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Dialogue in action: the witness of St Francis of Assisi

I am pleased to have this opportunity to address you today here in Oxford. Thank you for this invitation.

As the title suggests, I want to begin this talk with St Francis of Assisi. Specifically, I should like to reflect on the remarkable visit of St Francis of Assisi to the Sultan al-Kâmil, in Egypt, which took place a little while ago now, in 1219.

Exact accounts of this event, not surprisingly, are hard to determine. It took place in the middle of the Fifth Crusade, when the focus of the battle was Egypt, or more precisely the port town of Damietta. This Crusade was primarily encouraged by the Church and Emperors, but as often in these hundred years of Crusades, there was deep conflict between them as to intent and tactics. But for St Francis, this was of little interest. All he wanted to do was promote peace.

Indeed, he had made a number of attempts to reach the battlefields of the Crusades. In 1212, he set out for Jerusalem itself, but was shipwrecked in the Dalmatian coast. In 1213, he set off for Morocco but illness forced him to break his journey in Spain and return to Assisi. Then in 1219, accompanied by just one friar, he set off for Egypt.

Eventually, probably during a ceasefire in the autumn of 1219, he was allowed, astonishingly, into the presence of Sultan al-Kâmil, who had succeeded his father the year before and who was the nephew of Saladin. There is little historical record of the meeting and it is the subject of much speculation, some of it rather hagiographical. It would appear that, much to the dismay of his advisors, the Sultan engaged with Francis in a true dialogue, enabled surely by the Sultan's own largeness of heart and Francis' utter vulnerability. One strong storyline emerged from this remarkable pilgrimage, which was later illustrated in the art of Giotto in Assisi: Francis challenged his hosts to a trial by fire to demonstrate to the truth of his message. There is no evidence that such a trial actually took place, but it is entirely consistent that Francis could have proposed it.

What drove Francis to take such risks, in defiance of pope and emperor and common prudence? Most commonly, it is understood that Francis believed that only the conversion of the Sultan to Christianity would bring the Crusades to an

end, and to that end, he was willing to pay the ultimate price of martyrdom. Some, such as Navid Kermani, (c.f. *Wonder Beyond Belief*) have suggested that it was a search for friendship that motivated Francis. I can see that while this was probably not his starting point, such a friendship may well have been born in his heart. Indeed, one somewhat romantic account of the encounter brings it to an end thus: 'When they finally departed, the Sultan arranged for the brothers to be escorted to the Christian lines, bidding them farewell with these words: "Do not forget me in your prayers, and may God reveal to me the Faith which is most pleasing to Him."' (Francis of Assisi by Michael de la Bédoyère p.207). If there was a friendship born that day, it was a friendship based on a common search for God, on 'how to live a relationship with God', - as good a simple definition of 'spirituality' as can be found.

To understand Francis a little more deeply, and therefore to be able to draw from him lessons for today, may I fill out the picture a little more.

In Italy at this time, the transition from the 12th to 13th centuries, there were four concentric circles of violent conflicts marking everyday life. The first was constant outbreaks of violence between the inhabitants of the emerging cities. These were riots and battles between the 'boni homines', the noble and wealthy families who held sway, and the 'homines populi' - a definition that speaks for itself - a kind of populist movement. This came to a head in Assisi in 1198.

Then, the second circle was the battles between the cities, vying for control of lands and labour. Thus, a battle took place in 1202 in Collestrada, halfway between Assisi and Perugia. Francis was caught up in these conflicts. He knew the battlefield first hand.

The third circle of violence was the solidifying of these local conflicts into broader political alliances, between supporters of Pope and Emperor, the two great powers of Christendom.

But then came the fourth circle: the conflict between Christianity and Islam.

I say all this because scholars of this period (e.g. Marco Bartoli, 'Saint Clare: Beyond the Legend') point out firmly that among the consequences of all this bloodshed was the growth a deep intolerance. The hostility and hatred that sooner or later fuel warfare have to find enemies, even among the innocent. And these long years of bitter conflicts soon found an enemy nearer at hand: the Jewish people who had long lived in Western Europe. The pogroms of 1096 were an early expression of the intolerance, fuelled by war, breaking out into violence. But there was a second

innocent enemy identified: the leper. Leprosy seems to have spread across Europe with the Crusades. Leprosaria were established across Europe from the time of the third Lateran Council in 1179 and the prevailing response to the leper was one of exclusion from every facet of society.

This begins to lay bare the heart of St Francis. The same heart that is needed today if we are to follow his example. It is well known that among the first actions of Francis, after his dramatic conversion to a radical following of Christ and a period of radical penance, was to embrace a leper and take lepers into his care. This was not a chance action. It was fundamental to his new self-understanding and to his understanding of what is required by the Almighty. At the end of his life, too, this was still clear. The opening words of his final Testament are these: 'The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in this way: for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them.'

