

Islam and Christianity within Lusaka Archdiocese

By Fr. Gilles Mathorel

Following the second African Synod, the Archdiocese of Lusaka has chosen to base its 2011 pastoral plan on the theme: “The Archdiocese of Lusaka in Service of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace”; One of the first steps to implement that plan was a seminar run from 3rd to 5th February at the Marian Shrine. In attendance were 40 people, coming from the clergy, religious and lay movements. In the presentation of the theme, the pastoral Coordinator said:

“In order to foster reconciliation among all peoples, pastoral dialogue aimed at reconciliation continues to be today a fundamental task of the Church in different spheres at different levels.”

And among this dialogue, he specifically mentioned the Ecumenical and the inter-religious dialogue. I was called to give an input on Islam in Zambia. I tried to present the Muslims in Lusaka as far as I could know them through my contacts and encounters with them; I detailed their various implantations and made a few remarks about their mentality and the possibilities for encounter and interactions with them. I stressed that it was not an easy task, yet not an impossible one; and that in any case, both groups, Muslims and Christians needed a conversion of heart for genuine encounters to take place: encounters which would respect our differences. And I concluded with a quotation from Pope John Paul II:

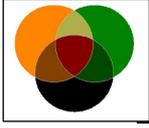
*“Either we learn to walk together in peace and harmony
Or we drift apart and ruin ourselves and others.”*

My talk was followed by a long period of questions and answers. To my surprise, people seemed to have forgotten my talk and focused mostly on Islam worldwide, as they know it, through the media. Those questions forced me to face the reality and acknowledge two facts:

1) Most of our Christians do not know their Muslims neighbors

2) Most of our Christians are scared and afraid of Islam, mostly because of media reports
Only one lady had enough courage to mention publicly that she was not afraid of the Muslims. All the others based their arguments on what they called “reality” as they saw it or understood it. I had to stress that the reality may have many facets. And if for some the reality is that among today’s terrorists many are Muslims, it does not imply that all the Muslims are terrorists. On the contrary we can find in Lusaka and Zambia many Muslims who are good spiritual Muslims as there has always been in the history of the Islamic Religion and still today in many other parts of the world.

As such, this seminar has been a good opportunity for many people to get a deeper look at the Islamic reality and to voice publicly their concerns, apprehensions and fears about Islam and the Muslims. It can be a liberating experience to express such fears in the assembly. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that in most cases, people’s fears and apprehensions are often due to prejudices because of wrong information through the media; and moreover, only



a few of the participants could claim to have had personal contacts with the Muslims in Zambia or Lusaka.

Rightly or wrongly, it has been said that Islamo-Christian relationship is not a pastoral problem in Zambia. Indeed it is not if we compare Zambia to other countries in the world. We enjoy a relatively good religious peace. There are no problems but the seminar has shown us that the roots or seeds of the problem are already with us in the heart of people. On one hand, such feelings of fear are very human and as such should be expected. Yet, they do not reflect the Christian ideal which we are supposed to proclaim. On the other hand, if nothing is done, this initial apprehension will become tension which in turn could give rise to clashes between members of the two religions. Let us not wait for those eventual clashes before doing something about it. Prevention is far better than cure.

Many members of the audience were a bit reluctant to dialogue with the Muslims. Yet they have not suffered physically from the Muslims as much as many Christians from Nigeria or Arab countries have. And it is those very Christians who have suffered, morally and physically, who, in many instances, are indeed advocating encounter and dialogue with the Muslims. So why are we not following the same path here in Zambia?

If we are Christians, called by Jesus Christ to love even our enemies, then we better try to work hard to become friendly with our Muslim neighbours who have done no harm to us and whose only draw back is to look different, unfamiliar to us. But they are like us, created by God, and as such they are and will remain our “Brothers and Sisters in humanity” just to recall a word from Pope John Paul II. If the Lusaka Archdiocese, following the African Synod, wants to promote reconciliation, justice and peace, then we have to address this issue of relationship between Muslims and Christians as there will be no peace possible without harmony not only between Christian Churches but also between the various religions here in Zambia, like Muslims and Hindus.

How to go about it? We already have a good number of people belonging to “Caritas” and working for Justice and Peace. They are doing a commendable job. It might be enough and quite appropriate if they could expand their field of activities by including the religious peace as one of their main objectives. Such suggestion was already made during the African Synod by one of the Major Superiors present. It reads:

“Rather than create or add another commission for inter-religious dialogue, I would suggest that to these already existing Justice and Peace Commissions, one or two individuals be added who are sensitive to the inter-religious questions who enable them to enlighten, explain and accompany this essential dimension.” (Rev. Fr.Chabanon)

May this year 2011 be a year during which parishes and lay movements will open their mind and heart towards a better knowledge and understanding, not only of the members of the various Churches, but also of our Muslim neighbors. That will be the only way that peace and reconciliation become a solid reality in the years to come.