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Sowers of Prophetic Hope  
*Seminatrici di speranza profetica*  
*Säerinnen Prophetischer Hoffnung*  
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Unione Internazionale delle Superiori Generali  
Piazza di Ponte Sant'Angelo, 28  
00186 Roma - Italia  
Tel. +39 066840020 / +39 349 935 8744  
Fax +39 0668400239  
www.uisg.org



## Sowers of prophetic hope: The call to interreligious dialogue

### Prof. Donna Orsuto

Originally from Ohio, Donna Orsuto is the Co-founder and Director of the Lay Centre at Foyer Unitas ([www.laycentre.org](http://www.laycentre.org)). She is also a Professor at the Institute of Spirituality of the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, Italy, and a Adjunct Professor of the Faculty of Theology at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas (Angelicum). She lectures extensively and gives retreats in various parts of the world. She is involved in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, having served as a consultant for the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and as a member of the Commission for Ecumenism and Dialogue of the Diocese of Rome. On 7 October 2011, Pope Benedict XVI named her a Dame of the Pontifical Equestrian Order of Saint Gregory the Great.

“Here we are, you and I, and I hope a third, Christ, is in our midst.”  
Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*

“Interreligious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world,  
and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities.”  
Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 251

“When we choose the hope of Jesus we find that the  
successful way of life is that of the seed... to give life, not keep it.”  
Pope Francis, *Wednesday Audience*, 12 April 2017

Thank you for the invitation to reflect with you on the theme “*Sowers of Prophetic Hope: The Call to Interreligious Dialogue*”. I would like to begin with an image that you see projected on the screen. Entitled “Followers of God”, it was painted in 1978 by the French artist Dolores Puthod.<sup>1</sup> It depicts Pope Paul VI standing in St. Peter’s square with his arms raised to welcome various religious leaders. Such a meeting actually never took place in that year<sup>2</sup> and if you read the official Church documents focused on interreligious dialogue in 1978, you would have to say that such a meeting of the Holy Father at the Vatican with leaders of world religions would have seemed almost unthinkable. It is true that *Nostra Aetate* had been

<sup>1</sup> To see a copy of this image, click here:

<https://www.google.com/search?q=followers+of+god+puthod&tbn=isch&source=univ&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewjy16n-krnhAhWFyKOKHS5PDQAOsAR6BAgJEAE&biw=1440&bih=757#imgdii=TLny2VjRZJzCM:&imgcr=CwqPAAG1G--fUM:>

<sup>2</sup> It was only in 1986 that a Pope encountered leaders of world religions in this way— and the historic meeting between St. John Paul II and religious leaders took place not in Rome, but in Assisi. An interreligious meeting did take place in St. Peter’s Square, but only in 1999 in preparation for the Great Jubilee Year of 2000.

promulgated, and Paul VI had called for dialogue in *Ecclesiam Suam* and was practising it himself on his apostolic journeys, but the time was perhaps not yet ripe for leaders of world religions to be welcomed in the Vatican. Yet, over the years, many people had the prophetic courage to let their imagination envision a future different from the past. Along the way, these women and men quietly, gently, and patiently worked to make that dream a reality. *Today such meetings between the pope and leaders from other religions are seen as quite normal both in the Vatican and on apostolic journeys.* A recent example is Pope Francis' visits to the United Arab Emirates and Morocco.<sup>3</sup> *A hallmark of his pontificate is a dialogue of fraternity with people of other religions.*

The seeds for Francis' approach to dialogue were sown during the Second Vatican Council. They were nurtured during the pontificates of Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Recognizing this progression is important because it encourages us as we embrace our call to engage in interreligious dialogue. We are invited to walk together in communion with our Church leaders. As the African proverb goes, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

The first part of this presentation will highlight some key insights from the Magisterium during these decades of dialogue that help us to understand the context of our call to be prophetic sowers of hope today through our participation in interreligious dialogue. In the second part, I will attempt to answer the questions: why does Pope Francis reach out to people of other religions? Why should we do the same? How can we become sowers of prophetic hope as we embrace this call to be involved in interreligious dialogue?

