

# **Friends And Not Adversaries: A Catholic-Muslim Spiritual Journey**

## **The West Coast Dialogue of Catholics and Muslims**

**2003**

### ***Introduction***

As Christians and Muslims, we are particularly aware of challenges and opportunities afforded by the tragic events of September 11, 2001, because of distinctive religious factors in the causes, the events themselves, and responses to the events.[1] Our American society that absorbed the tragic blows of September 11th is pluralistic in every major way—religiously, racially, ethnically, and culturally. We enjoy a religious pluralism guaranteed by the Constitution, in that no religious group is legally superior to others and every group has freedom to exercise their religious traditions within the limits of civil society. Opportunities abound for religious groups to flourish and to interact creatively and peacefully, but we are aware that this ideal has not been fully realized at all times by every religious group and that this prescribed religious pluralism has not been characteristic of every historical era. The advancement of religious freedom is a long-term undertaking, and active engagement of religious groups with one another that defines religious pluralism as a political and social phenomenon does not occur easily.

Islam, as a distinct religious movement identified with the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him),<sup>2</sup> arose in the seventh century of the Common Era, 600 years after the time of Jesus. During Prophet Muhammad's life, there were significant interactions between him and his followers with Christians. The revelations, which Muslims believe Prophet Muhammad received in the form of the Qur'ān, and the traditions of what the Prophet said and did (Hadīth), mention Christians in numerous places. In every subsequent era over the next fourteen centuries, Christians and Muslims have interacted as fellow citizens and foreigners, rulers and subjects, allies and enemies, and friends and adversaries. There have been times of confrontation and of peaceful coexistence and occasions of cooperation and dialogue.

Both Islam and Christianity are global religions taking diverse forms in the wide variety of cultures in which they appear. Thus, Christians and Muslims encounter one another and live together in a variety of cultural and political contexts. Our religions have been divided by sectarianism; at the same time, we each value unity of doctrine and moral practice. We each have known the debilitating effects of internecine wars and violence. Throughout our history, valiant and generous rulers and politicians, pious and brave saints, sincere teachers dedicated to the pursuit of God's message for all humanity, and many, many others among us have promoted cooperation, dialogue and understanding between Christians and Muslims instead of the negative alternatives which have so often characterized the history of our relations.

This report is based on a dialogue between Catholics and Muslims. It is important to take notice that this dialogue began well before September 11, 2001, and met for a series of four annual meetings. This Catholic-Muslim dialogue is also one of three such regional dialogues co-sponsored by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB); yet these dialogues are but one example of Christians and Muslims joining in cooperation and dialogue in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

We live in troubled times. With terrorism, violence, military interventions, the lingering effects of colonialism and the Cold War, economic disparities, the erosion of human rights, hate crimes, and growing misunderstanding in the world today, our dialogue and other concerted efforts of Muslims and Christians offer resounding testimony to our common commitment to peace and justice. Our dialogue provides a window of opportunity to develop a better understanding of one another as individuals, as religious peoples, and as companions on the journey that leads to God.

### ***Background***

On May 10, 1999, Msgr. Lawrence Baird and Fr. Rafael Luévano of the Catholic Diocese of Orange (California) and Dr. John Borelli of the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C., visited Dr. Muzammil Siddiqi, Director of the Islamic Society of Orange County, and three of his associates, Mr. Syed M. Hasan, Dr. Ahmad H. Sakr, and Mr. Haitham Ahmed Bundakji, at their Islamic center in Garden Grove. The purpose of the visit was to discuss the possibility of establishing a regional dialogue of Catholics and Muslims. At the time, Dr. Siddiqi was the President of the Islamic Society of North America, with its main office in Indianapolis and already a co-sponsor of a dialogue with the USCCB.<sup>4</sup>

For more than a decade, Msgr. Baird had served as the ecumenical/interreligious officer of the Diocese of Orange, the post to which Fr. Luévano had been named in 1999 by Bishop Tod D. Brown. At the time of this meeting, Bishop Brown was chair-elect of the USCCB's Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and preparing to serve a three-year term as chairman. Msgr. Baird and Dr. Siddiqi had already worked together on numerous projects in Orange County. Dr. Siddiqi was known nationally for his role in Christian-Muslim relations and had joined with Dr. Borelli on several occasions in the past fifteen years, promoting interreligious dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Participants in this exploratory conversation in Garden Grove in 1999 agreed to discern what interest there might be among Catholic and Muslim leaders in the area for a regional dialogue and to propose to them an initial meeting of such a dialogue in nine months' time at The Center for Spiritual Development, a Catholic retreat house in Orange, California.<sup>5</sup>

A number of factors go into a successful Catholic-Muslim regional dialogue. First, there must be enthusiastic Catholics and Muslims to serve as hosts who already enjoy a relationship of trust and cooperation. Second, there must be interest among those leaders of the region who have

responsibility for promoting Christian-Muslim relations. Third, there must be sponsors who lend their support to the dialogue. That role in this dialogue was served collectively by the Muslim leadership of the Los Angeles and Orange County area and the USCCB. Eventually there were two co-chairs for the Muslim side of the dialogue: Dr. Siddiqi and Sayed Moustafa Al-Qazwini, imam at the Islamic Education Center of Orange County.<sup>6</sup> For the first two meetings, Archbishop Alexander Brunett of Seattle was the Catholic co-chair. He was just completing the three-year term as chairman of the USCCB's Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and, before being named a bishop, served as a pastor in the Archdiocese of Detroit where he had participated in Christian-Muslim relations for many years. Bishop Carlos Sevilla, S.J., of the Diocese of Yakima, Washington, became Catholic co-chair in 2002. Most participants in a regional dialogue are from various cities and towns around the region who are already engaged in Christian-Muslim relations. On the Catholic side, these persons are usually diocesan staff with responsibility to promote interreligious relations, and on the Muslim side participants are invited from among those Muslim friends and partners of the Catholic diocesan staff in various interreligious activities. Thus the fourth factor is a core group of participants experienced in Christian-Muslim relations. The West Coast Dialogue brought together such experienced persons, Catholics and Muslims, from the environs of Orange County and Los Angeles, San Diego, San Jose, San Francisco, Sacramento, and Seattle. Dr. Borelli also attended from Washington, DC.