At the heart of this great figure of peace, then, is a first principle: following the call of God means compassion for the victim. The option for peace, that drove Francis to Egypt, was rooted in this compassion. These are words attributed to Francis by his closest companions:

'As you announce peace with your mouth, make sure that greater peace is in your heart. Let no one be provoked to anger or scandal through you, but may everyone be drawn to peace, kindness and harmony through your gentleness. For we have been called to this: to heal the wounded, bind up the broken and recall the erring.'

These words, in their entirety, provide us with the reason for his journey to meet the Sultan and, no doubt, the reason why he was received with such courtesy.

If we seek true dialogue today, if we seek a dialogue of spirit, a spiritual dialogue, then there can be no better guide than those words and the man who spoke them, no better starting point than compassion for the victim.

Today there are many places and movements of dialogue, some tenuous and tentative, some coming up against misunderstanding and resistance. But they are there, and they encourage us to seek out pathways of spiritual dialogue and fraternity ourselves.

Spiritual dialogue can focus on the call we all share: that of striving to live out, in practice, each day, our relationship with God. This implies, quite certainly, that such dialogue has to be rooted in our daily experience, experiences which include

vulnerability, fear and uncertainty. It is also rooted in the consolations we are given in family, in prayer, in our communities of faith. These are dimensions of dialogue between religions today, a dialogue that is not only much needed but also able to release the deepest power for good of belief in the one God.

Before seeking to explore something of our contemporary context and opportunities, allow me to bring onto the stage a second remarkable story.

Nebek is a small town in Syria, 80km north of Damascus. In the Qalamoun Mountains nearby, on the edge of a cliff, the Romans built a watchtower to guard the roads to Damascus, Homs and Palmyra. After the fall of the Roman Empire, Christian hermits used caves near this watchtower for meditation, and by the sixth century, a monastery of the Syrian Antiochan Rite had been established. The monastery was dedicated to St Moses the Abyssinian – in Arabic, Mar Musa el-Habasahi.

The present monastery church there dates back to the year 1058 (the Islamic year 450), and a community at Mar Musa has lived and worshipped in this remote place for most of the millennium. But by the early nineteenth century, the monastery was abandoned, and fell into ruins. And there the story might have ended, if not, on the one hand, for the devotion of the people of Nebek, to whom the monastery remained a holy place, and, on the other, the vision of a young Jesuit student from Rome, Paolo Dall'Oglio.

Fr Dall'Oglio first came to the Monastery of Mar Musa, remote and ruined, in the early 1980s. He became convinced that he had a calling to rebuild it and re-establish a monastic presence in the Syrian Desert. He was ordained a priest in the Syrian rite in 1984, and throughout the 1980s led groups for work and study at the monastery. In 1991, together with the then Deacon Jacques Mourad, he established a permanent community.

From the beginning, this community had three priorities as the focus of its work and mission.

The first priority was for the community to live a life of evangelical simplicity, in harmony with God's creation and the society around it.

The second priority, higher perhaps than the first, was to give the foremost place to the spiritual life, not as something utilitarian, a means to discovery of self or inner peace, but as being of value in itself, and ordered towards God. In that, Mar Musa is no different from countless monastic communities all over the world. But in other

ways, it broke fresh ground. Some inscriptions on the walls of the monastery church give a clue. They begin: 'In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate ...', and are written in Arabic. Mar Musa then bore witness to the shared search for God even in the ordering of its prayer. The choice of the Arabic language for liturgy, the inclusion of some patterns of prayer whose origins can be traced to Islamic mysticism, the possibility offered to Muslim visitors to pray according to their own tradition in an area within the monastery walls are all testimony to that.

The third priority flowed naturally from the second. In deepening their love of God through the spiritual life, the community sought to share that love in their hospitality, offered to Christians and Muslims alike. Fr Paolo Dall'Oglio wrote, "We are not seeking to closet ourselves in cultural ghettos but on the contrary we seek to give up a culture of separation in order to build gradually a culture of communion." That aim, that dialogue, was fostered through programmes of seminars, through building a library, which has been gathered with the aim of deepening understanding of the interreligious work of the monastery. But the hospitality offered went beyond the intellectual alone. The silence and solitude of the monastery were shared by all and, in time, some aspects of Islamic practice were woven into the pattern of community life. For instance, the community in the monastery and the villagers nearby united in observing the Ramadan fast.

