ During the Open Forum a student asked a significant question. This is how I recall it: “So, WHEN did the Church finally catch up with the vision of Francis?” GREAT Question! I thought for a moment and realized that the only answer was: At Vatican II. Yes! For most of us here the answer to the question is: “In our lifetime.” It took over 750 years for the hierarchy of our Church to articulate the wisdom of the Gospel known to and espoused by Francis of Assisi.

The climate and attitude of our Church today regarding interaction with other religions and the faithful of other world religions could not be more different than it was in the 13th century. It warrants our attention as we now explore more recent initiatives in Catholic-Muslim dialogue worldwide.

In the summer of 2001, it was my privilege to participate in the course on “Ecumenical and Interreligious Movements” offered at the *Centro Pro Unione* in Rome – under the gifted direction of Jim Puglisi, S.A. During the three week course it was my task and delight to research the Church’s response to the interreligious agenda opened up by Vatican II. In addition to studying Council documents, this included surveying statements, documents and other writings which emerged from the seeds planted by the Council. At the conclusion of my study I found myself once again amazed at how little known and studied this critical work of the Council was! I was determined, that if possible, my future

¹ My presentation to the student body and faculty was in 2006. Neumann College became Neumann University in 2009.

ministry would focus on sharing this treasure of our Church. A result of my summer study was that I could no longer believe the “great secret of the Catholic Church was the Social Teaching of the Church.” After discovering the teaching on Ecumenism and Interreligious Relations, I knew I had found a bigger secret. I had a new question: How had it been so overlooked?

Now, some 55 years since the Council began, its message is better known. There is still resistance and there always will be. However, evidence shows that this message has been heard and is being acted upon.

My plan for this presentation:

- 1) Review of Vatican II and Papal Priorities following the Council
- 2) Muslim Initiatives in a post 9-11 World
- 3) Practical Responses for Implementation

1. The Second Vatican Council² (1962-1965)

Most of us are aware that one of the principle documents of the Council, *the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium*, is known for highlighting the nature, role and guidelines of the Church.³ Less known is that this pivotal writing also speaks of the Muslims. After considering the People of God who profess faith in Christ, and the Jewish people, the document goes on to state: “God’s plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, first among whom are the Muslims: they profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, who will judge all human beings on the last day” (LG, 16.)⁴

This is quite an extraordinary inclusion in a document that provided a new understanding of the identity of the Church!

² 1962-1965.

³ LG (Light of the Nations) introduces us to familiar themes like “People of God,” “Pilgrim Church,” and “Universal Call to Holiness,” the “Mystery of the Church” and the “Blessed Virgin Mary.”

⁴ Approved in 1964. *Nostra aetate* was approved in 1965.

We move on to with the groundbreaking Declaration⁵ *Nostra aetate, On the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions*. Published one year later, it is the shortest document produced at only five paragraphs, 41 sentences, a mere 1,141 words.

I have no doubt that our brother, Francis, would have readily responded to this radically new papal priority that emerged at Vatican II⁶ and done everything in his power to promote its message. I find this landmark text to be an authentic expression of Francis' vision of Universal Kinship. We could hardly find a more drastic difference between this Council's message about other religions and their followers than the message of the Fourth Lateran Council that Francis needed to respond to. *Nostra aetate* boldly proclaims some radical new truths:

“The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these [world] religions. ** She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all [people]. . . . ** The Church therefore, urges [its members] to enter into [dialogue] and collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, together with their social life and culture.” (NA 2)

The Church has a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God who is one. They submit themselves to God's will as did Abraham...Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His Virgin Mother... During the centuries...not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Muslims and Christians...this synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding...promote together the benefit of all as well as peace and freedom. (NA 3)

The Church reproveth, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against people or harassment of them on the basis of their race, color, condition in life or religion... and begs the Christian faithful to maintain good fellowship among the nations and to be at peace with all people and in that way to be true daughters and sons of the Father who is in heaven. (NA 5)

This is a stunning reversal of centuries of Church teaching. The new approach of Vatican II continued to expand. 10 years after *Nostra aetate*, **Pope Paul VI**, who was very

⁵ This document is neither a 'constitution' (dogmatic or pastoral), nor a "decree." But rather a "declaration," the lowest rank of the three types of conciliar documents. The other decrees were written: on the mass media, religious liberty, and Christian education.

