

The Dream of Franciscus - A Pope in the Footsteps of a Saint

1. An encyclical drawing worldwide attention

Pope Francis has recently called on Catholic faithful worldwide to participate in the "International Day of the Fraternity of All People" on February 4th. This UN Day of Remembrance is being celebrated for the first time this year. It is the result of a joint initiative of Pope Francis and Egyptian Grand Imam Ahmad al-Tayyeb, including also an online meeting with UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres. The date commemorates the signing of a document by Pope Francis and Grand Imam al-Tayyeb in Abu Dhabi in 2019, with which the **two religious leaders promote global solidarity and peaceful coexistence**. This has a specific importance, as presently the term "Islam" is very often only heard in connection with words like "Islamistic" or even worse "terroristic".

Two weeks ago the renowned Cardinal Reinhard Marx of Munich wrote in a guest article for *L'Osservatore Romano* about a current book of the Pope. "**Let Us Dream!**" is doing a kind of translation work on the previously published encyclical "**Fratelli tutti**". The Pope almost gives the impression "as if he wants to make sure that everyone really understands that he also wants to **overcome borders in his papal office and calls on us all to do the same in our area of responsibility**". That encyclical can also be read as a "sum of Francis' pontificate so far", "as a sum of what he wants to write in the family tree of the world, and also of the Church itself".

2. Some personal preliminary remarks

I do not want to pick out and comment on some individual sentences of the encyclical but to express my deep joy about such a papal text. Next to some texts of the Second Vatican Council like *Nostra Aetate*, it is a deeply desired support for our Vincentian work in the Islamic world which has been existing since the time of our founder.

I myself came to Istanbul in 1977, three years after my ordination to the priesthood in Austria, and have continued my work as a Vincentian here ever since. Already at the end of my first year in the Internal Seminary, my provincial asked me if I would be willing to study for a teaching degree alongside my theological studies, so that I could later work in Istanbul. That was a very unusual thought for me at the time. Turkey was much further away for an Austrian than it is today. Even during my theology studies, information on Islam practically played no role. I agreed and began those studies, but with some doubts. When our former Superior General, Fr. James Richardson, visited our Province in 1970, I asked him if it was really the right job for a young Vincentian to be an English teacher in an Austrian school in Turkey, in light of our recent General Assemblies when the American confreres were moving out of so many educational institutions. I had some question marks about '*Evangelizare pauperibus*' in an elite school in Turkey where any form of so-called religious propaganda was strictly forbidden. Fr. Richardson strongly advised me to follow the wish of my superiors and prepare for Istanbul to keep that Vincentian mission alive, and so I came here and became

more and more convinced that this was the right place for me. At that time, the French confreres still had a very active presence at St. Benoit in the neighborhood and I learned many things from the former Superior Yves Danjou, who liked to emphasize the importance of the **mystery of the Incarnation for St. Vincent's confrontation with Islam**. My rootedness in Istanbul was so strong that later on Fr. Robert Maloney agreed three times that I could exercise the office of Austrian Visitor together with my administrative work as Headmaster of Istanbul. Thus, in these 44 years, many basic attitudes towards Muslims and their religion got deeper foundations through friendship with Turkish Muslims, both in our staff and among former students. It has also led to a long-time Muslim staff member becoming the first Muslim woman to be affiliated into the Congregation by the Superior General.

3. Vatican II: A Copernican Turn in the Relationship with Islam

Yet a redefinition of Islam had already taken place in the Catholic Church because of the Second Vatican Council, which a great scholar of Islam, the French Louis Massignon, had called the "Copernican turn in Christian-Islamic relations". In *Lumen Gentium*, the Council had unequivocally declared that the will to salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, referring in particular to Muslims "who profess the faith of Abraham and worship the one God with us."

Slowly, people started to think about different forms of dialogue between Christians and Muslims and doing so discovered different levels. The dialogue of life and then the dialogue of action were often mentioned as basic forms: meeting members of another religion on an interpersonal level, which then also leads to practical cooperation between groups and institutions in jointly important issues such as education.

4. From Regensburg to A Common Word

Some attitudes changed in later years. Here I only want to draw attention to the immediate background of Pope Francis' Encyclical on Fraternity and Social Friendship.

