

Catholic Peacebuilding Network

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Silsilah Dialogue Movement

The Beginning

The Second Vatican Council has been a great sign of the times for many of us to envision inter-religious dialogue as a path to peace. Since I was ordained priest in 1966 in Italy as a member of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Mission (PIME) I nurtured the interest to explore the new challenge of dialogue in my mission, but I was able to go mission only in 1977. My first assignment was Siocon, Zamboanga del Norte, Mindanao.

In the context of the Martial Law and the Mindanao conflict I felt the need to become a bridge of reconciliation between Lumads, Muslims and Christians so I decided to live in a Muslim community that welcomed me to be part of their group, thanks to a respected Muslim leader who invited me to stay with his people. This simple beginning brought me to many adventures, including the experience of becoming a negotiator for the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF).

The experience was not easy for me: was criticized by the Christians because I used to give most of my time to the Muslims and I was suspected by the military for my commitment to dialogue and peace on the side of the Muslims. For them the only way to solve the problem in Mindanao was to kill the rebels. In the midst all these tensions I have learned beautiful lessons living with Muslims and I understood, in a deeper level of my heart, the importance of starting a dialogue with the Muslims based on a spiritual approach.

It was there, living with my Muslims friends, that I rediscovered deeply in my reflection and prayer that "Dialogue starts from God and brings people back to God". This simple reflection became so powerful for me that I started to see Muslims and the Mindanao conflict from a new perspective. My Muslims brothers and sisters became part of my experience of living in dialogue. I was able to see God in them. I didn't find any more the difference between Muslims, Christians and lumads; they have equal dignity because all are created by the same God. This inspiration and reflection became my starting point for a deeper commitment and sharing of the importance of living and promoting a dialogue, not as a strategy, but as a spirituality. Only in this way can we promote sustainable dialogue and peace in society.

But how could dialogue be brought into the Mindanao conflict when many looked to the historical background in a narrow way, without giving the proper justice to the history, and at the same time without a sense of forgiveness on both sides? The spiritual element is not yet a point of reference, in spite of the fact that Muslims and Christians talk about love and compassion. In this context my continuous reflection was: "How do we break the cycle of hatred and prejudices?" With this spirit I moved and acted, telling everyone that only through a spiritual approach of dialogue is it possible to have sustainable peace in Mindanao.

This dream was cut for a while when in 1981 I received many threats from the military because of my effort to negotiate for peace with the :MNLF. The peak of this threats reached the point when in 1981 I was ambushed by soldiers and one of my staff was killed near me. In that situation it was decided by my superiors to "exile" me to Italy. That was not the end though.

In Rome I studied Islam and Arabic in a university to deepen my knowledge and reflection on Muslim- Christian dialogue, with the hope to go back to the Philippines one day, and share with others my experience. This hope became a reality when in 1983 I was able to return in the Philippines as a Superior of the PIME missionaries. Guided by the background of my experience and my studies on Islam and Arabic, I shared my intention to promote dialogue to Muslim and Christian friends and in 1984 we started the Silsilah Dialogue Movement in Zamboanga City.

Silsilah

"Silsilah" is an Arabic word which literally means "Chain" or "Link". As used by the Sufis (Muslim Mystics) it describes a process of attaining an experience of the Divine. The same root word is used to mean "genealogical tree" which implies a spiritual chain of humanity as created by the same God. Thus, "Silsilah" in the Movement is taken as an inspiring and key concept to describe Muslims, Christians and other people of living faith who

are moving together as one universal family towards a common vision and mission of dialogue and peace.

In the beginning of the 80s the concept of inter-religious dialogue for many was just as a "strategy" for peace. It was not easy for me to build a movement based on spirituality. Fortunately, I met with Bishop Tuftud, a man of dialogue and faith, and a dear friend who understood well my plan and encouraged me to continue, saying: " Go on with this vision, this is a dialogue of one hundred years!"

Silsilah, a Movement for Muslims and Christians and people of other faiths

One of the first challenges that I proposed to the Silsilah group was to form an autonomous movement where Christians, Muslims and people of other faiths could feel at home. We found support in the Archbishop of Zamboanga City and the Grand Mufti, encouraging all to see Silsilah as a common house of the Muslims, Christians and people of other faiths. This decision brought us to look for a Silsilah Center, away from a physical set up which would identify the Movement as being Muslim or Christian.

The deepening of the Silsilah spirituality of *life-in-dialogue* came from our continuous reflection, up to the point when we finalized crafting the statement of our Vision and Mission.

our VISION:

In the name of God, the fountain and source of dialogue, Silsi/ah envisions a life-in-dialogue for all Muslims, Christians and peoples of other living faiths in respect, trust and love for one and other, and moving together towards a common experience of harmony, solidarity and peace.

Our mission:

As instruments of dialogue and peace, we, the members of Silsilah, commit ourselves:

To live the essence of our respective faiths and bear witness to the values of our own religious traditions;

To be in dialogue with all peoples, regardless of culture and faith, promoting the Culture of Dialogue with particular emphasis on spiritual values; and

To be in solidarity with all peoples in the uplift of the less privileged, in the building up of a progressive, just, humane and ecologically sound society.

