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Christians and Muslims: A Common Cause

Fr. Nabil Haddad, a priest in the Melkite Catholic Church, is the founder and director of the Jordanian Interfaith Coexistence Research Center in Amman, Jordan. He is known both in Jordan and internationally for his work in interfaith relations, a priority for Muslim and Christian groups in the Middle East. The following are some excerpts of an interview of Fr. Haddad by the editors of *U.S. Catholic Magazine*, May 2015 edition.

Are there parts of the Quran that you find useful to know today?

Yes, indeed. There is the *sura* that talks of St. Mary. I admire the respect and reverence for the Virgin Mary in the Holy Quran. There is also the *sura* that talks about the obedience and respect we need to give our parents. That is also the fourth commandment. I also refer to the oneness of God that is proclaimed in the Holy Quran.

I concentrate on these instances because this is what we have in common. I don't quote the Holy Quran, but on many occasions I reference commonalities between Islam and Christianity. It's not a matter of admiring Islam but admiring the common living that existed for many centuries.

You've been advocating for greater appreciation of Islam among Christians. When did you start working toward this goal?

This concentration started after 2001, after 9/11. Because of the schism that we saw in the world, and how some people were starting to view Islam, I thought it was very important for Christians to clarify things on both sides.

I came up with the idea that Christians need to work together with Muslims to make changes from within our society in Jordan. At the same time, I needed to speak my intentions and objectives in a way that Muslims would accept. This is where I refer to examples from history and Islam. I always concentrate on the fact that the teachings of Islam call for the respect and acceptance of both Christians and Jews.

That's how I appealed to the hearts and minds of Muslims. I built a rapport and friendship through which I was able to serve my own people and my community. I was able to convey a message, and I believe that

concentrating on my Christian love was a good method of evangelization.

How do you, as a Catholic priest, approach dialogue with Muslims?

My calling is to be a Christian in a society with a Muslim majority. A Christian is a Christian whether here or in France, Japan, or South Africa. A Catholic priest is a Catholic priest in any part of the world. But the terminology we need to use is different. Spreading a Christian message to the Muslims is different than giving a sermon from the pulpit on Sunday.

I tell them, "I remind you to be good Muslims as much as I remind myself to be a good Christian." I try to make it easier for my Muslim friends to understand my Christianity in very Arabic terminology. I show them this respect as an Arab Christian, as an interfaith activist, and as someone who has an image of being liked by the Muslim community.

I try to use this in a very positive way to convey a very Christian message that needs to be understood by every Muslim. I admire their understanding.

Has the rise of radical extremists made your peace-building work more challenging?

Yes. In Jordan, we have some worries as Christians. Jordan is not isolated. It's secure, but it is in a very turbulent region. Syria, Iraq, North Israel, South Lebanon—they are all around us. We see the persecution. We see the murders. We see ISIS. We have ISIS supporters in Jordan. There are ISIS sleeper cells here.

But I don't isolate the Christians' worries from the worries of any Muslims. It would be very threatening for Christians not to coexist with Muslims. Christians must understand, here in Jordan and everywhere, that to be isolated by religion or to live in a Christian ghetto is very dangerous. Unfortunately, this is what we saw happen in Iraq.

Are you seeing more examples of Christians and Muslims coming together?

This is happening every day. If you see what is taking place on social media, you will see there are debates between Muslims and ideological extremists. For instance, I saw an extremist on Facebook call on Muslims to not socialize with Christians on Christmas because he said Christians were infidels.

But people responded to the extremist's comment and said a true Muslim would not do this. I saw that this response came not from the Christians but rather from moderate Muslims. The moderates were attacking the extremists for the way that they interpreted the Islamic faith.

I also saw Muslims and Christians get together on Christmas. In my own church, in my own house, I had Muslim friends who came to congratulate us on Christmas. It is not done as an artificial gesture but a manifestation of this fraternity between Muslims and Christians. It has become more and more a part of the strategy in the daily life of Jordanians as we face the threat and reality of ISIS.

How has Jordan been affected by the influx of refugees from surrounding countries in the wake of ideological extremism?

We have almost 1 million Muslim and Christian refugees from Syria and Iraq living in Jordan right now. It is very important to consider the region as a disaster area. Here I have seen that Christians are suffering.

It's so very unfortunate, and we are living this dilemma with our brothers and sisters. We are giving them housing and food. We are giving them all the support.

But the one thing we want to tell our brothers and sisters who are the victims of ideological extremism is that here in Jordan, they are not refugees. They are our guest, and we are here to serve them. This is a very strong message for both Muslims and Christians in our country.

This effort is mandatory. In this region, because Jordan is so close to these events, to these tragedies, I think it is our mission to raise our voice. We must speak with wisdom and tell the truth of this region to the whole world.

The plight of Iraqi Christians is very important for this region to realize. It is not the duty of the Catholic Church or Christians in general to address this situation alone. It is the duty of the whole world, the international community. They need to stand and support these Christians, not only as Christians, but also as human beings, as the citizens of one of the oldest civilizations in the entire world.

What is the current status of Iraqi Christians? How severe is the persecution they face?

I am talking to you while the church in Iraq is celebrating three days of prayer and fasting. They were called to spend three days of the fasting of *Baoutha*, which means "the cry" or "the cry for help" in the Chaldean rite.

In the north of Iraq, churches, holy sites, and Christian artifacts have been demolished by ISIS. For

the first time in nearly 2,000 years, there are no Christians left inside the city of Mosul.

Some of them went to Kurdistan, others went to Baghdad. I believe the Chaldean voice, the Christian Iraqi voices, should be carried as a cry not for the Christians but as a cry for peace for all.

The Christian voice and the Christian identity is not only being tortured—it's being demolished. More than 120,000 Christians have been forced from their homes in Iraq over the last year. What we see here in Jordan is a manifestation of the daily pain that the church is having, and we need to move and to move fast, to work with superpowers, with the United States, with Europe, with the United Nations Security Council.

What does the loss of the Christian communities mean to Muslims in the region?

I always say, "How could Muslims talk about a tolerant Islam, a moderate Islam, when they do not protect and preserve the existence and the presence of their Christian brothers and sisters?" Christians should be given the freedom to be witnesses of Jesus Christ.

The Quran mentions a mandatory respect for Christians and Jews. No one in the world is going to believe Muslims are living out their faith if they don't reflect such respect for their immediate neighbors, local citizens who have lived here long before Islam began. How can Muslims talk about their faith if they don't show this faith in action? We need to show within the Iraqi society that Christians are not only an integral part, but also that Christians have always been an added value to the society.

This diversity within the society is the best practice for Muslims. It allows them to experience this kind of dualistic nature within the society. If we look at other societies where Muslims are the majority or the societies where they have fewer Muslims, you see there is extremism. Adding minorities does not only serve the existence of this minority, but it also teaches and reminds the majority that they have to live with these minorities and have to recognize dignity and show respect for them.

I say this as a member of a minority in Jordan. In some parts of Jordan, where you see villages that don't have Christians sharing in the life of the society, people are more reluctant to deal with non-Muslims. It is as important for Iraq to protect the non-Muslim community in order to preserve diversity and peace.

Have a blessed week,

