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*Human Fraternity: A reflection on the Abu Dhabi
Document*

Felix Körner, SJ



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In Abu Dhabi on February 4, 2019, Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb signed a joint declaration of goodwill. The text of the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Life Together*¹ calls for a commentary from the points of view of both Catholic theology and Islamic studies.² First, however, some remarks on context are due.

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Comparable texts have been signed before. Among them are the final declarations of the four seminars of the Catholic–Muslim Forum, which took place in 2008, 2011, 2014 and 2017. This time, in contrast, delegations were not the signatories, but rather the pontiff himself and an Islamic leader. This elevates the importance of the text beyond its formal content.

Who is the Muslim signatory?

Since the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924, there is no universal representative of Islam, at least not of Sunni Islam. So that is not el-Tayeb’s position. Still, he holds one of the most important Islamic offices; he is the Sheikh of al-Azhar and thus “Grand Imam.” He heads the al-Azhar institution, which is influential in both religion and scholarship; it is a mosque and

La Civiltà Cattolica, En. Ed. Vol. 3, no. 7, art. 1, 2019: 10.32009/22072446.1907.1

1.“Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Life Together,” in laciviltacattolica.com/human-fraternity-for-world-peace-and-life-together/

2.Cf. Antonio Spadaro, “Sentinels of Fraternity in the Night: the apostolic visit of Pope Francis to Abu Dhabi,” in laciviltacattolica.com/sentinels-of-fraternity-in-the-night-the-apostolic-visit-of-pope-francis-to-abu-dhabi/

university in Cairo, and from there, an international educational network. The Grand Imam is a life-time position appointed by the Egyptian government.

Ahmed el-Tayeb was born in 1946 and completed a classical al-Azhar formation as well as a European doctoral degree from the Sorbonne University in Paris. He became the Grand Imam in 2010. Ahmed el-Tayeb regularly advocates a modernization of Islam. When he speaks against the Enlightenment and the secularization of the state, one has to understand that for him, the Enlightenment and secularization are synonymous to forcing religion out of the public sphere and to rulers controlling the religious communities. He advocates a more open Islamic teaching, in both content and form. He is to be taken seriously in this since he has proven his conviction by having the courage to bring Islamic reformers to Cairo for consultations, even though this exposed him to criticism.

A friendship has grown between Ahmed el-Tayeb and Pope Francis. It was already apparent in the visit of the Grand Imam to the Vatican (May 23, 2016) and in the papal visit to Cairo (April 28-29, 2017).

A document in evolution

Before we read the document, a few remarks on its history. Four statements by Pope Francis show how this common declaration did not appear out of nowhere.

Shortly after he took office, he said that the Church could be understood as a field hospital.³ In other words, we must give priority now to the many wounds and injuries. Later, in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), Francis looked at the “city.” One can, he wrote, see it as a place where God dwells. He lives among the citizens and promotes solidarity and fraternity among them (cf. EG 71). During his 2014 Jerusalem visit, before the holy city’s Grand Mufti, the pope sounded his fourfold urgent call: “Let us respect and love one another as brothers and sisters! Let us learn to understand

3.Cf. Interview with Pope Francis, in *Civ. Catt.* 2013 III 461.

each other's suffering! Let no one use the name of God as a justification for violence! Let us work together for justice and peace."⁴ A few days later, on Pentecost Sunday, he received the Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas and Israel's then-president Shimon Peres in the Vatican Gardens and, under a radiant blue sky, he reminded all politicians of their responsibility before God to break the spiral of hatred. This could be done, he said, "by one word alone: the word 'brother.' But to be able to utter this word we have to lift our eyes to heaven and acknowledge one another as children of one Father."⁵

All of this should be kept in mind when reading the document of 2019, the 800th anniversary of Francis of Assisi's meeting with the Ayyubid Sultan al-Malik al-Kāmil.

Title and leitmotif

The document's title is "On Human Fraternity." Speaking of "brotherhood" raises a theological question: is it Catholic tradition to call people of other faiths brothers and sisters? One might remember Jesus warning against misusing kinship to claim privileges: "For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (*Matt 12:50*). The first letter of Peter implores Christians to "honor everyone, love the fraternity" (*1 Pet 2:17*).