Finally, it is important to plan these dialogues as conversation punctuated by religious practice. In the case of the West Coast Dialogue, the Muslim and Catholic participants maintained their routines of prayers. Also, the Catholics attended as prayerful but silent observers of the evening (Maghrib) prayers of the Muslims, and the Muslims likewise were invited to follow the order of service for evening prayer (Vespers) which the Catholics prayed on the first evening. By the second meeting, it became our practice to visit an Islamic center on the second evening of our meeting for prayers, dinner, and a program. Prayer is an essential element in the schedule of an interreligious dialogue to sustain the intense conversation.

### ***First Meeting: Review and Resolution***

Eleven Muslims and eight Catholics attended the initial meeting of our dialogue (February 1-2, 2000). Introductions were very cordial allowing those who were already friends to share something of their friendship with the others. After the participants became acquainted or reacquainted, two papers were presented to stimulate discussion. Dr. Ahmad Sakr of the Foundation for Islamic Knowledge offered his perspective on the directions Catholic-Muslim relations could take and indicated particular challenges and important themes for our common living. He insisted that we must work on a product if we agree to continue to meet to share our faith with one another. Dr. John Borelli reviewed developments in Catholic-Muslim relations since the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) when the bishops of the Catholic Church

urged all Christians to enter into conversations with Muslims to overcome the past and to cooperate for peace and the benefit of all. He noted especially the developments in Catholic-Muslim relations during the pontificate of Pope John Paul II through his numerous contacts in the world with Muslim leaders and the increased number of dialogues and other activities with Muslims sponsored by the Catholic Church in Rome and in the United States. Dr. Borelli noted specifically the World Day of Prayer for Peace, hosted by Pope John Paul II in Assisi, Italy, in October 1986, and the Interreligious Assembly, hosted by the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in Rome, in October 1999, which was a preparatory event for the Jubilee Year 2000. He reported how he and Dr. Siddiqi were among the participants in the interreligious assembly.

Many of us who attended the first meeting recognized how we were already involved in programs and committees but how very little of what we accomplish together reaches even our Catholic and Muslim brothers and sisters who attend churches and mosques regularly. We agreed that accurate introductory information is a first step for overcoming false ideas and negative views of one another and for breaking down barriers to understanding. We also acknowledged that few Muslims and Christians understand how we each interpret our Scriptures and instruct the faithful in their daily lives.

In the end, we decided to improve relations between Catholics and Muslims by exploring together the spiritual bases for common and positive action. We committed ourselves to a series of three meetings beginning with a two-day meeting in February 2001 on the topic "surrender to God/obedience to God." Because our journey was going to be a dialogue, we could only indicate where we would begin, but we could not predict where our discussions would lead us or what exactly would result from our work. We knew that we would prepare papers for meetings, but we did not know what final form our work would take. We also could not anticipate all the positive developments and the challenges too that would arise over the life of the dialogue, but we trusted in God that this journey was the right thing for us to do. Our spiritual journey together had begun.

### ***Second Meeting: Surrender/Obedience***

For our second meeting on February 12-14, 2001, we had asked for papers that would both introduce surrender or obedience from Scripture and demonstrate how we interpret our Scriptures. On the Muslim side, the first paper was given by Imam Abuqadir Al-Amin on "active" or "conscious" surrender to God. Islam is translated from the Qur'ān as "surrendering," but it means "yielding one's will" or "submitting one's will." How we surrender to God is expressed in our speech and action. There are five direct references in the Qur'ān and 153 derivative references to surrender. Two examples are in Qur'ān 3: 19 & 85: "The religion in the sight of God is submitting to God" and "Whoever desires a religion other a submission to God,

this religion is not acceptable by God.” Ibrahim (Abraham) is given as the example of one who submits to God (Qur’ān 2:131).

When one surrenders, one accepts one’s duties of which there are two kinds: fundamental duties (fard ayn), those which it is sinful to neglect, and those duties that are helpful and please God (kifāyan). To know the fard ayn, Muslims must exegete the Qur’ān using five traditional sources: the Qur’ān itself, reports of the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad (Hadīth), consensus (ijmā’) of the community of scholars (ulamā), analogy or reasoning (qiyās), and juridical reasoning (ijtihād). Reciting the Qur’ān is itself an act of surrendering, and divine presence can be experienced in the recitation.

Two other Muslim presenters supplemented these initial remarks. Dr. Aslam Abdullah described the nature of the relationship between faith and surrender. Surrendering is the total reliance on a higher power and becomes a way of living. Islam is submission to God while belief (imān) is acceptance of God in the heart. Faith without surrender is empty; surrender without faith is incomplete. Imam Sayed Mustafa Al-Qazwini, the other presenter, summarized his remarks in these five points:

1. Muslims believe that all humans are born with a natural disposition to surrender to God;
2. Everything in the universe surrenders completely to the will of God by following the laws of nature;
3. Free will serves the intellect; if the truth follows one’s desires, then everything will be corrupted;
4. Even people without faith can surrender; they can feel God; when one is ill, what is needed is what the physician says and not what the ill person wants;
5. Surrender has four aspects: trusting and relying on God, acceptance of God’s message, submission to the ordinances of God, and turning over one’s affairs to God.

