

Pilgrims in Conversation

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The Catholic Church's deep respect for Muslims is outlined in the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, promulgated by the Second Vatican Council on 28 October 1965. The Declaration acknowledged the historical conflicts and disagreements between Christians and Muslims, and called upon both faith communities to move beyond past grievances and embark on a new journey of mutual understanding and collaboration. This call from the Second Vatican Council has paved the way for substantial advancements in Christian-Muslim relations worldwide.

To commemorate the 60th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, *Pilgrims in Conversation* presents a collection of interviews that explore the theological, spiritual and practical aspects of dialogue between Christians and Muslims in India, a country that is both multicultural and multi-religious. The interviews strongly underscore the Christian commitment to engaging with followers of other faiths on two fronts: first, the desire to witness one's faith with courage and conviction, and to live in truth and holiness; second, the aspiration to build harmonious national communities that uphold the values of religious freedom and justice. This book will be of particular interest to students of theology and to anyone interested in interfaith relations

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Praying with One Another: Moments in Witnessing to God Being at Work in Our Own Lives

Felix Körner SJ

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Edwin: Do Muslims and Christians require a mutually agreed understanding of God before they can pray together?

Felix Körner: The short answer is, no; but let's look at things more closely. The Muslims I know have always been welcoming when it came to praying together. They invite their Christian friends to join

their own rituals; they also suggest public events of common prayer. It is really the Christian side that is the difficult part in this. To get things clear, let's proceed step by step. First, why are Muslims normally more generous in praying together, than Christians? So, what is a Christian theology of prayer? Then, what does it mean to have a common understanding of God? And finally, which ways of praying together would be theologically sound?

Islam holds much more a natural theology. That is to say, the first human being was already a prophet. God sent many prophets to proclaim the same message to different people. There were some distortions in the transmission of that message; that is why new prophets were sent to set things right again; but if you put yourself at the service of the One God and reject other divinities, all is fine. Pray with us, welcome!

Christianity, by contrast, stands much more for a history of salvation theology. What is that to say? Christian faith sees that there is a problem in the human being. We close ourselves in. Rather than opening ourselves up to the other, we think we have to make it by ourselves. We fall into self-centeredness. And we cannot liberate us from that by ourselves. Rather, all our own efforts to be healed will be closing us in ever more; even our own *religious* efforts will only be more self-entanglement—if they are not accepting God's healing. That is what happens in our prayer, too. The Christian faith does not say that we can pray by our own will. It is, rather, God's generous gift that we can pray. Why? Because prayer is not just our attempt at speaking and listening to God. We pray, that is to say: we hear and sense and may know that we are in communion with God. Prayer is, for us, communion with God given by God. That is why Christians often say: we pray "through Christ." We can pray because of Jesus: because of his example, his words, his sacraments, because we were transformed by the Easter events—from death to God's ever-loving life.

Now, there is a Vatican document which says that we should not pray with the same words when joined by people from other religions. Why not? Because, says the document, praying together requires "a shared understanding of who God is" (*Dialogue in Truth and Charity*, n° 82). That is not well thought through. How do we check whether

we have a shared understanding of who God is? Our Trinitarian formula of three persons and one nature would have been strange to the first Christians; and look at today's cultures: your Indian Catholic grandmother and a U.S. Baptist! Shared understanding? Still, there is a meaningful side to what the document says. Let me rephrase it: in public prayer, we Christians want to give visible witness to our belief; and we believe that we come into communion with our heavenly Father through Christ. If we pray simultaneously and in the same words with non-Christians, that witness may be blurred.

So how to decide about praying together? When a person from another religion asks you for an intimate moment of common prayer, of course you pray together! Think of the many sick people who say: "Father, I am a Muslim, and I feel that I am about to die; can you pray with me?" Of course! As for public worship, we often say, let us have followers of one religion say their prayers after the other. The others are present in respectful meditation. That is the "Assisi model". And there are also situations when the concern about witnessing to 'our prayer made possible through Christ' is less important than our witness that we are one human family before God. For example, when there is a conflict that looks as if it was brought about by religions. Then, it may be theologically sound to pray together simultaneously, with the same words, and publicly. Pope Francis made such a discernment in 2015. In Sarajevo, he proposed a common moment of prayer with one and the same text for Jews, Christians and Muslims; and he introduced the text by using different invocations of God. By this, he showed that we "believe in the same God, though in different ways." This is a wise formula. It was first used by Pope Gregory VII in 1076, when writing to a Muslim prince; even Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate* declaration alludes to it, and it has since then been quoted frequently, e.g. by Benedict XVI in his Ankara Address of 2006: We believe in the same God, but we do so in different ways.