⁶ See Michael Barnes online article for the background and implications of this document which he says "encapsulates the extraordinary outpouring of the Spirit that characterized the Council." (No Title) <http://www.jesuit.org.uk/articles/nostra-aetate-%E2%80%93-moral-heart-second-vatican-council>.

committed to the ecumenical and interreligious agenda of Vatican II, elaborated significantly on the Council's breakthrough in *Evangelii nuntiandi*.⁷

However, it was **Pope St. John Paul II** who created and sustained an enormous change in interreligious matters, opening an energy that continues to this day, after a temporary set back during Pope Benedict XVI's tenure. Even that misfortune ended up having some extremely significant consequences as we shall see shortly.

It was John Paul II's numerous travels to historically non-Christian lands and his meeting and prayer with leaders of non-Christian religions that showed his priority for interreligious dialogue. He affirms the goodness and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the religions and their faithful, and the need to work together to bring justice and peace to our world. John Paul tells us that in working toward this mutual respect and collaborative engagement, it is extremely important to respect the differences that will continue to exist. Pope John Paul said these differences must not lead to polemics or even war, as in the past. Rather, they must be accepted with humility, acknowledging the mystery of this reality which will eventually be fully revealed. In speaking to the Youth of Morocco (1985) he said:

[T]here is a mystery here on which, I am certain, God will one day enlighten us. . . . I believe that, today, God invites us to change our old practices. We must respect each other and also we must stimulate each other in good works on the path of God. . . . I wish that you may be able to help in thus building a world where God may have first place, and where we, believers, give expression in our lives and in our cities to "the most beautiful names which our religious traditions attribute to God."⁸

Like Francis of Assisi, Pope John Paul II not only spoke the words, he also acted out his words. He, like Francis, was a man of imagination: he could imagine a different kind of world, he even dared to imagine a brotherly relationship with his neighbor, the Rabbi!

One of the most memorable pictures of the last century, as far as I am concerned is this one: 1986: John Paul II embracing Chief Rabbi Toaff outside the Great Synagogue

⁷ His apostolic exhortation was published in 1975. It states that the spiritual life of non-Christian religions "of innumerable human communities finds valid expression. In these we hear re-echoed...the voices of those who for a thousand years have sought God in a manner which, while imperfect, has always been sincere and upright (55).

⁸ Hoeberichts, *Francis and Islam* 154, quoting from "The Speech of the Holy Father John Paul II to Young Muslims during his Meeting with them at Casablanca (Morocco) August 19, 1985," *Seminarium* 26 (1986) 13-22.

in Rome. It was the first time since St. Peter that a Pope had entered a synagogue! Why did it take nearly 2000 years to happen? It has occurred in our lifetime....and we too are called to new actions and attitudes.

Later that same year⁹ Pope John Paul II invited leaders of the world religions to gather in Assisi, not Rome, to come together to pray for and witness to peace. The Assisi experience represented a new start in encounters among the religions and the event has been heralded as

- The most significant ecumenical/interreligious event since the 2nd Vatican Council
- A watershed event in the arena of interreligious activity
- A basic LANDMARK in the field of IRD
- A new horizon of dialogue
- A gesture without precedent
- The inauguration of a “planetary ecumenism.

The Assisi experience had an explosive spiritual power from which sprang new peace energies and its repercussions are felt yet today. Each year the Sant’ Egidio community of Rome organizes an anniversary event commemorating this international gathering. In 2006, the 20th anniversary of the gathering, Georgetown U. hosted the event – the first time the United States hosted the Assisi Gathering commemoration.

Not only once did Pope John Paul II invite world religious leaders to Assisi. He did it four times:

October 27, 1986: The First World Day of Prayer for Peace (commemorated annually)

January 9-10, 1993, at the height of the Bosnian war (Muslim, Jewish, Christian leaders)

October 25-28, 1999 in preparation for entering the new millennium

January 24, 2002, following the 9-11 attacks in the U.S. – to affirm that religion can be a catalyst of reconciliation rather than of conflict, and to pray for peace.

⁹ October 27, 1986.

At the conclusion of the 2002 day of prayer, the assembly of 200 representatives of World Religions gathered in front of the Basilica of St. Francis. In candlelight, ten of the representatives proclaimed the “Assisi Decalogue for Peace” in their own language and then took the Decalogue to their countries.¹⁰

Under Pope Benedict XVI Catholic-Muslim relations entered a crisis after gave his Regensburg speech in 2006. His remarks on Islam, taken in part from 14th-century writings, were considered insulting and a mischaracterization of the religion and sparked an international outcry.¹¹

Though far less enthusiastic about embracing interreligious matters, Benedict made some overtures.¹² After no public recognition of the 20th anniversary of the Assisi event, a bit reluctantly (it seems) Pope Benedict did call for a 25th Anniversary gathering in Assisi (Oct. 2011) with the aim: To honor his predecessor’s historic event and “to renew the effort of all religions to live their faith as a service for the cause of peace.”¹³

Before looking at Muslim responses to interreligious matters, I want to briefly reflect on **Pope Francis**. What a gift to our Church and world is Pope Francis – one of his many similarities with Francis of Assisi! The other likenesses to Francis of Assisi that I want to highlight include his commitment to the brother and sisterhood of the entire human family and to interfaith relations. In no uncertain terms his actions and writings call us to rebuild the house of God.¹⁴

¹⁰ A hand-out of this declaration is in the folders.