Fr. Rafael Luévano spoke from a Christian perspective touching on the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, and certain Scriptural topics: the meaning of the term gospel and the sources of the gospels, the Bible as a library of books, the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, and inspiration. Christian faith passes through two lenses, the experience of God manifested as creating, revealing, and moving all things to completion. Christians believe that the one God, revealed as the Holy Trinity, was made manifest through the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. The Gospel or good news is the revelation of God, embodied in the person of Jesus, who is both divine and human. Jesus preached this Gospel and his followers continue to preach it to all and seek to live the message of the Gospel in their daily lives.

Christians accept the Hebrew Scriptures as an Old Testament—a collection of books of various genres (creation narratives, historical and genealogical accounts, poetic expressions, wisdom

sayings, prayers, prophetic, apocalyptic and other writings) taking form over the course of centuries. The New Testament was completed in much less time with the letters of Paul being the first writings and the four gospels taking shape after decades of Jesus' followers preaching and giving testimony about him. Catholic Christians believe that God acted upon the Biblical writers giving them guidance as they composed the books of the Bible. For Catholics, inspiration is not dictation; rather, God worked with and through the Biblical writers' own human experiences and abilities in the languages and the cultural forms of their time. Christians believe that the message of God's grace was embodied in Jesus Christ who in his person is the Word of God—the fullest expression of God's revelation.

The Christians view the Scriptures to have a literal meaning as well as deeper meanings. The composition of each text cannot be separated from the communal experience in which it was composed. Fr. Luévano felt it was important to delineate three levels of interpretation: literal, analogical and the critical interpretation. The first is the basic or actual meaning of the words in the text. Analogical interpretation employs literary and other devices to expand the meaning of a text. Critical interpretation involves various tools of exegesis and the theological faith of the community in reaching an understanding of the meaning and significance of the text to Christian life.

Fr. Luévano illustrated the meaning of obedience by reading the passages in the Gospel of Matthew on paying the temple tax and on the coin found in the mouth of the fish (17:24ff) which emphasize obedience to law. More significantly, he cited passages in the gospels describing Jesus' agony in the garden before his arrest and crucifixion. These passages show Jesus' obedience to God, whom he addressed as "Father," by offering to God his life in the words: "Your will be done not mine" (Matthew 26:36ff, Mark 14:32ff, Luke 22:39ff, and John 17). Fr. Luévano further explained the Lord's Prayer, "Your will be done" (Matthew 6: 9-15; Luke 11: 1-4), is the heart of Christian obedience and the Christian life. He concluded by citing Paul's testimony of Jesus' obedience: "[Jesus] obediently accepting even death, death on the cross" (Philippians 2:6-8).

By the end of the second meeting we were grateful for the opportunities to learn more about one another's understanding of Scripture and how we use modes of interpretation. The use passages from the Qur'ān and the New Testament offered us glimpses both into how Scripture is interpreted and how we each understand the theme of obedience or surrender to God. We felt that we needed to take a deeper look at how Muslims and Catholics developed their understandings of surrender and obedience from Scripture.

Also at this second meeting, we spent one evening at the Islamic Society of Orange County as guests of Dr. Siddiqi and his community. The Catholic participants were invited to attend (Maghrib) prayers. Then a meal was served in the dining room, followed by a program in the

assembly hall on the question of why Muslims and Catholics enter into dialogue. Speaking at the evening program were Archbishop Brunett and Dr. Siddiqi, whose presentations were followed by questions and discussion. Both presentations were published in the *Origins*, the weekly documentary service of Catholic News Service.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Third Meeting: A Closer Look***

We have experienced much support for our efforts in this dialogue. Each year, on the day when our dialogue was to begin, Bishop Tod D. Brown of the Diocese of Orange, asked those who attended the morning Eucharist with him at the cathedral to remember the members of the dialogue in their prayers. The Sisters of St. Joseph, who own and operate the Center for Spiritual Development, where the dialogue met, prayed for the success of our meetings while we were meeting. As the year 2001 was drawing to a close, Pope John Paul II drew attention to how Muslims and Christians share the particular spiritual disciplines of fasting and almsgiving and noted how in that year the Christian season of Advent and the annual fast of Ramadan nearly coincided. He called on Catholics to fast on the second Friday of Advent (December 14, 2001) which that year was the last Friday of Ramadan. He further asked that they offer special prayers for peace and give the money saved from fasting to those in need.<sup>8</sup> On December 14, 2001, Dr. Borelli was in Orange to meet with Dr. Siddiqi, Fr. Luévano, Imam Al-Qazwini, and Professor June O'Connor to plan the next meeting scheduled for February 2002. On that day, as they planned the meeting, they also fasted together from dawn to dusk and prayed for peace and for one another.

The dialogue met for its third meeting on February 5-7, 2002. In that first post-September 11th meeting of the dialogue, our relationship reached a deeper level of friendship and mutual support. We felt a need to speak to one another about the effects of those tragic events on our lives and on our religious communities and to speculate about their present and future significance. We devoted our first afternoon and evening to this conversation.

