



# UNION OF THE CATHOLIC APOSTOLATE



## Apostles for Today

Monthly Reflection, November 2020

### Many Rooms in the House ...

Since several months a Muslim woman lives in our household. She is the nurse for my old mother. She considers herself of being a modern woman; she does not wear a scarf and has a modern and elegant outfit. At the same time, she is religious and follows the rules of Islam. She prays five times a day, early before sunrise, in the midst of May that is about five o'clock in the morning. Since April 24<sup>th</sup> at the beginning of Ramadan, I became witness of her strict abstinence from any food and drink during daytime. From dawn until sunset she does not touch any food. In the meantime, the days are long, dawn begins early morning before 4 a.m. and the sun sets at 8.30 p.m. – it's a long day and Ramadan lasts for 30 days. During the night she eats a light and nourishing meal. It is not easy for her, having such a short night and working the whole day, for she must look after my mother, must do the cooking, the washing and many other things. When I asked her, she answered she did the strict fasting most willingly for God. It was not for keeping herself healthy nor for the reduction of weight, but simply and solely for God. She also practises Zakat, the giving of donations, and she gives a remarkable amount of her modest income to various organisations and persons. – What shall I say? I am impressed and touched by her witness of faith.

I know that Islam – just as any other religion – has many different faces and tendencies, not different from Christianity either. As a Christian it is fascinating and enriching for me living together in one household with a Muslim. We often talk about our comprehension of God and of faith. It is a process of learning. Her regular prayers remind me of the rhythm of monastic tradition lived by monks and nuns. Mohammed himself has drawn an inspiration out of monasticism. Of course, I am aware of the differences between the traditions of our religions. I do not belong to those who believe that respect for family life and high morality is more to be found with Muslims, whereas Christians, at least in the western world, had supposedly lost ethic and religious values ... This topic is rather complex, but one thing is clear: Living together is a way of learning. It means giving and receiving, it is a process of mutuality. The fundament is a high esteem of each other. The Declaration of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council *Nostra Aetate* says: *The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all- powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth...*. Mission is first of all searching and finding traces of God's presence in the other person, in other cultures and religions.

I can very well accomplish how impressed Francis of Assisi must have been, when he, on the occasion of the crusade in 1219, was guest of Sultan Malek Al-Kamil in the camp in Egypt from the end of August until the midst of September; he then lived among the Muslims. His first intention was not to convert them but to set a sign that all men take part in the holiness of creation. In the Christian world of that time regular praying was only done in monasteries, it had become a privilege of monks and nuns. The biblical call to pray addressing all had been forgotten. Not so the Muslims: All of them would respond to the call of the Muezzin and pray five times a day. The Franciscan historian Michel Cusato has published interesting results of his research on the encounter between Francis of Assisi and the Muslims in Damiette in Egypt. He describes the wide effects of this encounter, of the meeting of Francis of Assisi with the Muslims. One consequence was the "democratisation of prayer". Cusato writes: „ In the West, for the most part, prayer was typically viewed as the prerogative of a spiritual elite, a duty and an honor for priests and canons, nuns and religious, even though it was during this same period that some forms of lay participation in the prayer of the Church were beginning to be developed... The Poverello was moved and impressed by the prayer of Muslims. All men and women, young and old – prayed. Prayer was not reserved to nor the special prerogative of a spiritual elite as it was in the West. Rather, at regular intervals, every member of the society was called into prayer. It is my contention that Francis reflected on this phenomenon and came to the simple conclusion that prayer was indeed constitutive of every single creature of God: in other words, to be a creature was to be a praying creature. ... Francis, in short, could not have been but favorably impressed with a society that takes time out, five times a day, to render praise and glory to God. And if the allegedly 'infidel' (faith-less) Muslim, why not the allegedly faith-filled Christian? This vision of the religious implications for the nature of creaturehood is the "democratization of prayer" (*compare Michael Cusato: Francis from Assisi (1182-1226) – How lonely he stayed as a witness of Islam piety in the occident, in: Bsteh/Proksch: Pacemaker of the interreligious dialogue, volume III, Vienna 2020*). This impulse he passed on into his religious surroundings, and this is the beginning of the noon prayer („Angelus“) and of the rosary. The little towers with a bell to be found on the roofs of the farmers' houses in Austria, that served to call the field workers to prayer, are the precious historical memory of this. Since that time the whole church prayed.