¹¹ This was due to an appalling mistranslation of a text which called Islam “evil and inhuman.” During Pope Benedict’s papacy, it was Muslim initiative that steered any significant development.

¹² During his first year in office on a visit to Turkey, he said: “We have an absolute need for an authentic dialogue between religions and cultures – capable of helping us to jointly overcome all tensions with a spirit of fruitful understanding.”

¹⁴ The election of Cardinal Jorge (Mario) Bergoglio on March 13, 2013, as the 266nd Pope of the Roman Catholic Church was a shock to many. His recent entrance onto the world stage is no less a gift of the Spirit of God than was the appearance of Francis of Assisi 800 years earlier. I think we would agree that respect and care for the poor and vulnerable, reverence for the planet, and world peace hold primacy of place for both of them.

The 80-year-old pontiff has thus far made 21 foreign trips during his papacy. One common thread that brings them all together is interfaith dialogue, especially with Muslims.¹⁵

Faithful to the vision of the Second Vatican Council he is pointing out new and courageous paths that can be traveled by others. His 2016 Holy Thursday liturgy at a center for refugees, included a moving gesture of brotherhood. Pope Francis tenderly washed the feet of 12 refugees, including Muslims, Hindus and Copts.¹⁶

On September 20, 2016, Pope Francis returned to Assisi to preside over the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the World Day of Prayer convoked by St. John Paul I. Among the special guests present for the day were the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I, the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, and the rector of the prestigious al-Azhar University, Imam Ahmen al-Tayyeb. The Imam's meeting with Pope Francis in May of the same year was seen as a major leap forward in terms of Catholic-Muslim relations.

Indeed! The joy of the Gospel resounds in Pope Francis as does it's central message of love of God and neighbor, universal kinship, reconciliation and peace.

MUSLIM RESPONSES

It would be hard to overemphasize the unprecedented Muslim response to the history unfolding in the era just reviewed. In the years after 9-11 fervent cries for responses from Muslims to the acts of terrorism committed in the name of Islam were not responded to. How could they be? Islam has no hierarchy and there is no group that can speak for other Muslims. The Muslim outrage over Pope Benedict's words in Regensburg added heightened tensions between Muslims and Catholics. Yet, the growing hostilities seemed

¹⁵ Muslim countries he has visited include Jordan, Palestine and Israel, Albania and Turkey (all in 2014); in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Central African Republic (2015); in Egypt (2017); Myanmar and Bangladesh (2018). Other countries he visited has significant Muslim populations like Sri Lanka and Philippines, Kenya, Uganda (2015).

¹⁶ This liturgy was celebrated at the Center for Asylum Seekers in Castelnuovo di Porto.

to serve as the impetus for a remarkably positive consequence.¹⁷ For the first time in history a statement was issued collaboratively by 138 Muslim leaders, members of every major branch of Islam. “They could have written about how offensive the pope’s words were, but instead they took a positive approach and wrote about the connections between Muslims and Christians.”¹⁸ The ground-breaking 2007 text, “**A Common Word Between Us and You**” identifies the significant common ground that Muslims and Christians share. It issues a striking call to conversion for all who read and prayer with it. Prince Ghazi, one of the main sponsors of the initiative, describes the statement as “an extended global handshake.” The power of the text is stunning. Now, ten years later, the influence of the document continues through the projects and relationships it has inspired, but many people still need to hear its message. Can you promote it? Let’s look at it. The text opens in this way:

“The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians. The basis for this peace already exists. It is part of the very foundational principles of both faiths: love of the One God and love of the neighbor.