We realized how every one of us experienced horror, shock, outrage, sorrow, fear and powerlessness. All of us had promptly condemned the despicable acts of violence as antithetical to religion; yet, our Muslim friends felt an extra measure of pain because these terrible acts, which clearly violated their faith, were wrongly associated with Islam. Many of us shared how we had at times fatigued responding to false accusations and random placement of blame and how we knew the frustration when biases interfered sometimes with our attempts to give meaning to facts. We admitted how we had to confront our own prejudices as new challenges emerged in the developments since September 11th. Though feeling we were swimming against a tide of ignorance, uncritical public opinion, hate and anger, at this meeting we drew closer together as faithful Catholics and Muslims wanting to do the right thing in those difficult weeks and months.

We also felt that it was an important witness to the world for us to continue with our discussion as planned. Four papers had been prepared in advance to further our discussion of surrender and obedience. Dr. Siddiqi gave a brief theological reflection on the concept of surrender in Islam. He noted that surrender to God is both natural and is enhanced by the will and intellect. The first kind of surrender comes from true self-knowledge and knowledge of the universe that leads to a natural surrender to God. Muslims, like everyone, can become slaves of their desires and thus can surrender to Satan. Qur'ān 2: 130-1 says that surrender is the teaching of all the prophets, but surrender is more than accepting God's will.

The second kind is surrender of the mind and will and is the superior form in Islam (see Qur'ān 2:256 which says: "There is no compulsion in religion"). One must have faith in what God commands. Ibrahim (Abraham) surrendered to God's command to sacrifice his son Ismā'īl (Ishmael), and God then revealed to him that this was a test of his faith. Muslims commemorate annually this act of surrender. For Muslims, faith is a relationship of love and trust in God that entails surrender and obedience to God's guidance. Acceptance of God's will is faith, not fatalism, and requires action, uses intellect, and involves obedience and duty. This is not unthinking obedience, which some may identify as a feature of "fundamentalism," but a proactive effort to understand and live God's message.

Dr. Siddiqi then ventured the position that all human beings are equal in the eyes of God who gives to each the ability to respond to His guidance, but not all views about God are equal. God could have created all people to follow one religion but allowed a plurality of religions so that we strive to excel in a spirit of good will. In the end, God will show us the truth. Muslims can recognize other religious authorities but none that is in conflict with God's guidance for that would lead to disobedience. This position allows Muslims to accept religious pluralism and is supported by various passages in the Qur'ān. God's will is our deepest will and thus free will allows us to choose that which we are naturally inclined to choose. Dr. Siddiqi said that this is an existential side of the understanding, but there are overall cosmic principles governing this.

This same year, Fr. Rafael Luévano offered another presentation which was based on the parable of the lost son (15:11-32) in the Gospel of Luke. He also used this passage as a lesson in Biblical exegesis. In the story, a younger son asks for his inheritance and leaves his father's household. In a foreign land he squanders all that he has and reaches such dire straits that he feeds pigs to earn money. The pigs are eating better than he. The younger son resolves to return to his father, to beg forgiveness, and to ask to be no more than a hired man and not to be restored to the status of son. The father rushes to the son when he sees him coming and receives him as a lost son. The older son becomes angry when he learns how his father has forgiven everything of his brother and has ordered a feast and celebration. The father then seeks to reconcile the older son.



Fr. Luévano drew attention to the interplay between the law of love and the unwillingness of the one brother to accept the other and how that reluctance undermined the latter's own obedience to the father. Ultimately the younger brother surrenders to God's love and is forgiven everything. This is the message of Christianity. The lost son is an example of authentic surrender to God, but it was noted that the parable had many levels of meaning in the Jewish context of Jesus teaching. For example, it was observed that Jesus tells the parable after it is reported that he scandalized some by eating with sinners. The older son refused to go into the feast because the younger son was unclean having lived sinful and unclean life among foreigners and even to the point that he fed unclean animals. The older son illustrates the struggle between compassion and obedience. The younger son had a change of heart, a conversion, and the story ends with the older son invited to make a change of heart.

A further reading of the text accents issues of power, relationship, awareness and gratitude. God is the source of our origin, our destiny and our companion along the way but honors our freedom sometimes more than we do. People with the most power are those who evoke respect through love and not those who have the most control. The younger son lost his power in the world when he has lost his possessions, but he gained a richer relationship when he surrendered to his father. The older son, to whom the father says, "everything I have is yours," is offered an opportunity for new insights and the possibility of gratitude.

Imam Qazwini followed with a second Muslim presentation on how trust in God and surrender to God are revealed through one's deeds. He noted that one can grow in degrees of surrender to God until one reaches absolute trust in God which is dedicating all one's affairs to God. Something is good for us if it is good for God. Sūrah 19 offers several insights about surrender: first, trust in God; then take pleasure in the Divine Will accepting what God has decreed for you; next, submit to God's ordinances; and finally place absolute trust in God dedicating all your affairs to God.

Dr. June O'Connor gave a second Catholic presentation and spoke on the levels of obedience and the role of discernment in knowing whether one is obeying God or not. Obedience in the Catholic tradition is understood as listening to the voice of God as mediated through the historical, cross-cultural, and contemporary church community. Scripture and tradition are given priority attention and value as resources for information, reflection, and decision. Scripture had been explained previously. The tradition of the Church refers to the historical faith life of the community through the ages and is accessed in many ways: a) through written documents (papal writings and letters, theological and moral treatises, pastoral sermons and other writings, conciliar documents and declarations, ecclesial laws, mystical writings), but also through b) liturgical practices, c) creeds, d) sermons, e) hymns, f) personal testimonies, and g) daily events which are received and embraced by the believer as loci of God's presence and activity. Thus, in addition to encountering the "Word of God" in the Biblical writings, the Catholic tradition

teaches that the voice of God can be encountered through participation in the sacraments, private and community prayer, other people, one's own distinctive experience, and nature (God's creation).

