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'LIVING OUR FAITH TOGETHER'  
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“A RETROSPECTIVE ON THE ORIGINS OF THE CATHOLIC-MUSLIM NATIONAL  
DIALOGUE”

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Thank you Dr. Sayyid Syeed for your kind words of introduction. I am deeply grateful to be invited back to participate in this National Plenary for the Muslim-Catholic Dialogues. It brings back many wonderful memories of working together with you, praying together, sharing together and growing in a deeper commitment to each other. This was brought home to me by two events in my own life, as I was preparing this talk.

My mother died a few years ago. When Dr. Shahid Altar, a participant in our West Coast Dialogue heard about her passing, he wrote me a beautiful reflection on “The subject of Death and Dying.” It was a compilation of quotations from the Quran and offered much consolation to me and my family. It concluded with the powerful reminder “To God We belong. To Him is our return.” From the very beginning of our Dialogues I have always thought that was the real purpose of what we were doing together.

“Those who believe and in whose heart find peace in the remembrance of Allah, behold in the remembrance of Allah, do hearts find peace” (Quran 13:28)

The other event happened in the Washington State House of Representatives. Two state legislators decided to leave the House floor during a prayer offered by a Muslim religious leader. This incident, which might have erupted into serious interfaith tensions or conflict within the community, ended in a spirit of forgiveness, reconciliation, learning and understanding – not only for the two legislators involved, but for many people who followed the development of this story. As I reflected on that incident in the state House of Representatives, it was clear that an

important lesson was learned here in the respect and the forgiveness that Imam Mohammad Joban showed those two elected officials who insulted him, as well as the Islamic faith tradition.

In his response to them, the Imam spoke eloquently of the one God of Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Mohammed. He reminded us that we are all called, as he put it, “to respond to bad action with good,” to forgive one another and to reconcile. Much of this came out of the Muslim Catholic dialogues because that Imam came out of our local dialogue in Seattle.

What were these dialogues and how did they get started? This year is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Second Vatican Council. This Council had the highest teaching and moral authority in the Catholic Church where bishop gathered from all parts of the world as representatives of local churches in communion with the Bishop of Rome. A spirit of renewal and updating took hold of the assembled bishop and major steps were taken in various aspects of daily life.

One important consideration for those who trace the development of interreligious relations emerged through this Council’s Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate).

The unity of the human community and openness of every human person to the experience of the divine are foundational ideas in the text of this document:

“Men look to their different religions for an answer to the unsolved riddles of human existence and throughout history even to the present day, there is found among different peoples a certain awareness of a hidden power, which lies behind the course of nature and the events of human life...The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth.”

This Declaration led the Catholic Church to take a dramatic stand to promote constructive, peaceful and religious relations with Muslim. First, the Catholic Church instructed Catholics how they should appreciate Muslims by promulgating these words in 1965:

The Church has...high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to people. They strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God's plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own. Although not acknowledging him as God, they venerate Jesus as a prophet, his virgin Mother they also honor, and even at times devoutly invoke her. Further, they await the Day of Judgment and the reward of God following the resurrection of the dead. For this reason they highly esteem an upright life and worship of God, especially by way of prayer, alms-deeds and fasting. (NA3)

Secondly, Pope Paul VI established an office in Rome so that "No pilgrim, no matter how distant he may be, religiously or geographically, no matter his country of origin, will any longer be a complete stranger in ....Rome, and over the course of more than five decades, hundreds of Muslim pilgrims to Rome have been received as guests

Third, every year since 1967 the Catholic Church has issued greetings to Muslims throughout the world at the end of their fast of Ramadan, on the 'Id al Fitr. As a bishop I send those greetings to Muslims in my Archdiocese or I write my own greetings. All the bishops in the world have a similar opportunity.

Fourth, The Catholic church continues to instruct its members on Islam and other religions and the good reasons for dialogue.