The Unity of God, the ... love for God and ... love of neighbor is thus the common ground between Islam & Christianity.

| From the Qur’an | From the Gospel |
|---|---|
| <p>He is God, the One! God, the Self-Sufficient Besought of all! . . . So invoke the Name of the Lord and devote yourself to God with a complete devotion. ... None of you has faith until you love for your neighbor what you love for yourself. (Q112:1-2; M/M)</p> | <p>Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind, and with all your strength . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these. (Mk 12:29-31)</p> |
| | |

¹⁷ See Professor Amir Hussain of Loyola Marymount University in an online article: <https://www.ncronline.org/news/world/common-word-10-years-christians-and-muslims-must-work-together-peace>.

¹⁸ A. Hussain.

Responses to and Follow Up from “A Common Word”

Momentum continued to build for establishing solid relationships and greater understanding between Muslims and Christians.

2008 saw international conferences hosted at Yale (July) and Madrid (later July). Georgetown hosted a conference in 2013.

The Croatian theologian, Miroslav Volf, reflected on “A Common Word Between Us and You” in this way: “A new wind of hope is beginning to blow...[Common Word] is the most significant text to appear in the past 50 years” – an obvious reference to *Nostra aetate*. The Common Word website calls the document the “Most Successful Muslim-Christian Interfaith Initiative in History.”¹⁹

Another outgrowth of all this fervor and ferment was the decision on the part of Vatican officials and Muslim leaders (representing the moderate wing of Islam) to convene the First Catholic-Muslim Forum (11/2008). The need for dialogue, understanding and building relationships could not have been more obvious. The Forum will alternate locations and conveners between a Muslim and Catholic country every three years. Thus, Forums have been held in 2011 (Jordan); 2014 (the Vatican); 2017 (Zaytuna College, Berkeley, California). Information, including the theme, attendees and declarations from each of these Forums can be found online.

An International Response

After 9-11 momentum for peace and connections continued to build even as terrorism escalated. As wars and violence accelerated in the first decade of the 21st century, so did energy for finding new ways to interact and live together. One initiative came through the United Nations. In October, 2010, the UN General Assembly unanimously passed a resolution deeming the first week of February each year to be “World Interfaith Harmony Week.” Proposed by King Abdullah of Jordan & co-sponsored by 29 other countries, the proposal encouraged all states to “spread the message of interfaith harmony and goodwill in the world’s churches, mosques, synagogues, temples and other places of worship . . .

¹⁹ www.acommonword.com

each according to their own religious traditions or convictions.” The 7th observance of this WEEK OF HARMONY occurred last February! In the past seven years, as anyone see coverage of this event? You might want to keep the first week in February in mind as you consider some actions on behalf of interreligious efforts.

To assist you in doing this: Websites to keep you informed

- 1) ISNA: Islamic Society of North America (established in 1963/1982)²⁰
 - a. ISNA is an association of Muslim organizations and individuals that provides a common platform for presenting Islam, supporting Muslim communities, developing educational, social and outreach programs and fostering good relations with other religious communities, and civic and service organizations.
 - b. Website: Basics of Islam, Statements issued regarding Women in the Mosques, Positions of Extremism and Terrorism; Recent News, Publications...National & International. www.isna.net
- 2) CAIR: Council of American-Islamic Relations (established in 1994)
 - a. The Council on American–Islamic Relations is a Muslim civil rights and advocacy group. It is headquartered on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., with regional offices nationwide (25 States).
 - b. Website: current news stories, project, action alerts. www.cair.com
- 3) USCCB: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
 - a. Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs: under “Beliefs & Teachings”
 - b. Extensive Valuable Resources from both Catholic and Muslim authors
 - c. www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/ecumenical-and-interreligious/index
- 4) Georgetown University Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding

²⁰ In 1963 with the merger of several Muslim student organizations, the foundation was laid for ISNA. Present-day ISNA was founded in 1982 through a joint effort of four organizations: The Muslim Students Association of the US and Canada (The MSA), Islamic Medical Association (IMA), the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (AMSS), and the Association of Muslim Scientists and Engineers (AMSE) - to create a community-oriented organization due to the changing nature of the growing Muslim community.

- a. The Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding was founded in 1993 to build stronger bridges of understanding between the Muslim world and the West as well as between Islam and Christianity.
 - b. The Center's mission is to improve relations between the Muslim world and the West and enhance understanding of Muslims in the West.
 - c. <https://acmcu.georgetown.edu>
- 5) Newest Resource: St. Bonaventure University's *CAIS: Center for Arab and Islamic Studies* (established in 2015) www.sbu.edu (put "Islamic center" in the search box).

Most importantly, I urge you to find out your own local resources! I have no doubt that you will be surprised at all that you unearth! I would like to share one of my resources: my current employer and supervisor: Bishop Robert McElroy. He is no stranger to many in our country because of the press he receives – either good or bad depending on the source. He made quite a stir with his talk about our need to become “DISRUPTORS.”