The recent Catechism of the Catholic Church is one of many documents from the Catholic tradition. A handbook and compendium of truth claims, values, and practices, it summarizes much of what the Church has cultivated, taught, and witnessed through the centuries in a variety of cultures and through various documents, prayers, creeds, and other sources. According to the Catechism, obedience in the Catholic tradition has been understood according to context and the contexts for understanding obedience are several.

The categories of obedience and disobedience are central for understanding the human response to God. Obedience to God's command or God's will is seen as a virtue and disobedience, a sin. This view is proposed in the account in the Hebrew Scriptures of the sin of Adam and Eve. They disobeyed God's order and suffered the consequences of being banished from the garden, having to labor for their food, suffering pain in childbirth, facing death as an inevitable and irrevocable feature of human life, and struggling in relating to one another. Thus, sin, or willfully chosen defiance and refusal, enters the Christian account of human life precisely as disobedience.

In the New Testament letters, Paul contrasts the disobedience of Adam with the obedience of Jesus. Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus is appreciated as one who reversed human history, effected salvation, and made reunion with God possible. Jesus is also highlighted as a model for Christians to follow in their own relation to God in and through him. Surrender to God's will is another way of describing this. Jesus' words on the night before he was killed suggest as much: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet, not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39). This is a challenge for all Christians.

Obedience can also be expressed in the form of a vow promised and lived out in community. Monks and nuns, sisters, brothers, and some priests live lives of obedience, voluntary poverty or simplicity of lifestyle, and celibacy in the context of community. For Christian life and practice, publicly professed vows of obedience in religious community or to a bishop in ordination, are an option, and often experienced as a distinctive vocation or calling.

Obedience to governmental authority is another context for considering obedience. The Catechism puts it this way: "The duty of obedience requires all to give due honor to authority and to treat those who are charged to exercise it with respect, and, insofar as they deserve it, with gratitude and good-will" (par. 1900). "Insofar as it is deserved" is an important qualifier. The voice of God in the heart of the human person must be listened to. An informed conscience sensitive to the moment and movement of God manifested as the Holy Spirit must be fostered in order to discern what is true from what is false, what is right from what is wrong, what is just

from what is unjust. In Christian life and practice, civic participation and cooperation are expected, unless the governing authority places itself and its laws above God and the laws of God. Thus, disobedience in some settings can be a virtue and desirable moral response, and civil disobedience is an option in some instances. Blind obedience is not a value.

Catholics must be alert not only to the ways in which they might be tempted to participate in evil intentionally and personally, but also the ways in which they might participate in evil socially and structurally by observing, tolerating, or ignoring systemic social and economic oppression. It is possible to sin by omission as well as commission. Obedience to the will of God requires paying attention to the opportunities and obligations embedded in the concrete circumstances of one's life, but exactly how to express these values in the concrete circumstances of my life requires a process known as discernment.

After these presentations and discussion, we returned to the Islamic Society of Orange County in Garden Grove for an evening of prayer, eating and conversation, and a program. The community's new mosque had been completed, and we were able to attend Maghrib prayers in this lovely new setting. For our program in 2002, the participants in the dialogue were first welcomed, and then Imam Tahir Anwar recited the Sūrah 107. Imam Al-Qazwini, Dr. Siddiqi, Bishop Sevilla, and Dr. Borelli spoke informally about the progress of this dialogue. Dr. Siddiqi took special note that Pope John Paul II had invited Muslims to the World Day of Prayers for Peace, which the pope had hosted in Assisi on January 24, 2002. Bishop Sevilla read excerpts from the concluding public service at Assisi, including all those parts read by Muslims. Dr. Borelli concluded the program by reviewing a few of the emerging points of consensus from discussions of obedience to God/submission to God.

By the end of our meeting, we felt that we had uncovered deeper meanings of obedience and surrender to God by using our spiritual resources. We had grown in respect for how each of us uses our sources and principally Scripture, which Muslims understand as God's guidance and Christians, as God's self-disclosure. We each enter dialogue accepting one another equally as spiritual companions on the journey to God although this does not mean that we value all views about God identically. We each recognize, when reading Scripture, that linguistic tools and critical methods of interpretation are necessary. We also recognize a certain tension between individual and communal interpretations of Scripture. We each value free will, as a gift of God, and surrender or obedience to God admits of many levels of response to God. When Muslims speak of absolute trust in God and dedicating all their affairs to God, they are approaching a Christian understanding of absolute obedience to God in accepting God's will. Unfortunately, surrender and obedience have negative connotations in our society, and it is a common task for us to explain this central act of faith in God as the beginning of all that can be good in one's life. For, we agree, that God's will and our deepest desire are not in conflict. We also agree that sin exists and that we are in need of God's grace. God reaches out to all of us and calls us to a

relationship, but when we remain arrogant and in isolation from God, we sin. Our response to God is an act of faith, but we Catholics and Muslims understand faith differently. While Muslims and Catholics perceive faith as a relationship with God, Muslims primarily focus on accepting God's guidance as contained in the Qur'ān, and Catholics primarily focus on accepting the person of Jesus as known in the Scriptures and through the life of the Church.