When in February 2019 Pope Francis signed a document on ‚Human Fraternity’ together with the Imam Ahmad Mohammed Al Tayyeb of the Al-Azhar in Kairo at Abu Dhabi, that was a reminiscence of Francis of Assisi’s stay with Sultan Malek Al-Kamil 800 years ago. This fraternal belonging together, that is spoken of here, rooted in the conviction that all humans are God’s beings and his images. – Eight billion of people, eight billion of different images, none is like the other.

Also, Pallotti was fascinated by this vision. Again, and again he speaks of the fact that one should see the image of God in anybody, the image of the Trinity and the image of the Crucified. That is why he was open to learn from everybody and to embody everyone into his engagement. In his spirituality there is a remarkably openness to universality that was not really standard in his time.

Sisters and brothers living together in the global world at the one house, that is the frame of the text of the Encyclical „Laudato Si” published five years ago. The image of a house is of Jewish origin (e.g. 1 Henoch 39); John’s gospel takes it up again (Joh 14,2): „There are many rooms in the house of my father ...”, that is how it is formulated in the farewell speeches. This metaphor beautifully expresses unity and variety. The many rooms in the citadel or in the house (or castle) play an important part in the history of Christian and Muslim (especially Sufi) spirituality. But – humanity does not really experience itself as a joint household. The various selfish interests of the different countries, societies, politicians, economies and also individuals are too manifold. Does the *one house* remain an eschatological image? The experiences of the Corona crisis have given evidence of the contrary. The connection of all humans, the interdependence of all beings has become evidently clear. We cannot escape the globalisation any more. It has its good sides as well as its bad sides. Consequently, it is important to look at the common house as a whole and to organise the household in it so that brothers and sisters will arise from the many inhabitants. The encyclical “Laudato Si” puts its hopes on the traditional principles of the Catholic Social Doctrine, on an education of an understanding of public welfare, that forwards the integral human development. Love as ethical principle is needed for that approach. Political and social action have to be influenced by love – a high demand!

The conviction of all men being images of God is in Christian view the fundament of the same dignity of all, and subsequently, of the same rights. In spite of that the experience of diversity can be dramatic. I have been working at an international institute in Vienna for 19 years, and therefore travelled a lot, especially in Africa and Asia. Besides fascinating similarities of the human abilities, I often experienced the enormous differences of cultures. I asked myself again and again whether there is more that unites us or more that separates us from each other. Humans are so diverse in many aspects that probably only the conviction of equal dignity and equal rights is that which unites us and not even this is a point to which everybody would tend to agree. Christian mission – according to Pallotti – is to study all the different images of the Crucified in the many people, to “contemplate” them, as he says, in order to learn and to become a grateful person...

A final hint: In these days a volume on the spirituality of Vincent Pallotti is printed. Title: „*Spread wide the Place of your Tent - Vincent Pallotti’s Inspiration for a Church of Greater Participation, Diversity and Dialogue*” (available in the German/Austrian Provicinalate).

*Brigitte Maria Proksch*

[\*\(brigitte.proksch@pallottiner.org\)\*](mailto:brigitte.proksch@pallottiner.org)

*This text has been produced late in May 2020 when the first lock down paralysed Austria and many other countries worldwide. – The author lives in Vienna, the old multicultural capital of the country, where 45% of the population are Catholics. Also, many Muslims and Orthodox and Lutheran Christians are living there, also a small Jewish community and many others. One third of the 2 Million inhabitants have migration background.*