

**FRATERNITY FOR KNOWLEDGE
AND COOPERATION**

The *Document for Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, signed by the Pope of the Catholic Church, Francesco, and by shaykh Ahmed al-Tayyeb, imam of the Al-Azhar mosque, along with the journey of the Pope to the United Arab Emirates, is an unprecedented event, at an institutional level, in the history of relations between Christians and Muslims.

The general impression is that a new phase is opening, under many aspects, with regards to the relations between our two religions. This phase seems to be moving toward the recognition of the legitimacy, and providence, of the diversity of the Revelations, of theologies, of religions, of languages, and of religious communities. Diversities are no longer being seen as a call to conquest or proselytism, or as an excuse for a mere facade of tolerance, but rather recognised as an opportunity for the exercise and practice of fraternity that represents “a vocation contained in God’s plan of creation,” as affirmed in the Document itself.¹

“God is at the origin of the one human family”, stated the Pope on this occasion, and out of respect for religious plurality a “recognition of the other” is necessary, a recognition that is “neither forced uniformity nor a conciliatory syncretism”; but one based on the need to “purify the heart from turning in on itself”, a warning against placing one’s group against or in the place of another. It is significant that all of this is occurring exactly 800 years from the journey of Saint Francis of Assisi to Egypt and his meeting with the Ayyubid Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil. It is auspicious that the events of 1986 in Assisi—the common prayer for Peace—and of 2019 in Abu Dhabi—the convergence over the value of human fraternity—can be taken as two cornerstones that from now on cannot be avoided in interreligious dialogue in general, and especially Islamo-Christian dialogue.

An important verse of the Quranic Revelation, that guides Muslims in the relations between Revelations and believers, affirms:

And unto thee have We revealed the Scripture with the truth, confirming whatever Scripture was before it, and a watcher over it. So judge between them by that which Allah hath revealed, and follow not their desires away from the truth which hath come unto thee. For each We have appointed a divine law and a traced-out way. Had Allah willed He could have made you one community. But that He may try you by that which He hath given you (He hath made you as ye are). So vie one with another in good works. Unto Allah ye will all return, and He will then inform you of that wherein ye differ².

1 *Document for Human Fraternity for world peace and living together.*

2 Holy Quran, V:48.

This Quranic verse seems to almost echo the content of the letter that Pope Gregory VII addressed in 1074 to the Hammadi Emir an-Nasir, who reigned over Bejaïa, in modern day Algeria:

Almighty God, who wills all men be saved and none to perish, approves nothing in us more fully than that, after his love for God, a man should love his fellow men and that what he would not have done to himself he would do to no one else. Such charity as this, we and you owe to our own more particularly than to other peoples; for we believe and confess to one God, albeit in different ways, and we daily praise and revere him as the Creator and Governor of this world.

Beyond the doctrinal foundations, we also understand the important role of more recent documents and declarations that constitute the history of Islamo-Christian dialogue over the past sixty years, documents that led to the Abu Dhabi meeting and Document for Human Fraternity. Above all, the fundamental documents of the Second Vatican Council, concluded in 1965, and in particular *Nostra Aetate*, marked a crucial moment of opening towards dialogue with other religions, towards brotherhood between faiths and the abandonment of missionaryism understood as authoritarian and aggressive proselytism. In 1985, Pope John Paul II, on the occasion of a meeting with the youth of Casablanca, in Morocco, declared with regard to our differences that “it is a Mystery about which one day God will enlighten us, I am sure”; this recognition of the providential mystery of religious differences; was the inspiration for the meeting in Assisi the following year, where religious leaders from across the world came together to pray for peace. Thereafter the idea began to emerge that the Christian concept of God, in its deepest essence, is not fundamentally contrary to the Islamic one, despite its presentation in a formally different way. The truth remains that, despite these differences, the successors of Abraham still turn to the one God, under whom they are united, whilst necessarily remaining distinct from one another on the formal level. On the other hand, the first years of the 2000s were perhaps more complex. This included Pope Benedict XVI’s declarations in his speech in Regensburg in 2006, that eventually brought 138 Muslim scholars to write and propose the *A Common Word Document*³, after which the Catholic-Muslim Forum was established and began 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.