In our final working session that year, we considered several possible themes to explore as the next step for reaching a consensus that might serve as a useful instrument in promoting Christian-Muslim relations. We noted several paired themes: repentance and forgiveness, peace and war, patient endurance and struggle, conversion and transformation, and faith in God and dependence. Other themes were worked into the discussion: justice, love, the missionary impulse. We settled on three themes that Pope John Paul II had connected in his message for first of January of that year (2002), a day that is now commemorated as a World Day of Peace: no peace without justice, no justice without forgiveness.

#### ***Fourth Meeting: Peace, Justice and Forgiveness***

Dr. Siddiqi, Imam Al-Qazwini, and Bishop Sevilla convened the fourth meeting of our dialogue on February 25, 2003. Two papers and been prepared on each of the topics—peace, justice and forgiveness. Imam Saadiq Saafir and Dr. Joseph Sanchez-Núñez spoke on justice, Dr. Abdullah Aslam and Fr. Alexei Smith gave presentations on peace, and Imam Al-Qazwini and Bishop Sevilla addressed the topic of forgiveness.

Fr. Alexei took a twentieth century approach to the theme of peace in the Catholic tradition. He began by citing Pope Paul VI's famous plea in 1965 during his visit to the United Nations: "war, never again war." He noted that Pope John Paul II also visited the United Nations thirty years later in 1995 to give an address in which he pleaded, "never be afraid of one another." But, it was Pope John XXIII before them in 1963 who was the first to make a strong plea for peace from the Catholic tradition in his encyclical "Peace on Earth" (*Pacem in Terris*), addressed to all Catholics during the depths of the cold war. For his message for the 2003 World Day of Peace, Pope John Paul II honored the encyclical on its 40th anniversary. Fr. Alexei mentioned the four pillars of peace identified in *Pacem in Terris*: truth, justice, love and freedom. He then reviewed the list of human rights which John XXIII asserted were based on the church's vision of the dignity of the human person: the basic rights to existence, the right to develop moral and cultural values, the right to benefit from society, freedom of worship and economic rights.

Dr. Abdullah began by asking rhetorically why God would give any community a different message about peace. The concept of peace is similar among religions because the source of that message is the one God; yet, peace remains on the illusory horizon of human life. From the divine perspective, peace is an obligation on humanity to give back to the Creator, that is, the restoring of divinity to the Divine. There are many barriers to peace because of our different

cultures, religions, languages, and even visions of God, but we are obligated to make our deepest, inner convictions of mind and heart about God prevail over these barriers so that we can return to God what belongs to God. Parallel to Fr. Alexei's presentation, Dr. Abdullah observed that the Qur'ān also declares that every human being is entitled to a dignified existence and certain rights—to life, to thought, to religious practice, to labor, to family, and without these there is no human dignity. He also cited some examples in the life of the Prophet which insured these rights for those living in covenant with the Muslim community and the development of a tradition to resort to war only when it becomes impossible to live in peace. He observed that this ideal to insure justice and live in peace has not been the case in every Muslim society, nor has it been true of other societies with similar ideals of justice and peace. Peace is not something that can be imposed but requires a conversion of heart to live according to the Divine Will. Without peace, justice comes at a heavy price.

Imam Saafir led off with a reference to Qur'ān 10:47 that to every people God has given a message of justice. Justice then belongs to God for it is God who explains justice and expects righteous behavior. Qur'ān 12:40 makes this point: Sovereignty belongs to God, and humanity serves God by being righteous and implementing justice and not by pretending to make or to abrogate divine law. Thus the most honored of humanity are the most righteous, those who are God-fearing or God-conscious. To be God-conscious means to obey God's law, to be mindful always of God, and to be thankful to God. Humanity was created and divided into nations and tribes, according to Qur'ān 49:13, so that we may know one another and not despise one another.

Dr. Sanchez-Núñez in his presentation on justice cited numerous Scriptural passages in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament. Justice is the central concept for all human relationships according to the Hebrew Scriptures. It is not simply an ideal but arises in human relationships. Justice applies in the variety of human relationships according to God's actions in history reflecting his justice, mercy and compassion. Turning to the New Testament, Dr. Sanchez-Núñez observed that Jesus underscored the element of service in justice and illustrated this in the passage where Jesus returns to his home at Nazareth, enters the synagogue on the Sabbath, and is asked to read aloud from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah: the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor; he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set liberty to those who are oppressed..." (Luke 4:16-21). Jesus closes the book and says, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Dr. Sanchez-Núñez concluded his presentation with reflections on the social teachings of the Catholic Church, especially in the twentieth century.

In his presentation on forgiveness, Imam Al-Qazwini emphasized that it is God who ultimately forgives and that God's forgiveness is greater than any human forgiveness: "Say, O My servants who have transgressed against themselves, despair not of the mercy of God; verily, God forgives all sins; verily, He is the Forgiving, the Merciful" (Qur'ān 39:53). Human forgiveness is one of

the levels of faith; it is a giving back to God what the Creator has given us. The Prophet set a good example forgiving others and seeking God's forgiveness many times a day. Thus, just as God forgives us, so we should seek God's forgiveness and forgive others. When we seek forgiveness, we should first repent of our sins expressing regret what sins we have committed. Then we should make a firm commitment not to sin again. We should discharge any obligations we have against those whom we have offended, and we should fulfill any obligations which we have ignored. We should make a fresh start and turn away from sinning as result of this experience and make ourselves obedient to God's will.

