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Report on the Activities of the PCID: Relations with Muslims

By Khaled AKASHEH

INTRODUCTION

This report starts with the last Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue (PCID) which was held from 20-24 November 1995. It will attempt to cover the Council's activities with respect to dialogue with Muslims, but it must never be forgotten that the most important dialogue is that which is undertaken at the local level.

1. CATHOLIC-ISLAMIC LIAISON COMMITTEE

In the report presented to the Plenary Session of the PCID mention was made of the setting up of a Catholic-Islamic Liaison Committee. An agreement for the institution of this committee had been made on 22 June 1995, the day after the inauguration of the Mosque in Rome. It was decided that the committee would meet at least once a year.

The first meeting was held in Cairo on 30 May 1996 and on the Muslim side was organised by the International Islamic Council for Da'wah and Humanitarian Relief.

The Muslims were represented by the Secretary General of the World Muslim League (Rabitat al-'Alam al-Islami), the Assistant Secretary General of the World Islamic Congress (Mu'tamar al 'Alam al-Islami) and the Secretary General of the International Islamic Council for the Da'wah and Humanitarian Aid. Dr Mohammed Sayed Tantawi, newly appointed Sheikh al-Azhar, came for the opening and was represented for the rest of the meeting.

On the Catholic side, besides the President, the Secretary and the head of the Islam section in the PCID, the Secretariat of State was represented by a specialist and H.E. Mgr Hanna Golta, Auxiliary of the Catholic Coptic Patriarch, represented the local Church.

Three themes were tackled: 1. The relationship between justice and human dignity; 2. The environment and human security; 3. Poverty and humanitarian aid.

Clearly, these matters could not be dealt with in depth in a single day. The meeting closed with several general resolutions.

The next meeting, organised by the Catholic side, was held in Rabat from 18-20 June 1997. The choice of Morocco was surprising, but we wanted to signal that it was not necessary for us to select a Western country, and furthermore, official dialogue with

Morocco was already set up. It should also be noted that the meeting was extended to two days.

The Director of ISESCO, a body of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) equivalent to UNESCO and having its headquarters in Rabat, was present for part of the meeting. On the Catholic side, the local Church was represented by Monsignor Jacques Levrat, Vicar General of Rabat.

There were two major subjects on the agenda: 1. How Muslims and Christians speak about each other; 2. Minority rights.

Many sensitive points were touched on: freedom of conscience, reciprocity, and mixed marriages. The Press communiqué drawn up by the meeting was very anodyne, avoiding all the embarrassing questions. The Rabat meeting provided occasions for visits to the King, the Prime Minister, the Minister for Habous and ISESCO.

The third meeting of the committee, organised by the Muslims, was held in Cairo on 17-18 July 1998. Two Muslim committee members who normally took part in the meetings were unable to participate: Dr Saleh al-Obeid, Secretary general of Rabita and Dr Outhman al-Twajrie, Secretary General of ISESCO. In their absence they were replaced by M. Tawfiq al-Sharif, Bureau Chief of the World Islamic Council for Da'wah and Humanitarian Aid (Cairo) and M. Abdullah Abd el-Shakour, Representative of the Rabita in Egypt. The committee received a courtesy visit from the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Dr Muhammad Sayed Tantawi.

The subjects dealt with were: 1. Duties of men and women; 2. Human rights and duties; 3. Rights of the child in the family and in society.

There was not much exchange on these subjects, and even less on questions of common interest, as had been foreseen. The atmosphere was however relaxed, and there was a growth of mutual understanding, respect and friendship. This is perhaps the real, if humble, contribution of these meetings.

2. A COMMITTEE WITH AL-AZHAR

During the meeting of the Catholic-Islamic Liaison Committee in Cairo Sheikh al-Azhar Tantawi came in person to the office of the Nuncio to meet Cardinal Arinze. He approved the creation of a mixed committee of representatives of al-Azhar and the PCID which had already been discussed with his predecessor. After this negotiations went forward with a view to setting up the committee. The agreement was signed on 28 May 1998 in Rome. Al-Azhar was represented by the Wakil al-Azhar (Assistant to the Grand Imam), Sheikh Fawzi al-Zafzaf and by Dr Ah Elsamman, Secretary of the al-Azhar Committee for Dialogue with Monotheistic Religions. The following day the Holy Father

received the signatories of the agreement and expressed his joy that the committee had finally come into being, and stated that there was much work awaiting it.