Fifth, The Catholic Church encourages Catholics to form dialogues. This can take place in many ways – living room dialogues in neighborhoods and communities; dialogues that lead to cooperative efforts on particular projects to assist those in need; the dialogues of specialist where our religious beliefs are examined, and the dialogue of religious experience, where we share more deeply of ourselves and our prayers and understanding of living a life devoted to God.

Sixth, wherever the Pope traveled, he wanted to meet with Muslim leaders who, in return have been among the most enthusiastic to meet with the Pope. When he was in Morocco, for example,

the king asked him to address the young people of that country, which he did in Casablanca. It was that talk to Muslim youths where he made some of his clearest statements on Christians and Muslims:

Christians and Muslims: We have many things in common as believers and as human being. We live in the same world. It is marked by numerous signs of hope, but also by signs of anguish. Abraham is the model for us all of faith in God: submission to His will and trust in His goodness. We believe in the same God, the one and only God, the living God, the God who creates worlds and brings creatures to their perfection.

Although this movement toward dialogue and understand, appreciation and respect began to take on a life of its own in local areas, dialogues were limited and often did not reach beyond those who were part of the dialogue group. In the early seventies we Roman Catholics involved in interreligious dialogue began to form an association of local Ecumenical Officers in order to support one another and to provide information and suggestion that would be workable on the local level. This organization, called NADEO – the National Association of Diocesan Ecumenical Officers, began in the mid-seventies and from its earliest years, I served as President.

One of my main challenges was to provide a handbook for Roman Catholics involved in interreligious dialogue. It was not a textbook but a handbook, a work intended to be a guide in the early stages of dialogue. We suggested that all dialogue should begin with the affirmation that Muslims and Catholics share a common heritage. They share a faith in the one God, the mission of the prophets, the divine revelation and they emphasize social, as well as personal ethics.

Catholics should remember two points in any dialogue. Many Muslims believe that most American are ignorant of Islam and that many, consciously or unconsciously, come to Islam with a knowledge based on negative images and prejudices. Second, reacting to what they perceive as western colonial political and cultural dominance and wishing to reassert their own Islamic heritage, many Muslims were less inclined to “theological dialogue”.

The work of Muslim – Catholic dialogue took a major step forward in 1987 when the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops provided a full-time staff member who would give a substantial portion of his time and energy to interreligious relations. This staff member, Dr. John Borelli, was a great motivator and began to build significant rapport and a record of exchanges with Muslim leaders in the United States. Dr. Borelli worked with the Bishop advisor for interreligious relation, Bishop Joseph J. Gerry, to convene Catholics and Muslim in dialogue from various parts of the country and to work on a national agenda to improve understanding.

Unfortunately few Muslim counterparts to Bishop Gerry were able to devote the time and funds for dialogue. The Muslim leaders had fewer resources which they needed to devote to strengthening ties among American Muslim and assist communities in getting started.

Thus we needed a format for meeting that would not stress the funds and energy of Muslim organizations but would provide opportunity for ongoing, face –to- face dialogue beyond the short-term coalitions addressing immediate problems. When I succeeded Bishop Gerry, I worked together with Dr. Borelli to set up regional dialogues with Muslim. The main purpose of these dialogues on a regional level was to connect with both national and local Islamic leadership.

We would identify an Islamic organization or association in certain regions to be our partner in planning and setting up a dialogue in the city where that organization was located. Working with our Islamic partners, we would invite Catholics and Muslims from cities within a manageable commuting area to be part of the dialogue. We depended on diocesan staff to co-host meetings with an Islamic partner and to identify Muslim partners to attend the dialogue.

Regional dialogues met annually in a retreat environment for two or three days. The first of these began in Indianapolis in 1996 with the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA). I served as the Co-Chairman for Catholics and Dr. Sayyid M. Syeed, Secretary General of ISNA was the Muslim Co-Chairman. At our initial meeting, we settled on the topic, “the Word of God”. We began in earnest in the second year discussing Jesus Christ, who is the Word of God made flesh for Christians, and God’s guidance in divine words, which Muslims believe is the Qur’an. We

also started some inter-textual work, providing exegesis of relevant passages of the New Testament and the Qur'an. By the third meeting, we wanted to compare how in each of our traditions the word of God is prayed. All our regional dialogues were like retreats. Without this spiritual dimension brought to the dialogue with breaks for regular prayer and with prayer during the meetings, the dialogues would have been lacking as interreligious dialogues. Catholics attended Muslim prayers and Muslims attended morning or evening prayer service specially prepared for the occasion.