Toward the end of his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (PT), John XXIII made an urgent prayer for peace, addressed to Christ. He then continued: "Thus, under God's guidance and protection, all nations will embrace each other fraternally" (PT 91).

The Second Vatican Council, in *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), welcomed the work of international institutions as ways of development and reconciliation, decreeing: "the Church takes joy in the spirit of true fraternity flourishing between Christians and non-Christians as it strives to make ever more strenuous efforts to relieve abundant misery" (GS 84). The same pastoral constitution, in its closing words, reconsiders its proposals and

4. Francis, *Visit to the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem*, May 26, 2014.

5. "Invocation for peace" by Pope Francis and the Presidents Shimon Peres and Mahmoud Abbas in the Vatican Gardens, June 8, 2014.

looks to “the assistance of every person of our time, whether they believe in God, or do not explicitly recognize Him. If the proposals are adopted, they will promote among humanity a sharper insight into our full destiny, and thereby lead humanity to fashion the world more to the surpassing dignity of humankind, to search for a fraternity that is universal and more deeply rooted, and to meet the urgencies of our ages with a gallant and unified effort born of love.”

And already six weeks earlier, in the declaration on the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions *Nostra Aetate* (NA), the Council had adopted similar words: “We cannot truly call on God, the Father of all, if we refuse to treat in a fraternal way any person who is created in the image of God” (NA 5).

Since then, “fraternity” has had a guiding role in Catholic social doctrine, often as the theologically more-easily-justifiable sister concept to “solidarity.”

John Paul II emphasized in Paris that *fraternité* is by no means merely an Enlightenment legacy. He emphasized the respect paid to the ideas of “freedom, equality, fraternity” in French culture, only in order to immediately add: “*Au fond, ce sont-là des idées chrétiennes.* (Fundamentally, those ideas are Christian).”⁶

In his social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (CV), Pope Benedict XVI recalled Paul VI’s teaching and briefly synthesized it as the “the Christian ideal of a single family of peoples in solidarity and fraternity” (CV 13). The concept of universal fraternity had already flowed from his pen four years before, immediately after the beatification of Charles de Foucauld, who had dedicated his life to witness among Muslims and for whom the expression itself had become a leitmotif: “Christ invites us to universal fraternity!”⁷

Speaking of fraternity, particularly toward Muslims – the “brother of all” concept may be seen as typical to Franciscan spirituality – can thus be understood as an integral part of

6. John Paul II, *Holy Mass at Le Bourget*, Paris, June 1, 1980.

7. Benedict XVI, *Greetings at the end of the celebration*, November 13, 2005.

Catholic tradition since John XXIII. But how does it sound to Muslims? They use similar formulas naturally but do not justify them with the idea that we are all children of God; for they do not call God “Father,” which appears to be too anthropomorphic to them. In the Koran, Adam and Eve give justification for human fraternity: “You people! We have created you from a male and a female being, and we have made you into peoples and tribes, so that you may know each other” (Sura 49:13). The same verse immediately deduces from the common descent of all human beings their equality: dignity is not linked to a better ancestry, but: “For God, the most noble among you is the most fearful of God.”

Structure of the document

We have examined the fundamental motif of fraternity, which appears in the title. It is time to turn to the text itself. How does it proceed? A preface locates the document in three ways: theologically, diagnostically and personally.

The *theological* foundation says that through faith in God, people perceive their fellow human beings as sisters and brothers; because of the God-given dignity of all creation, we are called to preserve and promote our fellow creatures. The *present time* is marked as a time of welcome progress but also of inhuman experiences of poverty and war. This contrast can only be explained by a social-ethical and political decay all the way down to terrorism. The *context* in which the document originated is personal. It has grown out of the two leaders’ exchange. It sees itself as an invitation to all believers to work together for a culture of respect.

Now follows the main text, which in turn is divided into three parts. One could describe the three sections as “horizon of responsibility,” “message” and “concretizations.”