Can Christians engage in inter-religious prayer if they "hold back" from Trinitarian language? Does this invalidate Christian prayer?

Our most fundamental prayer is the Lord's prayer. It does not contain Trinitarian wording. Still, it does not "hold back" the mystery of the Trinity. Rather, it is always implied when we pray. And even with the

shortest Christian prayer you can quite clearly see how the Trinity is implied: When you pray “Father,” or, as Paul says it in Jesus’ own language, when you pray “Abba,” you are addressing the Father through Christ in the Spirit. So, implicitly, our prayer is always difficult for non-Christians. And often not only implicitly! Look at the ‘Hail Mary.’ Our Lady is addressed as “Mother of God.” That can sound scandalous to others. So, the mystery of the Trinity is never “held back” when we pray. But you were not only asking about the mystery of the Trinity but about Trinitarian language. How to proceed in practice?

My short answer to this is, inter-religious prayer in public should proceed in the “Sarajevo mode,” as we may call it. That is the way Pope Francis indicated. Start with three introductory questions.

First, is it an exceptional situation of political stress and social challenge? In such a case, a truly inter-religious prayer can be a pathway to reconciliation—with respect for the remaining differences. Second, is it possible to prepare the event *together*? Representatives of all participating religions should discuss with each other beforehand the texts they want to use during the event. Otherwise, you might create painful misunderstandings. And that can lead to more conflict! When the Islamic side recites *al-Ikhlāṣ*, the Qur’anic Sura so dear to Muslims (Sura 112), Christians may not like that. Why not? It contains a phrase easily understood as a rejection of the Nicene Creed: God “does not beget nor is He begotten.” If you feel that Christians may be insulted by that, tell your Muslim interlocutors about it and ask them to choose a more suitable text for the occasion. The same holds true if we want to use a Trinitarian formula. Muslims may understand well that we do not believe in three Gods; then you may use it. If it sounds, however, blasphemous to some participants, it may be wiser not to speak in expressly Trinitarian terms during the moment of prayer you are planning. Third, however: are you ready to explain the point of the Trinitarian creed, once you get to a theological discussion? How to explain it? You may say that the Trinitarian profession is our way to confess that in communion with Jesus we are already in ever-lasting communion with the One he called his Father.

With these introductory questions, let yourself be inspired by Pope Francis's own formula at Sarajevo. He worded wisely. He used three ways of naming God when he said, "Now I invite you to say this prayer: to the Eternal, One and True Living God, to the Merciful God." The first is a typically Jewish naming of God, "the Eternal." But Christians and Muslims can join in naturally. "The Merciful" is the Divine name Muslims use most frequently; and again, it is also familiar to the other two religions. Between "Eternal" and "Merciful," the Pope put a triple naming of God: the "One, True, Living." Jews and Muslims can say that with conviction, the three names feature in their Scriptures; but Christians may see that as a New Testament wording (John 17:3, 1 Thessalonians 1:9); indeed, for us, it can be a Trinitarian formula.

How might our understanding of inter-religious prayer change if we understand prayer as an exercise in listening and receiving?

You are making an important point. Receiving—what? As I said above, real prayer as communion with God cannot be produced by us. It is a gift. But your point goes further! Listening—to whom? Receiving—from whom? We are listening to the other religious tradition at prayer: their words, their gestures, symbols, rites, and their reflections on prayer. Thus, we are receiving inspiration, encouragement, sometimes even a necessary "humiliation," because we sense how generous the others' trust, faithfulness and self-giving is.

And in this, we are not only listening to another religion. God is free to choose just any way to communicate what He wants to give us. He can use all sorts of channels. A sunset can become a moment in which He wants to make me sense his tender hug. A poem can become an opportunity for me to understand His call. A religious tradition quite different from my own can become God's way to make me feel how great He is. Even historical events, and not only pleasant experiences, will turn out to be such channels! Thus, God will also remind me that He is greater, more generous than the ecclesial limitations we tend to draw. So, when God chooses a non-Churchy way to communicate with us, He is challenging us Christians to step down from any arrogance.