After learning that the regional model could work in the Midwest, we turned to the Mid-Atlantic region and the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), with its headquarters in Queens, New York, to explore the possibility of a second regional dialogue. That dialogue studied various aspects of marriage and family life with the hope of a publication which would outline our values and practices and be of assistance to an anticipated increase of marriages between Christians and Muslims. An additional value of this project was to generate discussion between Muslim couples and Christian couples on the values each hold with regard to marriage and family.

Finally in 2000, we established a regional dialogue on the West Coast. I co-chaired this first meeting with Dr. Siddiqi, with sponsorship shared between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslim leaders, imams and directors of Islamic centers in the Orange County area. This group settled on the topic of surrender or obedience to God, and spirituality became the general subject of its first four meetings. During this dialogue, one evening was spent at either the Sunni or the Shi'ite center with evening prayer, a meal and a public program. After completion of an agreed upon set of four meetings, the leadership of the dialogue composed, circulated and approved a common statement *Friend and Not Adversaries: A Catholic-Muslim Spiritual Journey*, completed in 2003. I thank my colleague Bishop Sevilla for assuming Catholic leadership of this dialogue from the earliest stages.

This is one Retrospect on the origin of the Catholic-Muslim Dialogues. This model worked over the period of 1996-2003. This does not mean that the model should continue. Different times may require different models.

We are now in a different time after the second Iraq war and the spread of global terrorism. Despite these and other negative developments, there are positive signs too. The interreligious legacy of Pope John Paul II has provided a lasting memory for Catholics and Muslims alike that they can cooperate together in prayer and dialogue for the benefit of the whole of humanity.

Our meetings after September 11, 2001 were extremely profound and touched all participants at the deepest levels of friendship and trust. Gradually, each of the dialogues took time out from the schedule to address questions of religion, scripture and violence. Afterwards, our conversations become more probing and our insights more profound. As the war on terrorism unfolded, the intensity of our friendship and our conversations increased.

There will always be some who think our interreligious dialogues are like other dialogues – for example, negotiations between countries, bargaining between labor and management, or any attempts to find middle ground between disputing parties. Dialogue in society involves compromise. Our American political system gets things done by using compromise. Compromise often makes a family get along better. Labor and Management have to compromise or planes don't fly, goods are not delivered, phones are not serviced, and health care workers can't take care of those who are sick, injured or dying. Compromise is way for these things to happen.

But when people of faith talk to one another, they are not attempting any compromise. Our goal in interreligious dialogue is not to construct one religion for the whole world but to share and learn from one another. Interreligious dialogue is both a process of spiritual growth and a set of experiences that can have a transforming effect on those engaged in it. Interreligious dialogue is the art of spiritual communication (cf. ES) and can be described as “among the best manifestations of human activity and culture. Interreligious dialogue has certain characteristics: clarity, an outpouring of thought, meekness, humility, kindness, patience, generosity, prudence and trust. In interreligious dialogue, we are compelled to make our language understandable, acceptable and well-chosen, so that we can be both truthful and charitable to one another.

Every interreligious dialogue has a spiritual character. The participants maintain their religious practice, they invite their partners to be present with them when they pray, and they seek to understand how each of them understands what one must do to be holy. We seek to understand one another, to challenge one another to understand each of our beliefs more deeply, and to grow in our understanding of the greatness, abundance and mercy of God.

It is for this reason that we are grateful for the opportunity and success of our dialogues. These have been experiences of reflection, prayer and trust. The good and magnificent God has given us the courage to surrender to his all-embracing love and has given us the gift of peace. May this great and all caring God be praised, now and forever.