Bishop Sevilla began his presentation by noting that the major elements in the Catholic understanding of forgiveness and reconciliation were already given in Imam Al-Qazwini's presentation. First, it is God who forgives and we are called to seek God's forgiveness and expected to forgive others. Then, when we have sinned, we should be sorry or contrite, confess our sin to God, resolve not to sin again, and make amends for our sins. The imam, Bishop Sevilla said, connected forgiveness to faith, but we Catholics see a more specific connection between forgiveness and conversion to God. The good news of Jesus was that we are forgiven, and if we truly understand this and accept it, then we are transformed. Knowing that we sin, is an acknowledgement of good and evil. Sin is a result of our free will, a concept that is also shared with Islam. In the Catholic tradition, turning people away from evil and towards the good is a communal event, and we have made this reconciliation with God one another a sacrament of the church. We understand God's incarnation in Jesus Christ and the assumption of human nature, his ministry, passion, death and resurrection as the victory of God over sin and death. God remains with the community of Jesus' followers through the power of the Holy Spirit which enables us to forgive and be righteous. Only then can we know what justice is, and only then can we know God.

The group concluded the day marveling at the number of similar ideas and teachings regarding peace, justice, and forgives although our two different perspectives remain distinct. Our understanding of these three themes was enriched even by our brief comparative studies. In our discussion, we also recognized that evil pertains not just to the private sins in our lives but also to structures of human society. We agreed that as faithful Christians and Muslims we are expected to do more than simply make our personal lives right with God; we must also work to restore justice where it has been lost and reconstruct the social bonds between groups that have lost the relationships of justice. It is not enough to transform ourselves; we need to transform society.

After a full day of discussions on Wednesday, February 26, the group visited the Islamic Education Center in Costa Mesa where Imam Qazwini and his community hosted the dialogue for Maghrib prayer, an evening program of speakers, and dinner. Mrs. Saideh Khan moderated the program. She first introduced another member of the community, Ms. Julia El-Haq, who recited the opening sūrah of the Qur'ān (Al-Fātihah) and then offered a translation. Ms. El-Haq

then read a translation of a Qur'ānic version of the Annunciation (3:42-51), a passage extolling the virtues of Mary, the mother of Jesus. After this, Imam Al-Qazwini welcomed everyone to this community, many of whose founding members were exiles from Iraq and the regime of Saddam Hussein. He spoke about the significance of contemporary developments as preparations were being made for the invasion of Iraq by British and American forces. While his community was supportive of those efforts, they were also deeply concerned about the citizens of Iraq who would have to endure the difficulties of war.

Dr. Siddiqi was then introduced and spoke of the importance of both intrafaith relations, for example between Sunnis, like himself, and Shi'is, most of the Muslims in attendance that night, and of interfaith relations, such as this dialogue between Catholics and Muslims that has met for four years. He reminded everyone that dialogue is not compromise but a sharing of teachings and traditions, and expressed his gratitude for the programs of the Catholic Church cooperating with Muslims.

Bishop Sevilla was introduced and thanked everyone on behalf of the Catholic participants. He then read the recent statement (February 26, 2003) of Bishop Wilton Gregory, President of the USCCB, in which serious moral concerns for the movement towards war in Iraq and the reluctance of Catholic leadership to support a military intervention at that time were presented.

Professor June O'Connor, then, gave the major address of the evening on how each of us may work for peace. In her address, she named and described the ten practices for "just peacemaking" taken from a book with that title edited by Glenn Stassen. These ten practices are:

1. support nonviolent direct action;
2. take independent initiatives to reduced threats;
3. use cooperative conflict-resolution strategies;
4. acknowledge responsibility for conflict and injustice and seek repentance and forgiveness;
5. advance democracy, human rights, and religious liberty;
6. foster just and sustainable economic development;
7. strengthen the United Nations and International Efforts for Cooperation and Human Rights;
8. reduce offensive weapons and weapons trade; and
9. encourage grassroots peacemaking groups and voluntary associations.

The following morning, we reconvened and prepared a list of points of consensus on peace, justice and forgiveness. We were able to express our agreement in five points which we made public in a news release after the meeting:

1. We, Catholics and Muslims, believe that God is the source of peace and justice, and thus we fundamentally agree on the nature of peace and justice and the essential need of all to work for peace and justice.
2. Our rich teachings and traditions of peace and justice serve as a resource and inspiration for all; however, our immediate and present actions to work together are often wanting. The need to work together for peace and justice is a pressing demand in these troubled times.
3. We believe that it is God who forgives and that as Catholics and Muslims we are called by God to offer forgiveness. Forgiveness is an important step to moving beyond our past history if we are to preserve human dignity, to effect justice, and to work for peace.
4. We may disagree on certain points of doctrine, even as we respect the others' rights to a fundamental integrity of their teachings and affirm all their human and religious rights. With love and in the pursuit of truth, we will offer our criticisms of one another when we believe there is a violation of integrity of faith in God. We must avoid demonizing one another and misrepresenting the one another's teachings and traditions.
5. When we meet in dialogue and discuss matters of peace, justice, and forgiveness, while being faithful to our traditions, we have experienced a profound and moving connection on the deepest level of our faith, which must take effect in our lives.

### ***Conclusion***

Members of the West Coast Dialogue of Catholics and Muslims have prepared this report in the firm hope that others will read it and emulate what we have accomplished. We make it available for Christians and Muslims to discuss our points of consensus. They may agree or disagree on various points, but more significant to us in these times is for Christians and Muslims to take this discussion of spirituality deeper than we have plumbed and to build consensus further than we have reached. We pray too that others will find joy, affirmation and growth which we have experienced in our dialogues when we shared a little of our spiritual riches, prayed for one another and for the world each in and our own and in one another's presence, became friends, co-workers and companions on the journey to God, and took time to articulate a consensus and to understand better our differences.