## **I. From *Nostra Aetate* to Pope Francis**

An anchor for our contemporary call to engage in interreligious dialogue is the Second Vatican Council's Declaration "Nostra Aetate".<sup>4</sup> This dynamic (and I would say prophetic and courageous) document of 1965 does not focus on dialogue in an abstract way, but rather reminds us that encounter among peoples is at the heart of dialogue. The purpose of this encounter is to grow in mutual understanding. For example, specifically with respect to Christian-Muslim dialogue, *Nostra Aetate* 3 states,

Over the centuries many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. The sacred Council now pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding (NA 3).

One of the ways of growing in mutual understanding is through participating in interreligious dialogue.

Paul VI's first encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, a document that greatly influenced Pope Francis,<sup>5</sup> still has much to say about dialogue in general which can also be applied particularly to interreligious exchange. For Paul VI, *we enter into dialogue because our experience of God's love encourages us to do so. We were created in the image and likeness of God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—for communion and dialogue.* Salvation history is the unfolding of that dialogue. The history of salvation narrates exactly this long and changing dialogue. It is a conversation of Christ with humanity. It is above all a dialogue of love, for this is how God is known. We honour and serve God through sharing that love with others. Authentic dialogue cannot exist without love.

In *Ecclesiam Suam*, Paul VI suggests that there are four key characteristics of dialogue.<sup>6</sup> Though underlined more than fifty years ago, they are immensely useful for today and are worth remembering. First of all,

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<sup>3</sup> See the important document, a result of Pope Francis' Apostolic Visit to the United Arab Emirates: *Human Fraternity for World Peace and Working Together*: [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190204\\_documento-fratellanza-umana.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html).

<sup>4</sup> For an overview, see Michael L. Fitzgerald, "Nostra Aetate, a Key to Interreligious Dialogue." *Gregorianum* 87, no. 4 (2006): 699-713. <http://www.jstor.org/proxy.library.georgetown.edu/stable/23581614>.

<sup>5</sup> See Pierre de Charentenay, *Alla radice del magistero di Francesco: L'attualità di Ecclesiam Suam ed Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Vatican City: LEV, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> For the description of the four characteristics of dialogue, see *Ecclesiam suam* 81.

dialogue must be marked by *clarity* [*Primum omnium perspicuitate colloquium praestae aequum est. . .*]. Is my language understandable, acceptable, and well chosen when I enter into dialogue with others? One might add that clarity also implies a clear sense of personal identity. For example, over the last twenty-five years, I have had the privilege of living with people from various religious backgrounds: Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu brothers and sisters. In living this dialogue of everyday life, it would be a disservice to them to pretend that living my faith as a Roman Catholic Christian is not central to who I am. Similarly, their religious belief and practices are integral to their lives and deserve to be respected. It is precisely because we are clear about our personal religious identity that we can really enter into dialogue.

The second characteristic suggested by Paul VI is *meekness* (*lenitas*). Meekness is not usually talked about much today, but it is a vital attitude for genuine dialogue. I notice that often in English translations of *Ecclesiam suam*, the word *humility*, is used instead of meekness. The exemplar of both of these attitudes is Christ himself who is “meek (*mitis*) and humble (*humilis*) of heart” (Matt. 11:29). The meek are free from haughtiness and resentment, even when they have experienced injury or reproach. Meekness is incompatible with violent methods of acting (whether physical or psychological). It calls forth a gentleness which would mean that one would never impose or force oneself or one’s way of life on another.<sup>7</sup> When we truly live this beatitude (Matt. 5:4), we also learn not to take ourselves too seriously. We begin to acknowledge that God’s providence is at work in surprising ways in our lives and this consequently flows into our attitude towards dialogue.<sup>8</sup>

The third characteristic is *trust or confidence* (*fiducia*). This implies not only a confidence in one’s own words, but also a recognition of the good will of both parties involved in dialogue. Trust enables us to speak the truth to one another with frankness, but this truth is always spoken in charity (Eph 4:15).

