



# Monastic Encounter

Monastic  
Interreligious  
Dialogue (MID) in  
Great Britain & Ireland

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## Friends and neighbours

Interreligious dialogue has long been an interest of mine and, living as I currently do in Jerusalem, it has become a very real and necessary undertaking in my life. The recent anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks reminded me of the origins of my interest and how it has been shaped in the shadow of the 'War on Terror' over the past two decades.

I was only seven years old on the 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001. On that day I learned the meaning of 'terrorism' and, soon after, the prevalent view of 'Islam' and how some of its believers thought their religion called them to cause violence in the western world. Islam and Muslims were, in many minds, conflated with terrorism and terrorists. The fact that the attackers belonged to the Islamic faith meant that much fear, suspicion and prejudice was directed towards Muslims from then on. A sentence of collective responsibility was passed without trial on the heads of all Muslims, who would have to answer for the atrocities of a tiny minority of extremists among their co-religionists.

Since then, debates have arisen about whether Islamic values and practices are compatible with western societal norms and whether the migration of Muslims poses a danger to our way of life in the west. Islamophobia has spread like wildfire, stoked by the media and the press, ever hungry for sensational and contentious headlines. Rumours were spread that a President of the United States might secretly be a Muslim (his middle name was 'Hussein' after all!) and citizens from some majority Muslim countries were later banned from entry to the United States. Simply being a Muslim made one suspect, increasing the likelihood of being detained as a potential terrorist.

This atmosphere of fear and mistrust contrasts with my own experiences of growing up in northern England, where my group of school friends included two Muslims. My family hosted some Muslim exchange students from Kashmir

at our home and I later worked with several Muslims in the workplace. Today my mother and her Muslim neighbours celebrate religious festivals, family occasions and life events together. In my experience, Muslims always seemed like normal people who were pretty much just like us.

The misunderstandings and prejudices fanned during the 'War on Terror' and directed for the most part against the followers of Islam have thus prompted my interest in interreligious dialogue and Pope Francis' plea for a 'culture of encounter.' The past two decades have encouraged me to learn more about the beliefs and religious practices of Islam and to discover what motivates the faith of my Muslim friends and neighbours. I hope this will nourish my Christianity and, at the same time, allow a two-way exchange where my faith might be shared, understood, and offered as a source of nourishment for others.

Nevertheless, I believe we mustn't gloss over the differences we have, nor fail to recognise the existence of some extreme elements which are found in the dark corners of religions. We should seek to understand and tackle extremism through education and, where possible, encounter and dialogue.

Ultimately, I believe the call of Pope Francis for a 'culture of encounter' is a necessary undertaking for our times and something especially important with those of the Islamic faith. More than an academic exercise or an attempt to forget differences and underestimate them, it is a timely and necessary step towards living a more peaceful, prosperous, and congenial life together.

**- Justin Robinson OSB is a monk of Glenstal Abbey and co-ordinator of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue in Britain and Ireland.**

# Crossing the Boundaries of Difference



*'The Certainty of Being Loved: Pierre Claverie, O.P., 1938-1996'* is a spiritual biography of Monsignor Pierre Claverie OP who was assassinated in Oran, Algeria, along with his young Muslim helper, Mohamed Bouchikhi, on 1 August 1996. Pierre's beatification, and that of his eighteen companion martyrs (1994-1996), took place in the Basilica of Santa Cruz, Oran on 8 December 2018. In his message to the congregation Pope Francis declared: "Through the Beatification of our nineteen brothers and sisters, the Church wishes to bear witness to her desire to continue working for dialogue, harmony and friendship. We believe that this unprecedented event in your country will trace in the Algerian sky a great sign of fraternity addressed to the entire world." This fraternity was something for which Blessed Pierre Claverie had knowingly and willingly given his life.

## **Breaking Down Barriers**

Pierre was born in 1938 in Bab el-Oued, a lower middle-class district of Algiers. He was brought up, along with his younger sister, by two very devoted, though not particularly religious, parents. Pierre, at the age of eleven, had the good fortune to join a Dominican scout group at his local church and he took to scouting and to the Catholic faith like the proverbial fish to water. At the same time, he lived his early life in Algeria completely cut off from the majority Muslim population. Later in life he looked back in sadness at the spiritual impoverishment he had experienced, as a result of having been brought up in a "colonial bubble".