Horizon of responsibility

Like the other two main sections, the “horizon of responsibility” is subdivided into two parts. It consists of an “In the name of God ...” formula, known from the Islamic *basmala* and from numerous biblical and traditional Christian

expressions. If one speaks in this way, one dedicates what is being said to God, requests God's protection, and expresses the intention that what is said may correspond to God's will. Here, God is invoked as the One who created humanity and called the human person to be good.

After the invocation of God, however, the formula "in the name of ..." is used 10 more times. The two authors are aware that they not only speak before God, but also want to be responsible in their actions before human beings; human beings, that is, who are suffering, and human beings who have common values. The last invocation programmatically summarizes everything in a self-commitment: the common "path" in the future should be the culture of *dialogue*; the "rule of conduct" should be *cooperation*; and the "method and standard" should be *reciprocal understanding*.

When one reads the text in this way, it echoes the call Francis made in Jerusalem "to understand each other's pain." In the Arabic text, "reciprocal understanding"⁸ reads as *ta'āruḥ*, which means "mutual knowledge" and refers back to the Koranic verse already quoted: because of our common ancestry we can and we should come to know each other (cf. Sura 49:13).

Message

Now the document on fraternity sounds its call. All people with influence in world affairs should remember that humanity is one family; therefore, all human-made destruction must end as soon as possible: destruction by war, destruction of the environment, destruction in the decay of cultures and morals.

But the message of the text is not just a catalogue of demands. Rather, it is followed by an analytical part of great weight. The authors not only ponder on what is good but also ask where evil comes from. We do not find some cheap, blanket condemnation; rather, Pope Francis and Grand Imam el-Tayeb see the strengths of current developments. In the search for the sources of human-made suffering, their gaze goes – even before looking at the political crises and the unjust distribution

8. Francis, *Visit to the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem*, *op. cit.*

of goods – to the interior, namely to human conscience. Many decisions today can be explained by a vanishing “sense of responsibility.”

From that viewpoint the two leaders now set out a remarkable chain of reasoning. Where private and public life and decision-making are not shaped by the awareness of human responsibility, people become desperate. But this can lead to two effects: either people lose all religious reference (one might think of the boundless brutality of atheistic totalitarianisms), or they dedicate themselves to religious extremisms that can make people just as destructive.⁹

The diagnosis is followed by a proposed therapy. The two cornerstones on which the authors build their vision of the future are *family* and *religion*. Here, el-Tayeb and Francis declare that “religions never” incite violence. That sounds naïve, but the two authors know very well how easily blood can be shed in the name of religion. They distinguish between the “truth” of religion and its “instrumentalization.” The two leaders undermine the abuse of God’s name to justify violence, with a strong and impressive theological argument: “God, the Almighty, has no need to be defended by anyone and does not want His name to be used to terrorize people.”

Concretizations

From this profession, the text now leads to its final part. It consists of two series of concretizations. First 12 legal-political theses are presented. Then the authors indicate how they would like the document to be used.

The 12 theses will be briefly summarized below, first in a deliberately favorable commentary, but then through a more critical lens.

1. Religions promote fraternity. Here the authors express the choice between egoism and the solidarity to which religions

⁹In this context, besides “fundamentalism,” a less familiar word is used, “integralism.” It describes a religious understanding according to which one’s own religion can answer all questions out of itself and must determine all areas of life; counter-concepts would be “dialogue” and the recognition of an “autonomy of earthly realities” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 36).

invite humanity by using the contrast between “the law of force and the force of the law” (*qānūn al-qawm / qawm al-qanūn*).

2. Freedom of religion and belief is to be guaranteed to every human being and can be justified by faith.

3. Only the interaction of justice and mercy leads to humane living conditions.

4. The world’s problems can only be solved through dialogue.

5. Interreligious dialogue should be an encounter in shared values and a promotion of the good instead of “useless discussions.”

6. All places of worship are subject to legal and religious protection. Under no circumstances should they be attacked for allegedly religious reasons.

7. Terrorism must be completely condemned by the religions.

8. Everyone has equal rights. People are not entitled to rights because they belong to a certain group – such as a religion or an ethnicity – because that would imply another degrading category, e.g. “minority.” Rather, people have rights because they are citizens.