We all want to rid ourselves more and more of our false images of God, our projections onto God; we want ‘to clean our glasses,’ so that we can be in more honest contact with God—and less and less prey to our own thoughts. Other traditions may offer methods of opening ourselves up to that receptive listening. Think of the postures that the Asian traditions offer: they can be a great help for a Christian in meditation; and likewise Rabbinic wisdom, Zen ko’ans, Sufi stories.

But how can we learn to listen well? This is the key question! Because not everything that we may get from sunsets, poems, religions is ever-reliably true! The criteria we can always use are the following: does this help me to understand Jesus better, to love him more purely, to live more like him? (Cf., Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, n° 104.)

What might be gained from approaching inter-religious prayer as an exercise of seeing the other as someone listening to God?

“Religious experiences and outlooks can themselves be purified and enriched in this process of encounter.” This is a quote from a 1984 Vatican document (*Dialogue and Mission*, n° 21). Let us pray that through all our experiences we may receive purification and enrichment on our way to God.

How do we relate Christian understandings of the sacraments and the sacramental to Islam?

The seven sacraments of the new covenant are the Church’s ways to communicate the Easter transformation. It is really our most palpable way to get in contact with Christ and thus already sense that we are God’s beloved children.

But the Church has always had other, simultaneous understandings of the sacraments. Think of classical formulae like the “sacraments of the old covenant,” or “sacraments of nature.” So, we can say, in a more general way, sacraments are celebrations that condense the history and message of a religion in signs believed to transmit salvation to the believers. We can say, in that sense, an especially “sacramental” event in Islam is the ritual prayer. What is really happening there? What is its logic? What I mean by that question becomes clear when

we try to discover the logic of the Eucharist. It is a meal, the Lord's Supper, in which we receive the greatest gift, that is, communion with God. So, let us look with the same eyes at the ritual prayer of Islam, at the *ṣalāt*. What is its logic? It is, rather than a meal, an audience: the sovereign receives his servants. They put themselves anew at his service. The individual may sense to be put back into the communion with all God's servants; but the primary logic is: you are now in front of God. So, if the Eucharist is "God's communion," I'd say, the *ṣalāt* is "God's confrontation." God calls people to serve. After the words and gestures of acknowledgement, reverence, worship, you go out again: service is not due to God alone! God sends you to serve in this world, to serve other human beings.

The first gesture Muslims perform during the *ṣalāt* is often misunderstood by non-Muslims. We see that they hold their hands near their ears. Is that a gesture of listening? When you ask Muslims, they often respond: "No! By this gesture, I am throwing everything behind me that could come in my way to God. All distractions, even all mediations. Now it is me in front of God." We Christians would of course make another sacramental point here: sacraments are gifts; we cannot produce immediacy with God by ourselves. We need to receive the gift of his communion.

Are there analogies between the sacrament of the Eucharist, the Real Presence, and the Islamic understanding of the presence of the Divine in the Qur'an? Can these be equivalent experiences of God's presence?

I had a good sharing on this with a Muslim friend some years ago. We were discussing adoration. She did not say the most intense moment is the ritual prayer, no. But she did not say, she was adoring the Qur'an, either. Rather, for her, the most intense moment of divine presence is, *reciting* the Qur'an. She said something like this: "It is at the same time my activity and God's. We seem to work together!"

Should Christians pray the prayers of other religions as an alternative experience of God's presence? If so, are there specific Muslim prayers which are particularly appropriate for Christians to use?

When I was younger, I sometimes used the traditional Islamic list of the 99 most beautiful names; and not only as a personal recitation in Arabic: I also proposed the list to young Christians on week-end retreats. The task was: choose three names that particularly touch you. Maybe you choose the pair *al-Qābiḍ* / *al-Bāsiṭ* and finally *al-Hādī*; that is, “God is the One who limits—and who widens; God is the One who guides.” Now ask yourself, where in your life did you experience God as the one who limits and widens and guides? They were then sharing striking stories from their own experience. It became an exercise in witnessing to God being at work in our own lives.