The fourth characteristic is *prudence* (*prudentia*), which encourages us to adapt ourselves to those around us. It means, to learn the sensitivities of his [or her] audience.” It encourages us to truly learning to listen to the other. It is, though, a listening that requires one *to listen at times to the words behind the words*, as one of my friends likes to say. What people are trying to communicate is often veiled. Behind a clumsy word may be hidden a gesture of love. An angry word may mask pain and suffering. A timid word may be a cry for love and acceptance. Until we learn to listen to the words behind the words our dialogue will never reach the level of depth that leads to the transformation of ourselves and of others. This is not easy because often we are trying to formulate our response even as the other person is speaking. I find the first lines of the Rule of St. Benedict helpful in trying to figure out how to learn to listen. In the prologue, St. Benedict says, “Listen carefully . . . to the master’s instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart.”<sup>9</sup> First, there is an invitation to “listen carefully” (*obsculta*) and second there is call to listen to the other with “the ear of your heart” “*inclina aurem cordis tui*”.

John Paul II was deeply influenced by *Ecclesiam Suam* and he put into practice what Paul VI said about dialogue.<sup>10</sup> He fearlessly and prophetically forged a path to greater understanding with people of other religions. Who can forget that historic 1986 meeting in Assisi where he first met with religious leaders from around the world? And in 1999, he hosted a similar meeting, an Interreligious Assembly, in St. Peter’s Square.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. “Meekness” in *Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by Xavier Léon-Dufour (Boston: St Paul Multimedia, 1995<sup>3</sup>) which suggests that in the Old Testament, Moses is a model of meekness that was not based on weakness but on submission to God. Moses was docile and trusted in God’s love (Nm 12:13, Si 45:4, 1:27) and consequently was meek towards others, particularly towards the poor (Si 4:8). In the New Testament, Jesus reveals the meekness of God (Mt 12:18).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Simon Tugwell, *Reflections on the Beatitudes* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1980), esp. Chapter Four (pp. 29-41), which focuses on meekness.

<sup>9</sup> *Rule of Benedict 1980*, Prologue, “*Obsculta, o fili, praecepta magistri, et inclina aurem cordis tui...*” Edited by Timothy Fry et Al. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1981), p. 156.

<sup>10</sup> For an excellent overview, see John Borelli, “John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue.” In *New Catholic Encyclopedia Supplement, Jubilee Volume: The Wojtyla Years*, edited by Polly Vedder, 81-88. Detroit, MI: Gale, 2000. *Gale Virtual Reference Library* (accessed February 2, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> On the Interreligious Assembly, see *Pro Dialogo* 2000, pp.7-16.

In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II also reminded us that dialogue and proclamation are intrinsically intertwined and mutually support one another.<sup>12</sup> He also distinguishes various types of dialogue. The first sort of dialogue that probably comes to your mind is the so-called *dialogue of experts or of theological exchange*. This official dialogue is conducted globally, through the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and locally, through regional dialogues organized by Bishops' conferences and dioceses. In recent years, the circle of participants, in most cases, at least internationally, has broadened to include women, including women religious, who bring their expertise also to the table and participate fully in both the dialogue and drafting of official texts.<sup>13</sup> There are other forms and expressions of dialogue, including the dialogue of life, the dialogue of action and the dialogue of religious experience.<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis has recently spoken of a dialogue of fraternity, but more on that later! One point is clear: *Interreligious dialogue is not an optional activity in the church*. I would go so far as to say that dialogue is meant to be a way of life *for us all*.