3 *A Common word between us and you* - (2007), signed by 138 Muslim scholars and addressed to all the Christian religious leaders. Preceding this letter were the *Amman message* (2004) and the *Open letter* of the 38 Muslim scholars directly addressed to Benedict XVI.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia during King Abdullah announced the initiative of Interreligious dialogue with different religions and cultures, this was followed by a meeting with Pope Benedict in 2007 and launched KAICIID in 2012. The Center focuses on linking religious institutions and leaders and policy makers to collaboratively confront global challenges that affect all Nations.

The *Document for Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* is part of this lineage, and is the second official document that Pope Francis has signed with another religious leader, the first being the declaration signed in Cuba in 2016 with Patriarch Kirill of the Christian Orthodox Church of Russia. There have already been various positive comments and expressions of approval for the Abu Dhabi event and for the Document that was read and signed on that occasion; however, there have also been objections from the usual literalists and exclusivists that are unfortunately present on both sides. Among the positive and constructive responses, we cite as example the comment made by the network of European Muslim scholars, EuLeMa, and in the Catholic environment, the interesting comment that appeared on the Catholic review *Aleteia*.⁴ We would like to second these statements, taking them as an occasion to make some reflections on the themes put forth in the Document.

Interreligious dialogue is recommended by the Quran with the goal of putting it into practice “in the best of ways”, and nowadays it is of vital importance for at least three reasons. First of all, the modern world emerged not merely at the margins of religious values, but actually in opposition to religion as such. It is therefore important to change modernity’s view of the religions. Second, the religions face a common challenge — nothing less than the end of human civilization as we have known it. Believers must contribute to the common search for a new civilization. Third, our time is dominated by injustice, oppression, xenophobia, the decline of democracy throughout the world, and the growth of every sort of ideological extremism. These forces can only be fought on the grounds of solidarity—not only between religions, but between all human communities.

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4 Giovanni Marcotullio, *Se Gesù è l'unico salvatore, come può Dio aver voluto le religioni?* (<https://it.aleteia.org/2019/02/11/documento-papa-francesco-al-tayyib-pluralismo>).

From our point of view there are three types of dialogue between faiths: one of convenience, one of reality, and one of principle. The dialogue of convenience aims to avoid all thorny issues, it is a false, vague, horizontal approach, one that abolishes traditional doctrines, sacred symbols and ways of grace; in order to reconcile two adversaries it suffocates them both; this is certainly the quickest way to achieve a false peace that has been substituted for truth. Inspired by a philosophical indifference, or by a relativist universalism, the characteristic of this dialogue is the dissolving of values. This is a false dialogue because instead of recognizing and supporting religions and their sacred foundations, it ends up providing a cheap conception of human rights, above all promoting, in the place of true spirituality, the “right to indifference”.

For persons who are sensitive to spirituality and contemplation, to support one another in exclusively material or sentimental terms is neither true support nor true fraternity. To those engaged in this type of dialogue, the following question is addressed: are we sure that we truly know the nature of the Good we desire, before seeking it for ourselves and then imposing it on others⁵? The Document for Human Fraternity certainly does not propose this type of dialogue.

A second type of dialogue we might call “de facto” or “reality based”: this consists of an understanding of religious people and the institutions that represent them on the basis of their common acceptance of certain moral values and metaphysical concepts, and in the understanding that they are faced with the common threat of secularization. This is the type of interreligious dialogue upon which the Document mainly focuses: “Dialogue among believers means coming together in the vast space of spiritual, human and shared social values and, from here, transmitting the highest moral virtues that religions aim for”⁶.