As mentioned above, during the meeting of the Catholic-Islamic Committee for Dialogue a courtesy visit was made to the Great Imam. This was actually the first meeting with the Great Imam after the setting up of the liaison Committee.

3. MEETING OF MEMBERS AND CONSULTORS

Profiting from the visit to Jordan for the meeting with Al Albait, a meeting for Middle East, North African and European Members and Consultors was organised from 30 November (afternoon) to 2 December 1997. 20 Members and Consultors took part. An invitation was also extended to a representative of the Jordanian Union of Women Religious to be present as an observer. Besides Bishop Fitzgerald's report on the activities of the PCID with respect to dialogue with Muslims there were also reports of activities at the local level. Two papers on the spirituality of dialogue from the point of view of Christians of the East and of the West were presented by S.B. Mgr Michel Sabbah and Fr. Gilles Couvreur respectively¹.

The meeting gave Cardinal Arinze and the participants the opportunity to make contact with the local Church through celebrations of the Eucharist held in two parishes.

4. CONFERENCE ORGANISED JOINTLY WITH THE AL-ALBAIT FOUNDATION

Since 1989 the PCID has been organising Christian-Muslim conferences jointly with the Royal Academy for Research in Islamic Civilisation, an organisation dependent upon the Al Albait Foundation whose patron is Prince Hassan, until recently Crown-Prince of Jordan. The sixth conference in this series took place in Amman on 3-4 December 1997. The theme was Human Dignity in Christianity and Islam. Three aspects were taken up: 1. The concept of human dignity; 2. A historical review of Christian and Muslim attitudes to human dignity; 3. Perspectives. The acts are due to be published shortly in both Arabic and English.

5. CONFERENCE ORGANISED JOINTLY WITH THE WORLD ISLAMIC CALL SOCIETY

Again since 1989 the Council has renewed contacts With Libya through the World Islamic Call Society which has its headquarters in Tripoli. On 28-30 April 1997 there was a conference in Rome on a theme already touched on in 1989, Mission and Da'wab. No conclusions were reached at the end of the conference, but nevertheless the frank exchange of views has contributed to the clarification of respective positions.

¹ These papers have been published in Pro Dialogo 99 (1998/3).

6. TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE VISIT OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II TO MOROCCO

Cardinal Arinze went to Morocco in December 1995 for a commemoration of this historic event, organised by His Excellency the Papal Nuncio. It was an occasion for renewing contact with a good number of Muslim dignitaries.

7. VISIT OF IMAM WARITH DEEN MOHAMMED

Imam Warith Deen Mohammed is the son of Elijah Mohammed, founder of the Islamic Nation (known as "Black Muslims"). Turning his back on his father's racist ideas, Warith Deen Mohammed was reconciled to orthodox Islam and set up his own ministry. He has millions of followers in the USA. There has already been dialogue between Warith Deen Mohammed and the Catholic Church, mainly in Baltimore.

At the suggestion of H.E. Cardinal Keeler, Archbishop of Baltimore, Imam Warith Deen Mohammed came to visit Rome in October 1996. He was accompanied by a small group of imams and by a member of the staff of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Affairs of the US Bishops' Conference. The programme included visits to the PCID, the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies, St Egidio, the Focolare movement, and to the Mosque in Rome. The group was present at a general audience and Imam Mohammed and his companions were presented to the Holy Father by Cardinal Keeler.

It is good to add that contacts continue between Afro-American Muslims and the Catholic Church. For example, at Pentecost in 1997, Chiara Lubich, the founder of the Focolare movement, was invited to speak at the Malcolm Shabbaz Mosque in Harlem, New York. Another meeting worthy of mention is the Third International Congress of Muslim Friends of Focolare at Castelgandolfo on 10-13 July 1998, which was attended by 200 Muslims from 23 countries.

8. CARDINAL ARINZE'S VISIT TO GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

Georgetown University in Washington D.C. has recently set up a "Center for Christian-Muslim Understanding" and Cardinal Arinze was invited to give a lecture on 5 June 1997. He spoke to an audience, which included a good number of Muslims, about Christian-Muslim relations in the 21st century. The text of his lecture, which was given a good reception, was published in *Origins*, the official bulletin of the Bishops' Conference, and later released as an off-print.

9. PARTICIPATION IN REGIONAL ACTIVITIES

The official for relations with Muslims was present at various meetings as an observer. In this way he took part in the work of the Islam in Europe Committee, a committee set up by the Conference of European Churches and the Council of European Bishops' Conferences. The committee has produced two documents, the first on marriage between Christians and Muslims, and the other on reciprocity.