It has been suggested that if Pope John Paul II planted seeds for promoting dialogue, Pope Benedict XVI pruned the plants<sup>15</sup>, and Pope Francis has harvested them. It would be beyond the scope of this short reflection to focus on the various dimensions of Pope Benedict's approach to dialogue. I would like to mention just one point from his pontificate: namely the important role he gives to cultivating friendship with people of other religions. If you read through his discourses on interreligious dialogue, the theme of friendship consistently emerges.

Friendship is also an important dimension for Pope Francis' approach to people of other religions. His approach is best understood in the context of his invitation to create a culture of encounter. He explains,

For me this word is very important. Encounter with others. Why? Because faith is an encounter with Jesus, and we must do what Jesus does: encounter others. We live in a culture of conflict, a culture of fragmentation, a culture . . . of waste. (. . .) [W]e must create a 'culture of encounter', a culture of friendship, a culture in which we find brothers and sisters, in which we can also speak with those who think differently, as well as those who hold other beliefs, who do not have the same faith. They all have something in common with us: they are images of God; they are children of God.<sup>16</sup>

This quotation brings out two important points. First of all, encountering others is Jesus' way of being and acting. At the root of our encounter with others is the deep experience we have each had of an encounter with Christ. As Christians, we are invited to be in dialogue with others, but always with a third person, Christ, who is always present. As Aelred of Rievaulx once wrote in his classic book *Spiritual Friendship*, "Here we are, you and I, and I hope a third, Christ, is in our midst."<sup>17</sup> Christ is the foundation, the centre, and

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<sup>12</sup> See John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 55: "Inter-religious dialogue is a part of the Church's evangelizing mission. Understood as a method and means of mutual knowledge and enrichment, dialogue is not in opposition to the mission *ad gentes*; indeed, it has special links with that mission and is one of its expressions . . .

In the light of the economy of salvation, the Church sees no conflict between proclaiming Christ and engaging in interreligious dialogue. Instead, she feels the need to link the two in the context of her mission *ad gentes*. These two elements must maintain both their intimate connection and their distinctiveness; therefore they should not be confused, manipulated or regarded as identical, as though they were interchangeable."

<sup>13</sup> For example, women have participated, albeit in limited numbers, in the official dialogues organized by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. A good starting point is to review the various volumes of *Pro Dialogo* that regularly lists various dialogues and sometimes includes the names of the participants.

<sup>14</sup> John Paul II mentions these types of dialogue in *Redemptoris Missio* 11.

<sup>15</sup> See the balanced article by Emil Anton. "Mission Impossible? Pope Benedict XVI and Interreligious Dialogue." *Theological Studies* 78.4 (2017): 879–904.

<sup>16</sup> Pope Francis, *Vigil of Pentecost with the Ecclesial Movements*, May 18, 2013.

[http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130518\\_veglia-pentecoste.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco_20130518_veglia-pentecoste.html)

See also Diego Fares, *The Heart of Pope Francis. How a New Culture of Encounter is Changing the Church and the World* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company/A Herder&Herder Book), 2015), p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1977), p. 51.

the final end of all dialogue with others. In our dialogue with others, we are invited to seek and to recognize the face of Christ in our midst. Second, Pope Francis reminds us that we all have something in common: we are all created in the image and likeness of God. A consequence of this teaching is that we are all brothers and sisters to one another. We are called to “be there” for one another.<sup>18</sup> We are “beings of encounter”.<sup>19</sup>

In this first section, I have briefly set the context for why dialogue is an integral part of our call as Christians. We have seen that it is not an optional activity for us. As Religious Women called to be Sowers of Prophetic Hope, you are invited to embrace this call. You might ask, especially in the context of the many other challenges you face, *why should we follow the example of Pope Francis and commit ourselves to interreligious dialogue?* How can we prepare ourselves to embrace this call? What are some practical steps that we can take to respond in a prophetic way to this call? This will be my focus in the second part of this reflection.