9. The different cultures can, indeed must, enrich each other, but, at the same time, “culturalism,” which justifies human rights violations by labeling them “tradition,” is to be rejected. However, rights must not be used to justify double standards, either. The authors may be thinking of how Palestinian attacks are condemned while at the same time Israeli settlements receive approval.

10-12. The last three theses formulate rights for certain groups of people, namely women, children, the elderly and the disabled.

The authors conclude their text by looking to the future. They say three things: first, what they promise, then what they request, and finally, what they hope. Their *promise* is that they will spread the document themselves in text and content; their *request* is that the document also be included in the curricula of education; and their *hope* is that the declaration will be received

correctly, namely as an invitation to reconciliation, as a call to every conscience, as a testimony to the faith in God, and finally as a gesture of loving closeness, or, as they literally put it, as an embrace between people in their diversity.

A document under attack

From its initial publication, the Abu Dhabi Declaration has created controversy. It received praise as an astutely necessary sign of understanding at the highest level but it has also received criticism. I have explored the document with students and experts, with Muslims and Christians, in Jerusalem and in Rome. Here, I present the most frequent points of criticism and respond to the objections raised.

Some affirm that the document does not justify its assertions with quotations from the Scriptures. It should be kept in mind that Christians do not recognize the Koran as part of their canon nor as a starting point for theological justifications. Muslims see the Bible in a similar way: Moses, David and Jesus are acknowledged to have received a revealed “book” with practically the same content as the Koran, but what is found today in the Christian Bible does not correspond faithfully to what was revealed (cf. Sura 2:75). The Abu Dhabi document is “to be a joint declaration of good and heartfelt aspirations.” Express quotations from the scriptures of one religion or the other would be an obstacle to this. However, much of the text proves to be inspired by the Bible and the Koran.

Some say the document works only from a theology of creation. Behind that reproach is the fear that interfaith dialogue is founded merely on natural theology. That would mean that one speaks only on the basis of what one can derive from nature and logic. What is omitted in this way is the future perspective of humankind, redemption and the newness that came into the world through God’s covenant with Israel and in Christ. Against such a critique, one might first point out that the authors tried to avoid discussing the differences between the two religions in order to make this text accessible to both Muslims and Christians. Secondly, there are clear references to human destiny with the well-chosen term “vocation.” In it,

God's free, personal and ever-new action comes just as much to the fore as our personal and free response.

Others object that the document reduces – in Enlightenment style – religions to ethics. For Francis and el-Tayeb, the message of religions is also a clear orientation for human action. At the same time, the “first and most important aim of religions is to believe in God, to honor Him and to invite all men and women to believe.” It is true, the authors use a number of terms that were key motifs of the European Enlightenment. These speak of “fraternity,” “human dignity,” “human rights” and “citizenship.” However, the “fraternity” of all human beings is not only an Enlightenment idea. It can be justified on Koranic and Biblical grounds as we have shown above. The fact that “human rights” are used as a yardstick is a significant step forward. Muslims sometimes think they have to reject the universally binding character of human rights by saying that God has more rights than human beings.¹⁰ This arises from a misunderstanding.

Theologically, one can argue that the basic idea of human rights does in fact correspond to God's will because they protect human beings from human claims to power over other human beings because they all are God's creatures. The “dignity” of every human being is often understood on the Islamic side in light of the Koranic verse according to which God says: “We have dignified the children of Adam” (*karramnā*, 17:70). Above all, however, it should be emphasized that the mention of citizenship is of great importance in current Islamic legal debate.

The *Marrakesh Declaration* (January 27, 2016) was the first international Islamic scholars' document to use the term *muwāṭana*. A neologism, it is the Arabic echo of the French *citoyenneté*. Ahmed el-Tayeb has repeatedly spoken in favor of *muwāṭana* and thus against a modern application of the Koranic regulation of *dhimma*. The latter stipulates that members of

10.Cf. F. Körner, “Islam und Religionsfreiheit. Reibungspunkte, Schlüsseltexte, Lösungswege,” in M. Baumeister, M. Böhnke, M. Heimbach-Steins, S. Wendel (eds), *Menschenrechte in der katholischen Kirche. Historische, systematische und praktische Perspektiven*, Paderborn, F. Schöningh, 2018, 206.

religions such as Christianity are to be granted protection – but no equal rights – if they pay a poll tax (cf. Sura 9:29).