Spirituality of life-in-dialogue

"Life-in-dialogue" for us means dialogue with and in God, with oneself, with others and with creation. It is an holistic approach of dialogue where inter-religious dialogue becomes one important component of the dialogue with others and Muslim-Christian dialogue a priority in the context of Mindanao. We present the basic concept of this spirituality to all, encouraging all to deepen it further through each one's own faith. To the Christians we suggest to find in the Beatitudes an inspiration, guided by the journey to Emmaus; to the Muslim we suggest to deepen the concept of great jihad (the struggle for an internal purification) guided by the concept of God! Allah who is merciful and compassionate.

This spiritual journey is taken through a process of personal transformation that leads to social transformation.

Culture of Dialogue, Path to Peace

While we propose a life-in-dialogue on a personal level, we also propose the Culture of Dialogue on a social level. We are convinced that if many will live and promote life-in-dialogue it becomes a culture that can sustain peace in society. In this line of reflection and promotion we propose an *ActiveHarmony paradigm* to face all forms of conflicts. Thus, culture of dialogue is a holistic approach of dialogue that emphasizes the human and spiritual dimension of life-in-dialogue . It is a life style that witnesses to a deeper relationship with and respect for people of different cultures and religions; a life style that challenges all to build together a society where God's values and ethics are the guiding principles in journeying together towards harmony, solidarity and peace.

Our experience is that Muslims and Christians understand well this presentation and see the need to live and promote it in their groups.

Silsilah Programs and Initiatives

Since 1984 Silsilah has been in the front line of many dialogue and peace initiatives in the Philippines, dating to the EDSA revolution of 1986 up to now. The major contribution of Silsilah is the formation program. We have already thousands of Muslim and Christian alumni who have been with us for the Silsilah courses and our great joy is to see now many of them are involved in many institutions, GOs, NGOs and groups promoting dialogue and peace in Mindanao, other parts of the country and even outside the country. (See the brochure for the list of programs and activities.)

The effort to reach out to all sectors of society - educators, youth, grassroots, media, leaders, communities, etc. - is always guided by our vision and mission and we are ready always to face new challenges, especially working together, Muslims and Christians, in all our programs. At the same time we encourage Christians and Muslims to grow deeper in their own faith. Among the many initiatives and programs I'd like to say a few words about the Silsilah Forum.

The Silsilah Forum is a new initiative of Silsilah to sustain the continuing formation of our alumni and to assist friends of the Movement who wish to become part of the Silsilah Forum so that all will be sustained spiritually in their commitment for dialogue and peace wherever they are involved. We have already Silsilah Forum in different parts of Mindanao and Manila (Cotabato, Midsayap, Pikit, Kidapawan, Davao, Cagayan de Oro, Iligan, Sibugay, Zamboanga, Jolo, Siasi and soon in Basilan, Manila, Siocon, Bungao and other parts). The Silsilah Forum remains a loose group formed by Muslims, Christians and people of other faiths who wish to journey together and help each other in their programs and initiatives of dialogue and peace. The concept of the Silsilah Forum is simple but vital, and a strong link among people sharing a common commitment. A correct understanding of the obligation to their spiritual commitment brings people to reconciliation and peace; a wrong understanding of this "spiritual commitment" can bring about fanaticism and violence.

Partners and Linkages

Silsilah along the years has established links with many partners on local, national and international levels. Being the first group among those still active in Mindanao, and working always with many institutions and groups

especially through our formation program, we are in contact with many partners. This is for us the time to consolidate our partnership program, a "personalized" plan to be in contact regularly with our partners, including a more effective personalized effort to keep in contact with our members and friends. I believe there is a basic respect and appreciation for Silsilah in the Philippines and in other countries, and our commitment to dialogue and peace has been tested with the death of Fr. Salvatore Carzedda, PIME, who was killed in Zamboanga City on May 20, 1992. The loss of Fr. Salvatore's own life is a measure of his commitment to dialogue and peace in Silsilah.

Challenges and opportunities

For me dialogue is a journey, a pilgrimage and an adventure. Talking about adventure, we consider the great challenge that the Church and the others religions, especially Islam, are facing today. It is time for us who believe in dialogue to prepare a ground for a new era of understanding of our own faith, religion, culture and civilization and work together for peace. Meanwhile, we think globally in this specific field of Culture of Dialogue: Path to Peace; we work locally to encourage all to work on the path to peace as a new understanding of people's relationships that we call spirituality of life-in-dialogue; to form a new culture, that we call "Culture of Dialogue" .

The challenge is an opportunity if we consider that many today are convinced of the importance of inter- faith, inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue. We have reached a point in humanity, perhaps out of fear for the future, when many start to understand the need for a new and sincere mode of relating in the world, based on respect and dignity of each person, culture and religion.

God is at work in the world today and beautiful things will happen if we are able to harmonize the spiritual and human aspirations of humanity. I hope that the dialogue and peace partners continue to serve the people with humility and hope.

The Holy Bible and the Holy Qur'an remind us that nothing is impossible to God and with God. With this spirit the dialogue and peace partners and linkages are called to work with patience, faith and courage, sure that the sun is still shining behind the clouds.

Fr. Sebastiano D' Ambra,
PIME