The friendships that have been forged, the understanding that has grown, between Christian and Muslim at Mar Musa could be said to offer a contemporary resonance with the story of Francis and the Sultan. There are less palatable parallels too.

Thirteenth-century Egypt and twenty-first century Syria share more than heroic efforts by some at interreligious dialogue. They share a context of considerable violence. The Syrian Civil War has, over the past decade, cast a long shadow over the country, and far beyond it. Many of those 'concentric circles' of violence that were evident in thirteenth century Italy are at play in this arena of war too. Individuals who have long lived at peace, side by side, can do so no longer. Sections of the country are divided between 'rebel' and 'government' control. Other nations have become involved, just as the conflicts in Italy played out on the broader stage. And, not least because the actions of the so-called Islamic State, there are those who wish to cast Islam, in its widest sense, as the villain in the conflict.

The Mar Musa Monastery itself was spared destruction, though its role as a place of pilgrimage could not continue at the height of the war. But not all of its community were so fortunate. A daughter house, the Monastery of Mar Elian, between Palmyra

and Damascus, was razed to the ground by Islamic State, in 2015. Fr Paolo Dall'Oglio was himself exiled by the Assad Government in 2012 and abducted in 2013: nothing more has been heard of him. His successor at Mar Musa, Fr Jacques Mourad, was himself abducted in 2015, though thankfully later released. Dialogue is threatened in such circumstances – but it is never more necessary. The prerequisites for dialogue, above all peaceful co-existence, have all but vanished in many parts of Syria today. Reciprocity of trust and friendship are in short supply.

History has witnessed, far too often, to the reality that a common response to violence is more violence. Yet there is another response, quite as shocking in its own way: apathy. This is something that is wider than religious affiliation. Fr Jacques Mourad spoke directly about the response of elements of the Christian presence in Syria to the suffering of the people of Syria: 'we mean nothing to them', he said. It is a challenge to all of us to do what we can to prove him wrong.

But there is also another response: hope. Such hope can find expression in small signs, such as the re-opening of the Mar Musa Monastery to pilgrims, both Christian and Muslim, last year, despite the conflict. In their Christmas letter the community wrote, 'What a joy to see Christian and Moslem families climbing up again together to receive the blessing of this sacred place! What comfort to receive the visits of the young Moslem men and women from Nebek who come to show 'their' monastery to their Christian friends and colleagues from other areas who do not know the monastery! How moving it was when some Moslem women approached the sisters to ask for prayers for their intention.' Our reciprocal dialogue and friendship can be a sign of hope too.

The witness of Mar Musa highlights the important truth that dialogue is sustained only when sought in the company of trust, respect and friendship. To be truly fruitful, dialogue must go deeper than the cerebral alone, important though that is, if it is to avoid the risk of becoming simply an exercise in abstract theological jousting. The dialogue of the intellect must be accompanied, as at Mar Musa, by the dialogue of experience. Such dialogue may find expression in some form of shared prayer or religious experience; it may consist in the shared experience of life. I would go so far as to say that a dialogue of experience is essential to mutual respect and understanding between religions. It was evident at Mar Musa; it is evident in the co-existence of Christians and Muslims of all walks of life in many parts of the world, who live side by side and can call each other friends. Perhaps that dialogue of experience is what Francis and the Sultan most truly shared.

Keeping these various facets of dialogue – intellectual, religious, existential – in good balance is one of the surest forms of defence against those who will argue that

interreligious dialogue leads us inexorably down the road of dishonesty and syncretism. It need not. If Francis and the Sultan established some degree of friendship and respect, it was not because either suddenly concluded that the tenets of his own faith ceased to matter. To Francis, the love he was able to show was rooted in faith in the Christ to whom he sought to witness, and whose Church he strove to rebuild. One of Fr Paolo Dall'Oglio's books is entitled 'Love of Islam and Faith in Jesus.' To him the two were not mutually exclusive, and the love to which he witnessed found its expression in many strands of reciprocal dialogue. He does, however, make the point that rejection of religious syncretism, with all the false equivalences it entails, helps us to recognise the 'cultural syncretism' that is often shaping our societies: those elements that put pressure on all forms of religious observance. The rush to globalisation, the 'on-demand' culture, the reduction in attention spans all have their ramifications for people of all faiths.