The Grand Imam argues that this provision no longer applies today because it comes from a past legal and political context. “Citizenship” is in fact a modern term – used regardless of its connection with the French Revolution – that indicates a religious life can be lived under modern legal conditions, where every state should grant all its citizens the same rights of freedom, instead of treating people differently based on their particular groups.

Others argue that the document is “essentialist,” a reproach directed against statements that contrast “religion” in its essence with its misinterpretation and abuse. This is indeed problematic because nowhere is it undisputedly defined what “religion” is in purity or what its “true teachings” are (as the document calls them). But the authors are not describing Christianity and Islam historically or sociologically. Instead, el-Tayeb and Francis write normatively here. They express themselves as theologians. The two leaders want to speak as faith teachers when they say: “Whoever tries to justify the use of violence with the name of God is mistaken.”¹¹ The document on fraternity does not want to discuss religion philosophically; rather, it seeks to prevent the instrumentalization of religions.

It has been said that the document is snobbishly addressed to the elite and ignores the grassroots. It is true that the beginning of the main part addresses only the “leaders.” Later, however, when the two authors pledge to disseminate the text, they also speak of the “regional level” and of “organizations within civil society.” Above all, however, the end of the document expressly addresses the young people and schools.

11. Pope Benedict too has spoken in this line when he said at Assisi, “Criticism of religion, since the Enlightenment, has repeatedly argued that religion was a cause of violence, and thereby fomented hostility against religions. [...] This is not the true nature of religion. Rather, it is its misrepresentation and contributes to its destruction. The objection is made: but from where do you know what the true nature of religion is?” Pope Benedict did not answer the question, but handed it over to “interreligious dialogue.” Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address on the Day of reflection, dialogue and prayer for peace and justice in the world*, Assisi, October 27, 2011.

The document demands tolerance. Some have suggested that this is too small a claim. We need religious freedom. The document signed by Grand Imam el-Tayeb and Pope Francis, however, actually mentions attitudes of further existential engagement among fellow human beings of other faiths: respect, exchange, dialogue, cooperation, and repeatedly, fraternity. Freedom of religion comes to the fore as “freedom of belief, thought, expression and action” and is subsequently also called the “freedom to be different,” but could also expressly have been listed as freedom to change one’s religion, if one already condemns any compulsion in religious matters. When in the month following the signing Francis addressed the Moroccan people he explicitly spoke of “freedom of conscience and religious freedom.”¹²

12

The document – it is said – declares the theological dimension of interreligious dialogue to be unproductive discussions. This expression is indeed used in contrast to a dialogue that emphasizes spiritual and ethical commonalities. What the authors obviously warn against is the form of “dialogue” that is mere apologetics and debate. An argumentative dialogue, especially among equally well-trained interlocutors, can certainly be theologically fruitful, and it is quite understandable if people who experience their faith as a source of deep joy wish the same joy to their friends of other faiths. But “other believers”¹³ can hardly be led out of their religion by debate. Therefore, it is always important to look at common goals, values and intentions when differences exist.

Finally, some maintain that the document is an Islamic–Christian fraternization from which unbelievers and those of other faiths are excluded. One can show quite easily that this impression arises from a misunderstanding. When the text declares places of worship need to be protected, not only mosques and churches are mentioned, but also “temples” (*templi, ma’ābid*).¹⁴ In

12.Cf. A. Spadaro, “La Chiesa si fa colloquio. Il viaggio apostolico di papa Francesco in Marocco,” in *Civ. Catt.* 2019 I 159–169.

13.Benedict XVI, apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente*, 2012, No. 19.

14.The official English translation understands this as “synagogues.”

addition, the two authors hope that their document “is a call to every upright conscience.” They express the hope that their text will be understood as an invitation to reconciliation also “among believers and non-believers, and among all people of goodwill.” This obviously continues the tradition of John XXIII, who addressed his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* to all people of goodwill.