How much should we be seeking to develop a theology of inter-religious prayer and how much should we accept a more intuitive approach as an aspect of being in the “in-between time”?

We are still *on the way* to understanding. And until the end of History, we’ll keep learning, keep making mistakes, keep being corrected by new discoveries. As Church, we are using our classical formulae. Our dogma is interesting because often it comes in paradoxes. “Son of God,” “Three in One,” etc. Our classical wordings have a beautiful, poetic, challenging form. They make us think anew. So, our attitude toward doctrine and tradition is: we are not going to change the dogma. But we need to understand it ever more profoundly, and explain it anew. I also like to work with definitions. They are at least starting points. You have just seen that! Definitions may be helpful condensations of our belief, for the beginning of a dialogue. Then, in dialogue with the others and with the course of history, we hope to discover more profoundly what both the classical formulae and our own definitions mean. That is why I keep saying that theology needs to become “interactive.”

Shall we shift from prayer to politics? How much of political Islam is connected to the originating ideals of Islam? Is there a continuing relevance to the motifs of the Meccan and Medinan paradigms?

We need to clarify the concepts first! “Political Islam” is now often used in order to warn societies of Muslims. I reject this usage; also because its implication is that religions should not be political. Of course, no religion must use physical force! That is right! The only actor justified

in using physical force is a state legitimated by fair access to power, rule of law, checks and balances. If by 'political' you mean violent, then use words such as "extremist" or "militant"! And in that sense, of course, there is no justification for any group within society to be "political." Likewise religious leaders should not exhort with religious authority their adherents to vote for a particular political party.

Much more often, however, "political" means something else: that people and movements (also religions) want to shape the world. In that sense, political religion is something good, indeed important! A legitimate state needs citizens and groups who want to shape the world, inspire public awareness, educate people's conscience. In that sense, 'political Islam' is welcome in a democratic polity; and in that sense "political Islam" is based in the Qur'an. Not only in Medina. Look at an early Meccan Sura such as *al-Balad* (90). It is very political: it calls a selfish person to become a caring human being working for social justice.

Is there a specific theological space for Christians and Muslims to work together politically in light of modern liberal democracies' struggles to understand the place of religion in the public square?

Thank you for leading my thought forward. Indeed! Liberal democracies today face a challenge: within the same society you find fundamentally differing convictions, as different people get their existential orientation from different sources; but on the other hand, a liberal democracy only functions if people can often rely on each other. The state must not control every move. Therefore, the less totalitarian a system is, the greater is the need for sources of motivations to participate freely and helpfully. So, the question boils down to this: how can Islam and Christianity motivate people to be honest, righteous and compassionate? That is, how can religions shape a society's "spirit"? Or, even shorter, how can we be an inspiration? In order to work together on this, we need not agree! We can debate the principles which provide us orientation and motivation; and we should not be satisfied with slogans. We can question each other on what we mean by the terms we use. What is peace for you, or justice, or unity? That discussion is part of the democratic process. So: the

theological space for us is “values”. But realistically and happily we say: the debate will go on and will improve us all—as long as the rule of law determines the framework. Then, even if we will never agree on one particular list of values, we can continue thinking together, and working together for a more humane world.

To what extent do different conceptions of the nature of God shape the respective political theologies of Islam and Christianity? Where might the similarities of understanding about the nature of God lead to shared political projects?

Let me start with the three most fundamental commonalities. Christians and Muslims both see God as the One from whom, through whom and towards whom is the universe. To put it more classically: we acknowledge God as Creator, Lord and Judge of all. What follows from that? If we accept that we are not our own creators, we come to live in grateful humility. If we acknowledge that all history is in God’s hands, we gain confident hope, knowing that we cannot control or even understand everything. And as soon as we acknowledge God as our Goal and Judge, we start to live in responsibility for all creatures. What is the political consequence of that? To work together towards more justice in economy and ecology, aware of our limitations: of state power, of moral integrity, of human rationality and activity.