Justice, goodness, beauty, fraternity and peace on the social level are “anchors of salvation” for all, but they can certainly not be substituted for the salvation of the soul, just as the means are not a substitute for the end. It is a matter of creating conditions for a shared and necessary peace such as Dante strove for, so that it is possible for all to live a life oriented to the search for God, the highest and last objective that mankind can aspire to. This type of dialogue constitutes a necessary step towards the third type of dialogue, which we see as the most desirable of all.

5 “No man is a true believer unless he desires for his brother, what he desires for himself” teaches the Prophet Muhammad, and “Love your neighbour as yourself” teaches Christ.

6 *Document for Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together.*

This last type of dialogue can be called the one of “principle”, or “dialogue at the summit”: it consists in recognizing the mode of Knowledge that discovers the one Truth above the veil of multiple forms. Saint Basil, commenting on the beginning of the Gospel of Saint John, exclaimed, “Don’t forget ‘In the Beginning’! The culmination of the Principle cannot be understood while that which is outside of the Principle cannot be found.”⁷ To reach this objective, the one we consider to be of the greatest worth, there appears to be a long way to go.

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Secondly, In addition to Knowledge it is important to consider Fraternity, which provides the title to for this document and which should be understood, by both believers and humanity in general, as an ontological value to remember, rediscover, and practice. Regarding this, we wish to draw attention to some teachings of the Islamic Tradition regarding fraternity in its two fundamental aspects. First of all, men are brothers because they ontologically attest to the divine authority, as the Quran affirms:

And (remember) when thy Lord brought forth from the Children of Adam, from their reins, their seed, and made them testify of themselves, (saying): Am I not your Lord? They said: Yea, verily. We testify. (That was) lest ye should say at the Day of Resurrection: Lo! of this we were unaware⁸.

Also, fraternity is expressed at different levels depending on the spiritual family to which one belongs. A tradition of Muhammad the Prophet of Islam says: “The prophets are paternal brothers, their mothers are different”⁹. The believers and the communities that connect them to their founding Prophets are therefore called upon to live this fraternity, a fraternity that is not only human, but above all prophetic, in terms of the common spiritual paternity and generation that brings believing communities together and renders them brothers. This second level of fraternity is like a specification of the first: there are various spiritual families that make up humanity, connected to one another through a relationship of fraternity, both between the components of each specific community and between the different communities themselves. These connections operate on distinct planes, yet all of them descend from a common and single origin. These two different levels of fraternity should be distinguished and thereby made to harmonize with one another without confusion.

⁷ Saint Basil, *Homily XX*, 1.

⁸ Holy Quran, VII:173.

⁹ Prophetic tradition (*hadith*) reported by al-Bukhari.

This fraternity, of precious value for all religions, needs to be achieved at different levels. The Document develops some of the most important of these levels — namely, the dignity of human life (men and women, children and elders), family, justice based on mercy, freedom of the person, freedom of religion, the protection of sacred spaces and spaces of worship, condemnation of pseudo-religious fundamentalism, the culture of dialogue and tolerance, dignified citizenship, the protection and recognition of minorities, the relations and understanding between East and West.

The convergence between East and West—the “embrace” as defined in the Document—based on the “culture of dialogue”¹⁰ and on “reciprocal understanding”¹¹ represents, in the eschatological times in which we live, a true necessity and a sign of the Mercy of God. In asserting that “The West can discover in the East remedies for those spiritual and religious maladies that are caused by a prevailing materialism”¹² the Document demonstrates great foresight with regards to the potential of interreligious dialogue. The form of dialogue that it proposes is not that of good intentions, but rather the dialogue of faith in God, a dialogue reflecting the recognition of metaphysical principles, a dialogue that, without doctrinal compromises, allows the transparency of the One Divine Reality to emerge.