## **II. Becoming Prophetic witnesses of hope**

Even if we leave official Magisterial documents aside, we need only to browse social media to realize the urgency of engaging others in dialogue. With so much conflict in the world today, we simply do not have the luxury to stand by and pretend that dialogue does not concern us. *All of us are co-responsible for the Church’s mission in the world and all of us are called to be protagonists of interreligious dialogue.* As Pope Francis has said, “Dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities.”<sup>20</sup> Each of us, in our own small way, can make a difference, if only we are courageous and prophetic enough to risk engaging the “other”. *We engage in interreligious dialogue quite simply because we must.*

In this section, I would like to propose five practical ways to engage in interreligious dialogue today.

### ***First, recognize that many of you are already directly involved in interreligious dialogue and strengthen these relationships***

Many of your religious congregations are already sowing seeds of prophetic hope: your schools, hospitals and institutions serve people of other religions and have been doing it for years. Many of you have worked side by side with people of other religions in your apostolates. The impact you have had cannot be underestimated. I heard recently about how, for example, in Palestine, a religious congregation, which takes care of children with disabilities from different religious and cultural backgrounds, created an environment where it became normal for parents and children from different religions to gather for birthday celebrations. This might seem like a small gesture, but such sharing transforms a culture of suspicion into a culture of encounter.

Many Religious women have shown solidarity with people of other religions in harrowing situations of suffering. In war torn countries, many Religious women have chosen to stay. I think for example of the recently beatified 19 Algerian martyrs among whom there were six religious women.

As you recognize and thank God for what you are already doing, you might also ask the question: are there ways to strengthen the bonds that are already present?

### ***Second, reach out to your neighbours***

Pope Francis encourages us to not merely encounter others, but to forge relationships of friendship with them. Concretely, this means that we do not wait for tragedy to strike—a terrorist attack or a natural disaster—to reach out to others. We need to ask the question *now*: who is my neighbour? Who are the

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<sup>18</sup> For an excellent article on this topic, see James Fredericks, “The Dialogue of Fraternity. Pope Francis’ Approach to Religious Engagement”, *Commonweal* (March 21, 2017) <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/dialogue-fraternity> Accessed November 13, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Farres, p. 22, quoting Francis.

<sup>20</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 250.

people from other religions in my neighbourhood, in my city? Though medical experts might not agree today, perhaps we could apply Aristotle's advice that friendship takes time and therefore we need to eat the proverbial peck of salt together. We do not need to take the proverb literally, but everything that table fellowship suggests is necessary for engaging in interreligious dialogue.<sup>21</sup> There is something sacred about hospitality and table fellowship that breaks down barriers and opens up communication. It is no surprise that the Gospels often portray Jesus at table with others and that it is in the context of a meal that Jesus chose to mark the gift of himself to us in the Eucharist.<sup>22</sup> Practically, this can mean knowing when my neighbor's religious feasts are celebrated and reaching out to invite them, to perhaps invite them for a meal or to join them in celebrating. I know of Religious women in countries where they are a minority who regularly join Muslim families for Iftar, the daily feast that breaks the Ramadan fast.

### ***Third, caste out fear through knowledge: learn more about people of other religions and their beliefs***

Religious have a particular responsibility to foster a love that casts out fear. Some scholars say that the phrase "do not be afraid" occurs in one form or another 366 times in the Bible, one for every day of the year including leap year! We see that a culture of encounter and dialogue flourishes when people are not paralyzed by fear. It takes incredible courage to risk reaching out to the other, especially after experiences of extreme violence, but when people have had the the courage to move beyond their fears and risk reaching out to the other, the results have been transformative.

One of the ways of combatting fear is through a deeper knowledge of the other. Knowledge can eradicate the false perceptions we may have of them and their religion. For this reason, Pope Francis highlights the importance of suitable training, especially for promoting dialogue, for example with Muslims. He says,

In order to sustain dialogue with Islam, suitable training is essential for all involved, not only so that they can be solidly and joyfully grounded in their own identity, but so that they can also acknowledge the values of others, appreciate the concerns underlying their demands and shed light on shared beliefs. We Christians should embrace with affection and respect Muslim immigrants to our countries in the same way that we hope and ask to be received and respected in countries of Islamic tradition. (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 253)

Though many in your congregations are already involved in a dialogue of life with Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and others, one might ask the question: how many Sisters have received formal training in other religions?