*December 23, 2003*



## *Participants*

The West Coast Dialogue of Catholics and Muslims, after a planning meeting in May 1999, began meeting in February 2000, at the beginning of the new millennium and the celebration of the great jubilee year for Christians. The dialogue met another three times in February 2001, 2002, and 2003. Those who attended 2003 meeting discussed the possibility of a preparation of a report on the agreed upon four meetings. On December 17, 2003, Dr. Siddiqi, Bishop Sevilla, Dr. Abdullah, Professor O'Connor, Ms. Sherrel Johnson, and Dr. Borelli met and prepared this report.

Those who have participated as members of this dialogue, whether for one meeting or all four, are listed below.

Dr. Aslam Abdullah, The Minaret, Los Angeles, CA  
Dr. Karim T. Abdullah, Seattle, WA  
Imam Abuqadir Al-Amin, San Francisco Muslim Community, San Francisco, CA  
Mr. Salam al-Marayati, Muslim Public Affairs Council, Los Angeles, CA  
Imam Moustafa Al-Qazwini, Islamic Education Center of Orange County, CA  
Imam Tahir Anwar, South Bay  
Islamic Association, San Jose, CA  
Dr. John Borelli, USCCB, Washington, DC  
Archbishop Alexander J. Brunett, Archdiocese of Seattle, WA  
Imam Sabir El-Amin, Bilal Islamic Center, Los Angeles, CA  
Ms. Mary V. Cass, Focolare Community, Los Angeles, CA  
Sr. Joyce Cox, BVM, Archdiocese of Seattle, WA  
Mr. Kalim Farooki, Corona, CA  
Mr. Iftexhar A. Hai, United Muslims of America, South San Francisco, CA  
Ms. Sherrel A. Johnson, Council on American-Islamic Relations, Anaheim, CA  
Fr. John J. Keane, SA, Diocese of Sacramento, CA  
Mrs. Saida Khan, Costa Mesa, CA  
Msgr. James C. Kidder, Diocese of Sacramento, CA  
Dr. Kimquy Kieu, Seattle, WA  
Brian Linard, Focolare Community, Los Angeles, CA  
Fr. Rafael Luévano, Diocese of Orange, CA  
Fr. Elias Mallon, SA, Franciscan Friars of the Atonement, New York, NY  
Msgr. Dennis L. Mikulanis, Diocese of San Diego, CA  
Dr. June O'Connor, University of California—Riverside, CA  
Fr. Bruce Orsborn, Diocese of San Diego, CA  
Imam Enrique Rasheed, Elk Grove, CA  
Fr. Gerry O'Rourke, Archdiocese of San Francisco, CA

The Rev. Jose A. Rubio, Diocese of San Jose, CA  
Imam Saadiq Saafir, Pasadena, CA  
Dr. Ahmad H. Sakr, Walnut, CA  
Jerrel Abdul Salam, Paramount, CA  
Ms. Fatima Saleh, West Covina, CA  
Dr. Joseph Sanchez-Núñez, Ladera Ranch, CA  
Bishop Carlos A. Sevilla, S.J., Diocese of Yakima, WA  
Mr. Naim Shah, Los Angeles, CA  
Dr. Abdussattar U. Shaikh, Al-Waha Foundation, San Diego, CA  
Dr. Muzammil H. Siddiqi, Islamic Society of Orange County, CA  
Fr. Alexei Smith, Archdiocese of Los Angeles, CA

### *Notes*

[1]The Christian participants in this dialogue were Catholics; the Muslim participants were both Sunnis and Shi'is. They generally spoke to one another as Christians and Muslims, but sometimes the Catholics would identify an interpretation, teaching or practice more precisely as Catholic.

[2] This is the general prayer Muslims make when they mention or listen to the name of a Prophet of God, and it is their way of showing respect for these noble souls. Likewise, there is a similar prayer especially for the Prophet Muhammad. Writing in English, some Muslims place (pbuh) after the name of the Prophet, and they request the readers to make this general prayer in their heart whenever the name of any prophet of God is mentioned. This formula will not be repeated in this text.

[3] The three regional dialogues are: the Midwest Dialogue of Catholics and Muslims, meeting since 1996 and co-sponsored by Islamic Society of North America and the USCCB; the Mid-Atlantic Dialogue of Catholics and Muslims, meeting since 1998 and co-sponsored by Islamic Circle of North America and the USCCB; and the West Coast Dialogue of Catholics and Muslims described in this report.

[4] The Midwest Dialogue of Catholics and Muslims has met annually from 1996 to 2003 in Indianapolis. In December 2003, members of that dialogue completed a lengthy resource as a result of their proceedings: Revelation: Christian and Muslim Perspectives.

[5] All three regional dialogues meet as retreats, with time set aside for prayer and sessions focusing on religious topics.

[6] So that wider notice would be taken of the dialogue in the Muslim community, it was decided to ask Imam Al-Qazwini, a Shi'ite, to serve as a Muslim co-chair with Dr. Siddiqi.

[7] "What Dialogue Means for Catholics and Muslims," by Archbishop Alexander Brunett, and "How an Islamic Leader Views Dialogue, by Muzammil Siddiqi, Origins. Catholic News Service Documentary Service, 30/41 (March 29, 2001): 660-663.

[8] At this same time, Pope John Paul II also announced that he would invite religious leaders again to Assisi on January 24, 2002, for prayers for peace.