This kind of dialogue allows men and women of the different Revelations given them by God to come together peacefully and recognize one another in their common origin.¹³

What comes to mind are the words of Shaykh Abd al-Wahid Pallavicini, representative of Islam at the meeting promoted by Pope John Paul II in Assisi in 1986:

This will be the true ecumenism at the summit, the only one that can lead towards true peace, that peace that does not derive only from justice and is not one that occurs at all costs, but is founded on a superior justice that can come only from the mutual recognition of the spiritual validity of our different faiths, of that Abrahamic Tradition of which we are all part.¹⁴

10 *Document for Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together.*

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*

13 The Sacred Quran refers to God as “Lord of the East and West” (Holy Quran, LXXIII:9).

14 Abd al-Wahid Pallavicini, *L'Islam interiore*, Il Saggiatore, Milano 2002, p. 91.

The Document repeatedly affirms the centrality of faith:

*We affirm also the importance of awakening religious awareness and the need to revive this awareness in the hearts of new generations [...]. The first and most important aim of religions is to believe in God, to honour Him and to invite all men and women to believe that this universe depends on a God who governs it. He is the Creator who has formed us with His divine wisdom and has granted us the gift of life to protect it.*¹⁵

In this case, the Document takes into consideration the danger of “a desensitized human conscience, a distancing from religious values”, as well as that of “prevailing individualism accompanied by materialistic philosophies that deify the human person and introduce worldly and material values in place of supreme and transcendental principles”¹⁶. Faith, however, is not complete if it does not reflect a lived religious practice that transforms hearts. If it is true that there should not be any coercion in religion, it is also true that, if the rites and their protection are overlooked, there is a secularization of religion itself¹⁷.

The protection of religious minorities and places of worship becomes a necessary consequence of the reciprocal support of the adoration of the one God: “The protection of places of worship – synagogues, churches and mosques – is a duty guaranteed by religions, human values, laws and international agreements”¹⁸. Spiritual centers, that recall the primordial spiritual center, represent the terrestrial Jerusalem from which to elevate oneself in order to reach the celestial Jerusalem, according to the words of Christ: “The Peace that I give you is not that of this world”¹⁹.

15 *Document for Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*.

16 *Ibid.*

17 The Church Fathers taught that “the Word of God was made flesh so that we could be deified.” (Saint Athanasius of Alexandria, *Treaty on Incarnation*, n. 54) and that “if God made himself man so that man could make himself God” (Saint Augustin of Hippo, *Discorso* 371,1).

18 *Document for Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*.

19 Gospel of St. John 14, 27.

The text of one of the covenants sanctioned by the Prophet Muhammad and the Christians states:

If the Christians approach you seeking the help and assistance of the Muslims in order to repair their churches and their convents, or to arrange matters pertaining to their affairs and religion, these [Muslims] must help and support them. However, they must not do so with the aim of receiving any reward or debt. On the contrary, they should do so to restore that religion, out of faithfulness to the pact of the Messenger of Allah, by pure donation, and as a meritorious act before Allah and His Messenger.²⁰

The path to be walked together is that of “justice based on mercy”²¹. And by “based on mercy” we do not mean a lax justice, permissive and without rules, but rather a way to exorcise the inquisitional formalism and the obsessive concentration on the differences that have to be put forward, that can distract from the only truly fundamental concentration—the concentration on God.

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Beyond our generally positive reaction to the Document, it also seems necessary to make some cautious reflections, in the form of a warning with regards to a latent danger—one that does not place blame anywhere except upon ignorance—that the values mentioned by the Document, and recalled in this comment, might be interpreted or practiced in a partial or excessive way, outside the field for which they were designed by the Creator. Fraternity, mercy and spirituality should not be exclusively understood or practiced in a sentimental and emotional way. This is a latent risk that is always present when one enthusiastically undertakes the path of knowledge and love. It is not a matter of denigrating or eliminating good feelings or healthy emotions, simply of not forgetting their fundamental aim: to melt the hardness of the heart before the revelation of the more elevated and profound levels of the unity in God.

20 J. A. Morrow, *The Covenant of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of the World*. New York 2013

21 *Document for Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*.