Basic knowledge of other religions for all of us is important, but I would go a step further: we need well-trained Religious women sitting at the table when official dialogues are taking place.<sup>23</sup> This will imply investing significant resources in the education and formation of your sisters for interreligious dialogue. There is a growing recognition that a community of ongoing spiritual and professional support is critical in sustaining and nurturing leaders trained in interreligious dialogue not only during their years of education but also throughout their professional lives. Conferences and seminars, formal and informal gatherings, retreats and the use of social media are essential for sharing information, sharpening insights and supporting each other.

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<sup>21</sup> See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII, 4, 25 where Aristotle emphasizes that that friendships take time to develop. People need time to grow accustomed to one another, for, "as the proverb says, they cannot know each other before they have shared the traditional [peck] of salt, and they cannot accept each other or be friends until each appears lovable to the other and gains the other's confidence."

<sup>22</sup> See Eugene Laverdiere, *Dining in the Kingdom, The Origins of the Eucharist According to Luke* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994).

<sup>23</sup> When organizing interreligious events, it should be normative that women and men work together in the planning, execution and evaluation of the program. In this regard, religious men and women have set an excellent example in establishing the UISG-USG Commission for Interreligious Dialogue. Since 2002, this commission of sixteen women and men meets regularly to "stimulate awareness and develop understanding among Religious Congregations resident in Rome of the importance of the ministry of interreligious dialogue." Another example is the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue where for more than forty years, monks and nuns have been in dialogue with Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims.

The assumptions and demands of interreligious dialogue are becoming more rigorous than ever. Effective dialogue requires not just acknowledging all participants to be sincere and of good will but also includes the careful examination of differing positions and the discerning exploration of the assumptions behind them. To do this the whole array of modern scholarship and science must be brought to the dialogue. Making a commitment to prepare more religious women to competently participate along with men in dialogue would both enhance the quality of the dialogue and give more credible witness to the Church's teaching on the equality and complementarity of women and men.<sup>24</sup>

There are numerous educational institutions and opportunities in Rome and in other parts of the world, where scholarships are available to support sisters who could be trained for interreligious dialogue (Just ask Sr. Pat Murray for more information!).

#### ***Fourth, pray; pray for peace between people of different religions***

In his address to the Fraternity Conference in the United Arab Emirates, Pope Francis said,

... [P]rayer is essential: while sincerely intended prayer incarnates the courage of otherness in regard to God, it also purifies the heart from turning in on itself. Prayer of the heart restores fraternity. Consequently, as for the future of interreligious dialogue, the first thing we have to do is pray, and pray for one another: we are brothers and sisters! Without the Lord, nothing is possible; with him, everything becomes so! May our prayer – each one according to his or her own tradition – adhere fully to the will of God, who wants all men and women to recognize they are brothers and sisters and live as such, forming the great human family in the harmony of diversity.

[Pope Francis continues] There is no alternative: we will either build the future together or there will not be a future. Religions, in particular, cannot renounce the urgent task of building bridges between peoples and cultures. The time has come when religions should more actively exert themselves, with courage and audacity, and without pretence, to help the human family deepen the capacity for reconciliation, the vision of hope and the concrete paths of peace.<sup>25</sup>

Here Pope Francis is encouraging people of all religions to pray for peace. I would make an appeal to you, Religious Superiors. I know that many of your congregations mission elderly members to pray for certain persons or apostolates. Would it be possible to mission some sisters to pray, for example, for people of other religions in your part of the country and for peace among peoples of different religions in troubled parts of the world?