And the major differences? One is in the early community’s experience, the other in the fundamental feeling. Islam was very soon a successful movement. It defeated tribalism and became a new civilization’s unifying belief. Therefore, from its very beginnings, Muslims often identify a society with a community of believers. The Christian community, conversely, started off as a persecuted minority. A distinction between the Church on the one hand, and the state and society on the other, comes more naturally to us. And what about spirituality? The Islamic tradition stresses as the believer’s fundamental feeling: “fear more than hope” (Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, d. 728). The Christian faith, by contrast, comes from the experience of Easter: Christ is risen! So, the starting point is joy that makes us “love without fear” (1 John 4:18). Consequently, faithful from the two traditions may sometimes feel a difference when discussing what we hold most important: rules,

or trust? Within a democratic framework which grants equal rights to all citizens such differences are a fruitful enrichment.

What does the common good of Christians and Muslims look like? Can we point to specific models, “best practices”? How can the Church arrive at a common good that is theologically authentic yet understood beyond the bounds of the Church?

Catholic Social Teaching speaks of solidarity. Pope Francis and the Shaykh of al-Azhar (Cairo) said the same thing by using a more familiar wording: human fraternity (Abu Dhabi, 2019, *A Document of Human Fraternity*). We are all called to live as brothers and sisters. Once you understand that, your readiness to help, to collaborate and to learn from others becomes natural. Muslims can justify that with the Qur'an (49:13; 30:22); and Christians can say: God, our Father, calls us all to realize that we are brothers and sisters (*Fratelli tutti*, 5, Romans 12:14, cfr., Genesis 9:6).

How do the freedoms of secular modernity contribute to the political dialogue between Christians and Muslims? How, and to what extent, do both Christians and Muslims understand and affirm the freedoms of secular modernity, such as democracy and gender equality?

Europe had to see, during the era which it calls “the Middle Ages,” that the leading culture in Mediterranean encounters was the Arabic-Islamic civilization. In Early Modernity, the West became leader. Why? Because Islam was over-challenged with wars at different fronts: by European Crusaders to the Holy Land, Mongols to the east, and the Reconquista in Spain. If a culture senses that another is leader, jealousy and inferiority complexes often come in. That is why for decades several Muslim thinkers such as Sayyid Quṭb wanted to reject modernity as a Western danger to Islamic identity. But in reality, fear of liberal, secular culture has nothing to do with the essence of a religion or the religion's teachings. It rather comes from a society's own historical experiences. Muslim intellectuals with new self-esteem today offer good Islamic arguments for the core values of modernity. Three examples: The Qur'an calls people to think for themselves, to

grant more rights to women than in pre-Islamic Arabia, and to accept that compelling people to believe does not work.

What is the distinctive Christian contribution to the idea of religious freedom?

Congratulations on not claiming that religious freedom came from the Church! But Christian ideas and Christian individuals did play a role in bringing religious freedom to reality. The specifically Christian emphasis in the field of religious freedom is threefold: otherness, plurality, and mission. *Otherness*: A particular viewpoint holds that religions and traditions, with all their different forms and wording, in fact mean the same. The Christian faith, however, is based on a unique event and consists in an irreplaceable message: Christ is risen. That is why Christianity is able to see and accept that different religions are really different; Pope Francis therefore stresses the “duty of identity and the courage of otherness” (Cairo Peace Conference, 28 April 2017). *Plurality*: Christianity started off as a minority movement. So, Christians today should be able to recognize again that a society can function with different sources of joy, different foundational principles. The Catholic Church teaches that when people of different religions encounter each other, that can become for all sides “purifying and enriching.” *Mission*: We also stress that all religions have the right to witness to their convictions in a convincing way and welcome new believers, as long as those conversions happen freely. We reject proselytism, that is, exerting pressure on people to join us; but mission which happens in a witnessing, dialogical style must be protected by religious freedom!

Can Muslims furnish an understanding of religious freedom consistent with contemporary liberal democracies?

Take a verse from the Qur'an for that: “If it had been thy Lord's will, all who are on the earth would have believed, all of them. Wilt thou then compel mankind, against their will, to believe?” (10:99) Muhammad Talbi (1921–2017), a great Tunisian scholar, used this Qur'anic injunction. The idea is: the Qur'an's basic intention is to call people to believe in God and his Judgement. In order for such

a belief to really start you need to be free. Otherwise, you are not believing but just joining out of pressure. Freedom to participate in the life of faithful belief is a good basis for living together in freedom, democracy and plurality.