Let us return for a moment to the main theme of the Document—fraternity. It is necessary to understand clearly what is meant by this word in order to avoid misunderstandings or manipulations. Fraternity in diversity is the cornerstone of the text, but there is a danger that this concept might be interpreted in too sociological or psychological a sense. In this case we would be left with a solely human, “too human” interpretation of religious fraternity, according to which man would be adored as he is, worshipped instead of God, despite the continued use of the word “God” as a mere formality, a word no longer referring to a Reality that we aspire to know. A respect for differences should not become an excuse for the adoration of the particular and the phenomenal in and of itself, where contingency replaces the Eternal. On the other hand, understanding fraternity in a vague and general sense, in the absence of sound theological principles, would lead to an insipid indifference. The “general” meaning of “human fraternity” and the “specific” theological meaning should not be confused or allowed to cancel each other out: loss of the specific leads to empty indifference, while loss of the general leads to idolatry of the most insignificant phenomena.²²

In saying this, we intend to express our disagreement with some of the critiques leveled at the Document on the question of fraternity, critiques made by both Muslims and Christians. According to them, true fraternity can only exist between members of the same religious community, whereas the fraternity between Muslims and Christians has no theological foundation. It is, however, fundamental to remember that the “general” fraternity between human beings is based on a teaching inherent in both the Muslim and the Christian Revelations; it is this mode of fraternity that in no way annuls specific fraternity, but is rather a consequence of it. To be “brothers in Christ” or “companions to the Prophet” does not imply that there must be an hostility between brothers and companions; in fact, there could be an even greater loyalty to our respective spiritual Teachers if the richness of the forms they brought could be understood as a way to vie with each other in good deeds. In this way we might come to a deeper understanding of the Absolute, Metaphysical, and Single Truth based on the recognition of a shared metaphysical perspective and the inner tension that is proper to the traditional forms through which this Truth manifests, a tension that does not posit cultural relativism but, rather, a mysterious and fully blessed spiritual participation by every believer in their specific “religious grammar” through which the Will and the Mercy of God transmits Its intelligible signs in a sacred communication.

22 In this sense the Document specifies: “It is important to pay attention to religious, cultural and historical differences that are a vital component in shaping the character, culture and civilization of the East”.

Such a mystery becomes even more priceless when every believer is able to respect, even in the brother of another culture and religion, the full dignity of a faith in its different and providential “grammar” and to recognize in this “pluralism” the signs of an extraordinary Will and Mercy of the One God, thus abandoning all claims to an apologetic exclusivism and rejecting the arrogant denial of another God-revealed faith. In fact, it is not a matter of understanding religious pluralism as the legitimation of the “confusion of tongues” that supervened after the presumptuousness of the tower of Babel, but, rather, of respecting the differences between the languages, symbols, rites, doctrines and dogmas and at the same time recognizing a superior language shared among believers, which might form the basis for a deeper respect and collaboration between brothers in contemplating the infinite articulations and aspects of the divine expression. A greater understanding of this superior language might lead to dialogue aimed at better understanding His Monologue, and to a re-establishment of the purity of the Intellect in the simplicity of human life and the complexity of human history.

It is equally crucial not to reject objectivity, depth, discernment, and even knowledge itself in the name of fraternity, either now, at the beginning of this great fraternal dialogue, or in any future stages of it. Fraternity does not mean renouncing the good and the true (that would be to compromise Principle), but rather to learn how to put all things, including humanity, in their proper places. In order to recognize the dynamic by which everything integrates harmoniously in Unity without making Unity the product of personal imagination, it is fundamental to know how to disregard biased and conditioned thinking (whether apologetic, theological, or cultural) with regards to doctrines and symbols, as well as when considering history and contemporary events, whether pleasant or unpleasant.

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Following these brief critical reflections that we felt it necessary to share given the historical importance of the meeting between the Catholic Pope and the Imam of al-Azhar, and the Document which resulted, we wish to express our great sense of satisfaction at the achievement this occasion represents, and we hope that this will be a starting point (and also a point of no return) challenging us to truly dedicate ourselves, as men, as brothers, and as religious people, to the discovery and practice of these treasures of spiritual and metaphysical knowledge that the religious Traditions continue to hold in trust.