President Trump was the candidate of disruption. He was the disrupter, he said. We now, we must all become disruptors.²¹

What do all of these international, global and national efforts mean for us in the “grassroots”? In Franciscan parlance: what is ours to do in light of this message to interact and dialogue with people of other faiths? How do we do it? A description from the Dialogue & Proclamation document issued by the Vatican in 1991 speaks about dialogue as: “all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment in obedience to truth and respect for freedom.” The document goes on to identify four types of dialogue. Everyone in this room could engage in at least three of them.

²¹ We must disrupt those who would send troops into our streets to deport the undocumented, to rip mothers and fathers from their families. We must disrupt those who portray refugees as enemies rather than our brothers and sisters in terrible need. We must disrupt those who train us to see Muslim men and women and children as sources of fear rather than as children of God. We must disrupt those who seek to rob our medical care, especially from the poor. We must disrupt those who would take even food stamps and nutrition assistance from the mouths of children.” Nov. 19, 2017.

1) Dialogue of LIFE....happens in neighborhoods – with interactions that occur in neighborly ways like backyard picnic, neighborhood ballgames or block parties, birthday parties, celebrations of births, graduations, weddings, exchanging daycare. Dialogue of Life is being neighbor to each other, getting to know one’s neighbor in the most basic activities of life: eating!

2) Dialogue of RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE....sharing our rituals and prayer....Baptisms, First Communion, Funerals Christmas or Easter Mass, Friday Prayer at the Mosque, Ramadan iftar meal, sharing in the fast, listening of the story of the pilgrimage to Mecca, attending a whirling dervish event, visiting the Synagogue and celebrating the High Holy days.... So much more!

3) Dialogue of ACTION ...Joining together for the sake of improving the lives of others....engaging in such actions as Habitat for Humanity, Community Fund Raisers, Environmental Issues, Immigration Concerns, Healthcare, ESL....& so much more....all concerns that are shared in common and require the attention and effort of all.

4) The forth kind of dialogue is one in which a very small percentage of people from each religious tradition participate in the **DIALOGUE OF THEOLOGICAL EXCHANGE.** This happens when theologians, scholars and clerics get together to discuss doctrinal issues. These vital exchanges are reserved for a very small fraction of each religious family. Important, yes....but more restricted in who engages. This doesn’t mean that we on the grassroots don’t talk about our belief and practices. It is important that we do, but we do it in a different way than our scholars and leaders.

Thus we have the 4 different types of “dialogue” Which as you see are more about *action* than discussion. Dialogue is meant in a very broad way. A more appropriate word would really be “relations.” Interreligious relations, or “activity.” Doing Interreligious dialogue from a Franciscan perspective as well as from the official Church teachings handed to us, in the era of Pope Francis, is certainly more about actions than conversation.

Elizabeth Johnson says that the dialogues of life, action, theological exchange and religious experience allow Christians to glimpse the God we know through the windows

framed by other peoples' faith traditions and to share our own precious heritage in exchange. The public effects are far-reaching. Mutual understanding coupled with growing friendships set up possibilities for a new relationship among the religions. The personal effects are equally significant. Glimpsing the Holy through the religious experience of peoples of other faiths, Christians grow in knowledge and love of the great mystery of the living God. The distinguished Jesuit, Jacques Dupuis, reflecting on his own experience of dialogue in India for nearly 4 decades noted, "personal commitment to one's own faith and openness to the faith of others need not be mutually exclusive; rather they ought to grow in direct proportion.

The bottom line is new behaviors are required to bring peace into our world. New behaviors have been modeled for us: by Francis and the Sultan.

Conclusion:

We are followers of a man who dared to cross new and dangerous thresholds, even battle lines, to offer a message of peace to the loathed enemies of Christianity. Francis did not succeed in converting the Sultan to the Gospel of Christ, but returned to Assisi impressed by the faith he had experienced among the Muslims, himself converted. I believe he was converted to a new truth: he recognized that he had met people who loved and served God as he did, who worshipped the same God as he did. Once again, in a very unlikely place, Francis saw the face of God and met new brothers and sisters. Acknowledging our legacy, is it not "ours to do" the work of dialogue among Muslims and Christians in order to be architects of peace and reconciliation in our world? Indeed! Let us begin now to rebuild the house of God which is so in need of renovation. What message do I hear?

Suggested Question for Reflection:

Share with each other what you have been doing in Muslim-Christian relations....and what ideas you have for what you might do next as you move forward with your commitment to Interreligious dialogue.