More recently there was an opportunity to be present at a joint Christian-Muslim meeting of the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) and the Arab Group for Islamic-Christian Dialogue which took place in Beirut from 9-12 July 1998 entitled Abrahams heritage. This followed a decision to increase collaboration between the PCID and the MECC, and a representative of the MECC was invited to the conference organised with Al Albait (Amman, December 1997).

At the invitation of the Friars Minor, the official for relations with Muslims took part in a meeting of the International Franciscan Commission for Inter-Religious Dialogue which was held in Sarajevo (13-20 September 1997). He also went to the first meeting of the laity of the Middle East held in Beirut (10-14 June 1997), having contributed to the preparation of it. The meeting was organised by the Pontifical Council for the Laity and an important place on the agenda was given to relations with Muslims.

Each year the Egyptian Higher Council for Islamic Affairs organises a large seminar with Islamic representatives from all over the world. For the last few years a number of Christians have also been invited. In July 1997 the official for relations with Muslims attended, together with Cardinal Lopez Trujillo, President of the Pontifical Council for the Family. The seminar took as its theme Islam and the West.

At the beginning of November 1997 Bishop Fitzgerald was invited to the French Bishops' Assembly where one day had been dedicated to the study of relations with Muslims. The Bishops' Conference will look at the subject again this year.

In March 1998, Fr. Akasheh represented Cardinal Arinze at an international symposium organised by the Istanbul municipal authorities. The theme was inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue. He had the pleasure of being received by His Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. In June 1998, the Fr. Akasheh took part for the second time in the General Assembly of the North African Bishops' Conference. This contact is opportune and useful.

10. TRILATERAL DIALOGUE

The World Council of Churches and the World Lutheran Federation together with the PCID and the Commission for Religious Relations with Jews organised a second conference on Jerusalem. Given the impossibility of getting Jews, Christians and Muslims of Israel and Palestine to a meeting in the Holy Land, the meeting was held in Salonika,

Greece, in November 1997. The subject of the meeting was A Vision for Jerusalem, but the reality of the situation in Jerusalem and the absence of progress in the peace process made the meeting extremely difficult. Nevertheless the participants were able to agree on a final communiqué.

Trilateral dialogue is increasing in popularity. In November 1997 Bishop Fitzgerald took part in the second interreligious meeting organised by the Alcalá University (Madrid) which took as its theme From Conflict to Dialogue.

11. THE COMMISSION FOR ISLAM

This commission, the Commission for Religious Relations with Muslims, has existed since 1974. It has been transformed into a "think-tank" for the study of questions arising from relations with Muslims. The commission whose members include the President and the Secretary of the PCID, together with the official for relations with Muslims, who acts as its secretary, and seven Consultors, meets annually. It has studied the question of prayer with Muslims and an article on this subject by Fr Stamer, one of the Consultors, was published in Pro Dialogo (no. 96,1997/3). The present theme of study is religion and politics.

12. THE "NOSTRA AETATE" FOUNDATION

The Council has set up a Foundation to encourage interreligious dialogue. The principal means for achieving this goal is the awarding of grants for the study of Christianity. These studies must be undertaken in Rome. This favours the development of an understanding of Christianity which is not solely theoretical, but also practical, and as far as possible scholars are accommodated in Christian surroundings (a college, or religious house or community). Contact with the Council is also provided. The PCID organises a monthly meeting where these students meet Christians and Muslims resident in Rome who work in the field of dialogue. Since 1991 the Foundation has awarded 17 Study grants to Muslims (8 short - less than one semester; and 9 longer - one semester or more; the awards have been given to 1 Algerian, 1 Jordanian, 1 Moroccan, 2 Britons, 3 Tunisians, and 9 Turks.)

CONCLUSION

Relations between Christians and Muslims take on particular importance as a result of the troubled history they share, the demographic and political weight of Muslim majority countries, and the spiritual links which exist despite the fundamental differences which must never be obscured. Christian-Muslim dialogue is without doubt the most difficult of dialogues, but at the same time the most necessary and perhaps the most promising. It constitutes a sign of hope for the future, but also a challenge. The PCID, strengthened by divine assistance, by the encouragement of the Holy Father and by the collaboration of Members and Consultors, hopes to succeed in this mission to bring about a future of peace

and collaboration not only between Christians and Muslims, but also between all believers and men and women of good will.