

Allow me to start with a short story.

During the Crusades in the Middle Ages, Doumyat, a large Egyptian city today, was besieged by the Crusaders. And the Egyptian Islamic forces were fighting back. The siege went on for a long time, yet with no avail.

Then on a calm day when there was no fighting, a monk dressed in his distinctive priestly robe came forward from the Crusaders' camp carrying nothing but a Bible. He was not carrying a weapon, nor even a stick.

The Muslims were surprised to see him coming forward from the enemy camp but they dared not harm him.

His clothes indicated that he was a monk and a priest, and the Koran (Quran) praises Christians because there are monks and priests amongst them.

Similarly, the Bible that he was carrying, is considered holy by Muslims, because they believe, as per the Koran, that it is revealed from God, and that it offers guidance and knowledge. The Koran goes even further to say "may the people of the gospel judge in accordance to what God has revealed through it".

For that reason the Muslim soldiers received with respect, but also with confusion, this priest who came from the enemy camp, and they asked him: "who are you? and what do you want?" He indicated to them that he wanted to meet the king.

After some hesitation and consultation, the priest was taken to the camp of the king who, at the time, was King Al-Kamel the cousin of Salah ad-Din Yusuf ibn-Ayyub (known as *Saladin*)... The king asked the same question: "What do you want?" And the priest's answer was: "I want peace."

- "But you are fighting us..."
- "We are not fighting for the sake of fighting, but because we want our route to Jerusalem to be one of peace and safety."

And the king asked: "And how can that be?"

The priest responded saying: "It is very simple. The problem will be solved once you all convert to Christianity. Then we all become brothers."

The king was not upset. He said "I will introduce you to a number of our Muslim scholars that you may discuss this issue and decide together which of the two religions is true, and who should adopt the religion of the other".

During the meeting that was hosted by the king, one of the Muslim scholars boldly suggested that they build a fire and throw the priest willingly into it. Should he come out of it unscathed, this means that his religion – Christianity – is right, and accordingly Muslims should follow the Christian religion.

The visiting priest did not think much about it but instantly said: “I agree... if I come out of the fire untouched, then Christianity is the true religion, and you all convert to Christianity. But if the fire should consume me, then that would be because of my personal sins. Meaning that even in that case Christianity would still be the true religion.

The king and his scholars were impressed by his deep spirituality and intelligence.

The dialogue ended with the return of the priest to his camp carrying royal gifts which I believe are currently displayed around his tomb. The priest is St. Francis of Assisi under whose spiritual umbrella we are gathered today, thanks to the community of St. Egidio.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I shared this real story with you not only because we are on St. Francis campus, but to raise the following questions:

- *Should St. Francis come back to life today, and visit the conflict areas in the Middle East, how will he be received by ISIS and others like it?*
- *Would they have respected his religious attire and his Holy Bible?*
- *Would they have listened to him expressing his religious convictions?*
- *Would they have interacted with him as a Christian believer, in light of what the Koran and the Muslim Prophet Mohamad (peace be upon him) say about Christians?*

I don't think any of us needs an answer... we all know the answer.

We know the fate of the Italian Jesuit father Paolo Dalloglaio who dedicated his life to serve Muslims and Christians in Syria. And we know the fate of Bishop Yohanna Ibrahim whom we miss today, as from every Sant'Egidio event, and from the Muslim-Christian dialogue platforms in the Middle East and beyond.

We know what happened to many monasteries and churches that were destroyed even though they are described by the Koran as houses of God, and despite the Prophet Mohamad's warning to Muslims not to harm them, denying Muslims the use of one stone from a church building to build a house for Muslims considering this a disobedience against God and His prophet.

Islam has not changed. The Koranic text is constant, and the Hadith (sayings of the Prophet) are clear. It has not changed neither before nor after St. Francis' meeting with Al-Kamel in Egypt. What has changed is that a group of vindictive, desperate extremists have hijacked Islam and are using it as a tool for vengeance. They have become a new totalitarian movement, yet this time in the name of religion.

For this reason, we Muslims realize well, that we have to free our religion from this "hijacking", and to reorganize our Islamic in-house in alignment with the spiritual principles of Islam, and the general principles that form the foundations of human civilization in the twenty first century.

For this reason too, addressing religious extremism is first and foremost a duty of Moslems. Islam believes in pluralism and considers diversity amongst people an expression of divine will that people be different. Which is why God called them to come to know each other. And dialogue is the means to do so, but there is no dialogue in the absence of freedom. Religious freedom is the basis, the crown of all freedoms as is stated in the Apostolic Exhortation on the Middle East, and the Azhar Al Sharif's document on basic freedoms. That is why H.H. Pope Francis proved himself to be a spiritual leader for all humanity when he said that there is no criminal religion, but there are criminals in all religions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I learnt from the story of St. Francis of Assisi in the East that relations between people of different religions cannot be based on elimination as ISIS is doing today, not even on tolerance as some good intentioned people think. It should be based on a belief in pluralism and diversity and on respect for the intellectual and ideological foundations that are the basis of pluralism and diversity, and in a manner that supersedes tolerance which Nietzsche describes as an insult to "the other".

State citizenship is not based on tolerance but on rights. At the very first sign of change or tension in relations, tolerance may lead to the violation of human rights. Tolerance is practiced with a certain level of superiority – that of the *tolerant* against the *one being tolerated*. On the other hand, the principle of rights is based on equality and justice, and safeguards human and national relations on the basis of mutual respect. Exactly what our nation states need, and should be based on.

Allow me to bring my word to a close in confirming the following reality, which is, the fact that “the other” is me “the different”; That the more I make space within myself for “the other”, the better I understand myself... and the other. Only through freedom of expression, freedom of religion and the freedom to practice religion, can I understand what it means to be you.

Thanks to Sant'Egidio... and thank you.

May God bless you all.

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