Under Pope Benedict XVI. the Vatican attitude towards Islam could be entitled: "Regensburg, and Everything After." Regensburg 2006 was the Pope's landmark discourse at his former university that included a historical citation asking if Islam lacked reason, making it inherently prone to violence. The worldwide protests at first strongly deepened the tensions between Christians and Muslims, including a handful of church burnings and the killing of a nun. Pope Benedict, having spoken like a university lecturer, was shocked about this outcome and did his best to change his scholarly tone.

But religious violence was not the only answer. One year later, on 13 October 2007, 138 Muslim scholars, clerics and intellectuals declared the common ground between Christianity and Islam in **A Common Word Between Us and You**. The letter was addressed to the leaders of all the world's churches and to Christians everywhere. In Rome, a Catholic-Muslim Forum was established to consider the twofold commandment of love of God and love of the other as a common word that can bring light to relations between Christian and Muslim believers.

5. Francis: An Extraordinary Pope in the Footsteps of an Extraordinary Saint

Many additional steps were necessary before a groundbreaking change of atmosphere was possible under Pope Francis who showed a completely different approach in the footsteps of St. Francis.

Pope Francis published his extraordinary encyclical "On Fraternity and Social Friendship" in October 2020, and named it **Fratelli tutti** after a word of St. Francis of Assisi. With this new social encyclical, Francis wanted to address not only Christians, but to call out his vision of a better world to as many people as possible. The Pope is aware that such visionary thinking, while in line with prophetic callers such as once Francis of Assisi or, in our day, Martin Luther King or Mahatma Gandhi, might provoke much opposition. It must be possible to have a world in which people recognize each other as brothers and sisters, resolve conflicts through dialogue, and leave no one behind on the path of development, but give everyone room to participate. This is "not pure utopia, but a humble contribution to reflection."

For his plea for "fraternity and social friendship" Francis was inspired - highly unusual for a pope - by **Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, the grand imam of Cairo's Al-Azhar University**. Present at the Vatican's presentation of the encyclical in Rome was an Islamic jurist and longtime adviser to the Cairo grand imam, who clearly declared himself to be a Muslim "in harmony with the pope."

In his 2015 environmental encyclical "Laudato si," the pope had focused on the earth as a "common house" that must be preserved for future generations, and in "Fratelli tutti" he now outlines the rules of conduct for the inhabitants of the house. From there, the pope declines self-centeredness as a basic evil and its remedy, loving openness, at all levels. He rejects aid that creates new dependencies or disregards cultural identities of peoples as colonialism in disguise. To resolve conflicts, Francis relies on dialogue and international mediation. National interests must be subordinated to the global common good; he rigorously rejects war and armaments as means of politics. On the subject of migration, Francis emphasized that as long as the conditions for a life in dignity are lacking in the countries of origin, it is necessary to respect the right of every human being to find a place for the realization of his or her person. Every country is "also a country of the foreigner"; the goods of a territory should not be "withheld from a needy person who comes from another place." He sees different cultures not as an obstacle, but as an enrichment.

The world of Islam is such a complex area that will face many questions in our new third millenium. For many persons Islam has replaced the old danger seen in Communism in earlier decades. As mentioned beforehand we very often only speak of Islamistic power groups and forget the peaceful dimension of Islam.

6. Vincentian Confidence

While reading this "dream" of Pope Francis, I often thought, that such a positive development would be wonderful, but that our world did not function that way. Suddenly I remembered my years in High School, when in 1967 I had read my first encyclical "Populorum progressio" of Paul VI. with great inner excitement. That text helped me to accept my Vincentian vocation and to join the Congregation a year later. This present encyclical of Pope Francis is also - unusually for such a long ecclesiastical letter - worth being read intensively.

Many Christians and theologians had forgotten much of what we discovered in 1965 in "Nostra Aetate". Our originally strongly France-based Vincentian presence in the Islamic world has greatly diminished. If out of historical circumstances possibilities – even limited ones – still do exist, we should not easily give them up. I am deeply thankful that our new Austrian-German province has unanimously confirmed that our presence in Istanbul should remain one of the main works of the province in the international field. Next to directing a high school for more than 500 mainly Muslim students we constantly look for new additional chances – I only mention our Vincent-de-Paul Society's work for Christian refugees in Istanbul or our Christian-Muslim Library – and develop new answers. So far, that has proved workable, underlining thus the importance of the work for Muslims in our tiny province.

Franz Kangler CM
Province of Austria-Germany, Istanbul