Does Islam have an understanding of itself that can be reconciled with minority status? It must be admitted that Christianity has a long history of enacting persecution and intolerance; not until the 1960s was there a seminal shift in the Catholic Church's recognition of religious diversity, in Vatican II. In what ways might the Church's own struggles to arrive at notions of religious freedom be mirrored in Islam's engagement with the West?

We need to be careful when we use the word "minority." We often simply want to say: a group that is not the numerical majority in some territory. "Minority," however, often implies: inferior in number and therefore in status. Of course, nobody wants to accept such inferiority, and rightly so. But what about Muslims living in relatively small numbers in states and societies which fully grant religious freedom? They need not follow any Christian model. On their own terms, they find ways permissible within Islam to participate actively in the democratic processes of the country in which they live and which they have often come to love. They can start from the Qur'anic concept of *ma'rūf*, that is, "what rational beings understand to be morally good." For example, Muslims take part in public debates in Germany and call for the protection of families or for solidarity with the poor. Their starting point is Islamic, but their goal is to be an inspiration for the whole pluralistic society.

What is the role of the worldwide Church in responding to the plight of Christian minorities in Muslim contexts and how might the concept of *dhimmitude* be replaced by notions of shared citizenship? How can the pursuit of religious freedoms be a collaborative venture across the Christian and Muslim faiths and what theologies might underpin such a shared endeavour?

In pre-modern times, the *dhimmī* status granted to Jews and Christians was obviously much better than what the so-called Christian countries did to the Jews and Muslims of Europe. But for a modern state, we

need full religious freedom. You rightly suggest the term of shared citizenship. That is also the wording used in the Document on Human Fraternity formulated and signed jointly by Pope Francis and Shaykh al-Azhar Ahmad at-Tayyeb; in Arabic, that is *muwāṭana*, ‘mutally recongnized citizenship’. Sometimes Muslims even argue that such an idea is already implied in the contract of the various groups of Medina in the early years of Islam: in the so-called “Constitution of Medina.” Two good theological arguments to grant freedom of religion are “faith” and “fraternity.” *Faith*: only if justice is granted independently of religious belonging, only then the free space is open in which an unconstrained faith can grow. *Fraternity*: as brothers and sisters, we know that within each family there are differences—they are a rich, positive challenge for all of us.

Relations between Christians and Muslims still fall prey to global geopolitics and perceived historical fault-lines that lie outside the control of both confessional communities. This is especially apparent in the conflict between Israel and Palestine in the respective histories of Christians and Muslims. What is the Church’s understanding of “the land” in Christian eschatology and its relation to the state of Israel? What is the significance of the longstanding Middle-Eastern Christian communities, to both the world Church and the future plurality of Islam, at a time when those communities grow increasingly fragile? What role do the holy sites of Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the Middle East play in a shared project of hospitality and witness to the common good?

The best guideline in this is what the United Nations have decided. The present government of Israel has been acting against U.N. resolutions; some previous governments did, too. For example, Israel did not stop the settlers from occupying ever more land; and that deserves critique and a strong call to stop this. All too easily, however, critique of an Israeli policy flips over into a critique of Israel altogether. Such criticism, again, becomes easily (whether more or less openly) anti-Semitic; and Israel’s right to exist is thus challenged. Now, that must be condemned just as much as each injustice calls for condemnation.

The Catholic Church feels, speaks and acts in empathy with the suffering Palestinians; but it also takes a reasonable position in front of Israel and the question of the land. We have diplomatic relations with Israel; that includes acknowledgement of the legitimacy of Israel's existence. But the Vatican's diplomatic relations acknowledge the democratic State of Israel, not each of its actions; and the recognition of the State of Israel is not theological. We do not link the State's existence to divine promises but to historical contingencies. The horrific genocide committed by Nazi Germany made plausible the need for a modern Jewish State in terms of international law. The disintegration of the Ottoman Empire made it possible to locate that State where it is now. Of course, the universal Church senses a special solidarity with Christians living in the Holy Land. Jews and Arabs in that area can tell you how much they have suffered and how inadequately the others – and the whole world – recognise their plight. Therefore, Pope Francis' appeal in Jerusalem (24 May 2014) is a wise and constructive call: "Let us learn to understand the pain of the other."