But what of our experience of dialogue between great faiths? I would be the first to admit that my own experience in this area is limited, but nevertheless, it has set up deep resonances. I was appointed Archbishop of Birmingham in the year 2000. Just a year later, the substantial Muslim community in that city found themselves targeted by hate and threat, in the aftermath of the attacks on America in September 2001. This was a decisive moment. There was a real risk that prejudices would become more ingrained, and serious damage to community cohesion would result, to the detriment of the entire city. On the very day of the attacks, I was invited to participate in a show of public solidarity by faith leaders at the Central Mosque – solidarity both with those who had died, and those who lived and were accused without cause. From that initiative grew meetings of the Faith Leaders' Group in Birmingham. It started on a day of great tension; but it was sustained through personal relationships, building communal solidarity and growing in its capacity to respond to difficult and sensitive moments. It is interesting, incidentally, that the whole thing began at the initiative, not of a Christian or a Muslim, but of the late Rabbi Dr Leonard Tann.

Dialogue with Muslim leaders continued when I moved to be Archbishop of Westminster in 2009. It has been based, substantially, on our shared experience of being a religious minority in a society in which an increasing secularism is evident. We listened to the lessons each had gathered in this situation of being a minority. In practical terms, these lessons included the need to extend compassion and assistance to those most in need; the imperative to reach to all, beyond those who shared our own religious affiliation. We recognised, too, how the provision of education is an important pathway by which we contribute to wider society, and through which our religious belief and practice become open to public scrutiny and accountability. This last point is particularly important in our response to those

who say, increasingly loudly, that there is no proper place for 'faith' schools in our modern British society.

We have talked together about how to give the practice of true charity its clear place in the message we bring to society. We recognised that the role of the generous volunteer is an essential element of finding and following the pathway out of social exclusion or segregated living. Slogans come and go, but the way that religious belief underpins generous citizenship and selfless public service does not. I am told that within the Roman Catholic Diocese of Westminster alone, over four million hours of voluntary service were offered in the past year. This is a persuasive element of our profile in our complex society. It is, then, a challenge to us all to translate our faith in God into eloquent expression in action, to help each other to do so, and to thereby reshape the profile of religious belief today.

And then there are the increasingly pressing questions of how best people of faith contribute to debates about the role of government, its limitation and what it can (or cannot) legitimately demand. An aim, in our dialogue, is to find ways in which the voice of faith can speak compellingly and in confidence as we contribute to the debates of our times. When Pope Benedict visited the United Kingdom, in 2010, he gave an address in Westminster Hall. He spoke compellingly of the role of religious faith in society, and of the ways its contribution are indispensable: 'The role of religion in political debate is not so much to supply these (objective) norms (of ethics) as if they could not be known by non-believers – still less to propose concrete political solutions, which would lie altogether outside the competence of religion – but rather to help purify and shed light upon the application of reason to the discovery of objective moral principles.' In this light, I pick out just one contemporary issue we might consider: the current consultation on changing organ donation into automatic organ retrieval by public authorities. How might our beliefs about the dignity of the human person, the integrity of body and spirit, and the rights of individuals and families, guide our shared responses to this question?

Pope Benedict cast his challenge more widely. And it is a challenge, which we should be exploring together. He says, 'This 'corrective' role of religion vis-à-vis reason is not always welcomed, partly because distorted forms of religion, such as sectarianism and fundamentalism, can be seen to create serious social problems themselves. And, in their turn, these distortions of religion arise when insufficient attention is given to the purifying and structuring role of reason within religion. Without the corrective supplied by religion, though, reason too can fall prey to distortions, as when it is manipulated by ideology, or applied in a partial way that fails to take full account of the dignity of the human person. Such misuse of reason, after all, was what gave rise to the slave trade in the first place and to many other

social evils, not least the totalitarian ideologies of the 20th century. This is why I would suggest that the world of reason and the world of faith – the world of secular rationality and the world of religious belief – need one another and should not be afraid to enter into a profound and ongoing dialogue, for the good of our civilisation.'

Dialogue between faith and society will be significantly impoverished if dialogue between faiths is characterised by suspicion or hostility, or is simply non-existent. It is important, obviously, that such dialogue takes place between leaders; but it has to go far deeper into our communities if it is truly to flourish. If our dialogues, inspired by these two great historical examples, are underpinned by a quiet, contemplative approach to the beauty of each other's belief, and a desire to live peaceably before God and together, we are on the right path. And on this path, the importance of respectful listening cannot be over emphasised. Pope Francis, speaking to some of us last year, provided what could be called a 'theology of the ear', which must precede all the theology of the mouth!

But to conclude, we know that lasting, genuine and spiritually based dialogue between us requires nothing less than a thorough and humble holiness. That is why those words of St Francis ring true now, eight centuries after they were first uttered. They must guide us always: 'As you announce peace with your mouth, make sure that greater peace is in your heart. Let no one be provoked to anger or scandal through you, but may everyone be drawn to peace, kindness and harmony through your gentleness. For we have been called to this: to heal the wounded, bind up the broken and recall the erring.'

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