#### ***Fifth, see the other with the eyes of God: contemplation and dialogue***

My final point focuses on a fundamental attitude of dialogue: namely gazing at the other with the eyes of God. It is no surprise that interreligious dialogue has flourished especially among those who share with one another a dialogue of religious experience. Contemplation as a way of life leads one not only to see God, but also to see others as God sees them. In an account well known to us all, the martyrdom of the seven Trappists in Algeria and the moving testament of Dom Christian de Chergé, there is an insight into what this can mean. His *Testament* has a subtitle *Quand un À-Dieu s'envisage* or "when a farewell is contemplated". Much stronger than the English equivalent, "farewell" adieu, A-Dieu literally means "to God". The word *en-visagé* means envisaged or contemplated, but it can also mean something that has received a *visage* or has

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<sup>24</sup> See Kathleen McGARVEY, OLA "The Church and Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa In service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace. *Gender: Where are the Women in Interreligious Dialogue?*", Paper presented at the CAFOD/ Heythrop conference October 28th and 29th 2009, London. [http://www.olaireland.ie/files/9714/1933/2213/The\\_Church\\_and\\_Christian-Muslim\\_Relations\\_in\\_Africa.pdf](http://www.olaireland.ie/files/9714/1933/2213/The_Church_and_Christian-Muslim_Relations_in_Africa.pdf) See also her book, *Muslim and Christian Women in Dialogue: The Case of Northern Nigeria* (Bern: Brill, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> See [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/february/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190204\\_emiratiarabi-incontrointerreligioso.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/february/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_emiratiarabi-incontrointerreligioso.html)

been given a face (in line with the philosophical thought of Emanuel Levinas). So the subtitle could mean “Contemplating when God has been given a face.”<sup>26</sup>

In this context, we can perhaps understand the depths of Dom Christian’s words:

And also you, the friend of my final moment, who would not be aware of what you were doing. Yes, I also say this *Thank You* and this “*À-Dieu*” to you in whom I see the face of Christ.<sup>27</sup>

In commenting on this passage, Dom Armand Veilleux notes that “this capacity of seeing God’s face, God’s incarnation, in the person who is slitting your throat is certainly the fruit of a profound contemplative life lived in deep relationship with a group of brothers, with a Church and with the whole human family.”<sup>28</sup> If “dialogue is the new name for charity” (VC 74), then what greater expression of charity is there than to lay down your life for others? As I read this moving account, it is a reminder that *the best preparation for dialogue is a life of contemplation*. This is what enables us to see the face of Christ in the other and what will lead us into a dialogue without frontiers.

In conclusion, I would like to cite the words of Sr. Yvonne Gera, a Franciscan Missionary of Mary, who worked for twenty-two years in Algeria and who knew personally all of the recently beatified Algerian martyrs. When asked about what to say to religious living in crisis-ridden countries, she replied:

We are missionaries. Whatever happens, we are missionaries. We know that that is our vocation and I say one thing, “you will receive more than you give”. It is sometimes difficult, yes but the Lord has called us. If the people suffer, we suffer with them. It is our vocation and the Lord is always there to help us. Even in suffering or in martyrdom. These 19 martyrs knew that they were targeted but they remained. Don’t be afraid, the Lord is there to help you.<sup>29</sup>

“Don’t be afraid, The Lord is there to help you”: these are encouraging words also for you and for me as we embrace the call to engage in interreligious dialogue. As we courageously sow seeds of prophetic hope in the world today, remember these words: “Don’t be afraid, The Lord is there to help you.”

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<sup>26</sup> Armand Veilleux, “Community, Church and the Contemplative Life,” in *The Gethsemane Encounter. A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics*, Edited by Donald Mitchell and James Wiseman (New York: Continuum, 1999), p. 133.

<sup>27</sup> As quoted in Veilleux, p. 133.

<sup>28</sup> Veilleux, p. 133.

<sup>29</sup> Interview, December 7, 2018 <https://zenit.org/articles/franciscan-sister-recalls-algerian-martyrs/>