Religious diversity in the history of salvation

One sentence from the second concretization is particularly criticized on the Christian side, often and sharply. The formulation wants to show that freedom of religion is theologically justifiable. The passage reads: “The pluralism and the diversity of religions, color, sex, race¹⁵ and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings.”

We have to discuss that sentence under three different considerations. On the one hand (1): How is it received on the Islamic side? Then (2): What is its Christian-theological problem? And finally (3): Can it be understood as a meaningful Catholic-theological statement?

(a) On the Muslim side, the passage does not arouse any offense. Rather, it expresses a Koranic idea. In order to understand it, two verses have to be studied. The Koran expressly mentions the difference of human “languages” and “colors” as created by God. In which context? Often the Koran speaks of “God’s signs.” The Koran deciphers the world to its listeners, making it readable as creation and revelation. In the happenings of the world, one can recognize God’s powerful work. “Another of His signs is the creation of the heavens and earth, and the diversity of your languages and colors” (Sura 30:22).

But the Koranic view of the history of revelation also includes the fact that the various revealed books have been sent down to “prophets” such as Moses, David, Jesus and Muhammad, each book establishing a different way

15.The official German translation rendered this word by “ethnicity.”

or “custom” though basically identical in content. Thus, according to Sura 5, God turns to Muhammad concerning the apparently differing professions of Jews and Christians and says of the Koran: “And we have sent down to you the Scripture with the truth, so that it may confirm what of the Scripture before it was there [...] for each of you we have determined a custom and a way. And if God had willed, He would have made you one single community. But He wanted to test you in what He had given you. Now compete for the good things!” (Sura 48)

(b) The diversity of humankind – in skin color, male or female – is a fact that will probably remain until the end of time. In that, one can see the colorful, productive diversity of God’s creation. But the fact that there are Muslims and Christians in humanity obviously has other reasons and consequences. For example, people have been converted. For some, this happened in freedom, for others it did not.

Now there are tensions between the Islamic and Christian creeds, especially concerning Jesus: Did he die on the cross and was raised from the dead? Is it “to the glory of God” to profess him as “Lord,” indeed to address him as “Lord and God” (*Phil* 2:11; *John* 20:28)? Christians and Muslims disagree on that. If such fundamental differences are now simply “willed by God in His wisdom,” it sounds as if it were against God’s will when Christians witness to their faith in the hope that others too might acknowledge Christ as Savior.

(c) In the Document on Human Fraternity, the controversial sentence serves as a justification for religious freedom. Religious freedom can be justified theologically also along different paths; for instance, by explaining faith as trusting acceptance that happens in the form of a personal and freely-given “yes.”¹⁶ Incidentally, the Koran also teaches that people cannot be forced in questions of religion (Sura 2:256).

Moreover, the document’s formulation can be understood as theologically meaningful. For one, it closely follows *Nostra*

16.Cf. Second Vatican Council, Declaration *Dignitatis Humanae*, No. 10.

Aetate: “The Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against people or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or religion” (NA 5). So, when religious and ethnic differences are mentioned in the same breath, it does not mean that they are on the same level, but rather that they both easily become sources of discrimination and that we are called to prevent this.

But the Document on Fraternity suggests something more when it says “willed by God in His wisdom.” God’s creative government of history again and again leads to situations that seem incomprehensible to us. Why was Joseph sold to Egypt by his jealous brothers? Why was Christ crucified? Why do not all recognize the fullness of salvation in Christ? Joseph will years later reveal to his brothers: “God sent me before you to save life” (*Gen* 45:5). God has acted through the jealousy of those brothers.

And of the diversity of religions, both Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have impressively stated: when people of different religions meet, the encounter can be for both sides a “purification and enrichment.”¹⁷ This is acknowledging that religious diversity has a healing role in the history of salvation. In Rabat, Francis then also emphasized how respect of the other entails discovering and accepting difference, “enriching one another through our diversity.”¹⁸

17.Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address*, December 21, 2012; Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 250, cf. Secretariat for Non-Christians, *Dialogue and Mission* (1984), No. 21.

18.Francis, *Address during the meeting with the people of Morocco, the authorities and civil society*, Rabat, March 30, 2019.

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