We pray that the Document for Human Fraternity will be of substantive aid in reinforcing unity both inside each religious community and in the intellectual exchange between them, in a fruitful in a fruitful engagement-of differing positions. We hope that, through it, the Islamic community worldwide may find a renewed impulse and inspiration toward internal dialogue, thereby allowing its natural “unity in diversity” once again to become a communally shared value. The Islamic tradition is rich in diversity, including different legal and theological schools, and it is important that an inviting and brotherly space be provided for all groups to join in dialogue and fraternity. Within Islam, this includes outreach and understanding of both Sunni Islam and of Shi’a Islam, which has historically been underrepresented but has much to offer global religious dialogue. A call for human fraternity and sectarian de-escalation is especially important in a context of increased sectarian violence and discrimination across the world including within the global Muslim community. We pray that practices such as excommunicatory violence (*takfirism*), are brought to an end, and that inclusive Muslim unity be forged while building on significant prior achievements such as the Amman Message that established intra-religious acceptance across various Muslim schools. From this common effort toward a renewed circulation of ideas and insights from within the Islamic world, we hope that concrete actions may arise, either as continuations of past efforts or as new initiatives, in order to increase the number of religious representatives directly engaged and widen the scope of their influence.

As this new step in the Islamo-Christian dialogue matures, it will be equally important to accept, together with the points we hold in common, those necessary asymmetries that may emerge from both a formal and a doctrinal point of view, so that each may learn to accept the theological expressions of the other’s religion without judging them on the basis of their own, insofar as we respect each others’ specific jurisdictions. We need to cultivate mutual respect between our different communities on the basis of our common proclamation that God as One, helping each other to remember that our central aim is to honour the name of the Lord, especially in the difficult times that our humanity is now passing through.

It is for the attainment of this goal, as interreligious relations and Islamo-Christian dialogue continues, that we find it important and opportune to give wider expression to certain actors who could truly play a prominent role—namely, the contemplative orders, that is to say the Christian monastic orders and the Sufi orders of Islam, those who are custodians and cultivators, in different forms and at different levels, of the contemplation of God, since it is from this perspective that they call one another “brothers”.

It is no accident that the meeting between Saint Francis and the Sultan, an example that still has a positive impact in the East and West today, occurred at a time in which these religious orders emerged, blossomed, and renewed themselves. On the one side, the Franciscans (1209), the Dominicans (1216) and the Hermits of Saint Augustine and the Carmelites, and on the other side the *Qadiriyya*, the *Rifa'iyya*, the *Suhrawardiyya*, and shortly after, the *Shadhiliyya*.²³

What true understanding can there be at the summit if there is not a common orientation towards the Eternal, a will to elevate ourselves from the temporal contingencies towards the Face of God? In the past, the contemplative orders were fundamental bastions of orthodoxy and spirituality, both in Christianity (Catholic and Orthodox) and in Islam (*Sunni* and *Shi'a*), and nothing prohibits them from carrying out this role once again, serving also as mediators between both the believers and religious of our two faiths, for a true spiritual understanding—strictly avoiding any shadow of syncretism—whilst waiting for the eschatological denouement to our human drama, whose final nature and outcome lies in the mystery of the Divine Will.

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²³ From our point of view, this correlation is completely legitimate, and its model before the letter can be considered the profound and mysterious relation of exchange and teaching that tied a venerated khorasanian saint, Ibrahim ibn Adham, and a Christian monk named Simeon, in the middle of the 8th century C.E. Not to mention the dialogue between St. Gregory Palamas and certain Sufis, or Sufi-influenced sages, during his period of detainment under the Ottoman Empire; Palamas' doctrine of the "uncreated Divine energies" has much in common with the Islamic doctrine of the Names of God.

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