In 1957 Pierre went to France to study science at the University of Grenoble. However, his heart was not in his studies and after one year he applied to join the novitiate of the French Dominicans in Lille. It was at this time, at the height of the Algerian war of independence (1954-1962), that he became acutely aware of the injustice being suffered by the Algerian people. This realisation was a turning point in his life and from then on he sought tirelessly to break down barriers of fear and misunderstanding, to become, in Christ's name, an ambassador of reconciliation. He was to remain in France, apart from a period of military service in Algeria, until 1967 when he returned as a priest to his newly independent homeland.

## **Rose-Tinted Spectacles**

From 1967 until 1981 Pierre served in the capital, Algiers, before being appointed in 1981 to the episcopal see of Oran. Totally captivated by an independent Algeria, he viewed Islam through rose-tinted spectacles. Pierre tended to see what both religions had in common and was impressed by the beauty of Islam - its fervent communal prayer, the serenity of its believers in the face of suffering and death, and its strong sense of community. He wrote: "Without wishing it and with complete good will, I was enclosing myself once more in a bubble. The other had his place there, but disinfected, seen through the lens of my values, of my culture, of my faith – almost the same apart from a few details." Pierre had failed to realise what he would later describe as "the abyss" which separates Christianity and Islam. He maintained that until we are willing to acknowledge this chasm, "we are not ready to recognise each other, to know each other, to love each other."

What is striking in Pierre's approach to dialogue is his insistence on being honest with one's dialogue partner, in not concealing differences in the hope of winning the confidence of the other. We mustn't gloss over, he insists, the different understanding Christians and Muslims have of various theological concepts concerning God, the prophets, revelation, God's will etc. Because we use the same words, it is easy to be deluded into thinking that we are talking about the same thing. Pierre remarks that "one notices by living with people that words haven't got the same meaning because they are not based on the same spiritual experience. For words to mean the same thing, it is necessary to live, to share together an experience, the experience of human existence with birth, life, suffering, love, death. To give words an enfleshed existence, for me that's what dialogue means." Through sharing the life of the Algerian people Pierre was in a position to understand more deeply their religious sensibility and also to speak to their hearts. Friendship and relationships were at the centre of his witness to Gospel values and of his ability to engage fruitfully in dialogue.

## **Following a Crucified Christ**

It was Pierre's conformity to Christ which enabled him, during the Algerian civil war (1992-2002), to persevere in the face of much violence and suffering and to reach out to others. His compass was the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Following a crucified Christ, says Pierre, not only involves the big choices in life such as becoming a religious, but also the little free choices of everyday life. It is in this way that we help to bring in the Kingdom in the here and now: "Between human ways and the ways of God there is this unfathomable mystery of the Cross and if one accepts to be shaped by it, one can hope for a resurrection."

For his willingness, in a war-torn Algeria, to be Jesus Christ for others, to cross the boundaries of difference, to hold out his hand in friendship, and to speak the truth in love, Pierre paid the ultimate price. However, he didn't die alone but in the company of a young Muslim friend, 21-year-old Mohamed Bouchikhi, who was also willing to sacrifice his life out of love for Pierre and the Christian community. Their blood, mingled in death, witnesses to a fraternity which can exist between Christians and Muslims, a love stronger than death.



**- Martin McGee OSB is a monk of Worth Abbey and the author of three books on Christian-Muslim friendship in Algeria. His recently published book 'The Certainty of Being Loved' can be purchased at [www.dominicanpublications.com](http://www.dominicanpublications.com)**

# Remembering Sister Lucy Brydon



Sister Lucy Brydon, long-time coordinator of the Great Britain and Ireland commission of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, died last year on August 23, 2020 at the age of 80.

Sister Lucy spent the early years of her religious life as a Sister of Mercy in teaching and administrative posts in the north of England and Kenya. In 1991 she joined the Olivetan Benedictine Sisters of Turvey Abbey. Besides representing the Turvey nuns' community in interreligious matters, she served as Guest Sister, was involved in retreat and hospitality ministry, offered spiritual direction, and was one of the community's cantors. Her retreat and spiritual direction work was interreligious in its outreach.

In reflecting on her involvement in Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, Sister Lucy noted that she grew up in a fervent Roman Catholic family in a largely Protestant neighbourhood. In the 1940s and '50s, ecumenism had hardly been heard of, and yet her childhood experience was one of learning good neighbourliness and friendship with people of "other religions"—in this case, Anglicans, Methodists, and Baptists. Even though she had opted for Comparative Religion for a Cambridge Religious Studies Diploma towards the end of the 1970s and had taken a course on Islam, it was not until she went to Kenya at the end of the 1970s that she came into personal contact with people of another religion.

One incident above all continued to stand out for her as an experience of grace. In an article entitled "Journey into Interfaith Dialogue 1939-2011" that she wrote for the first volume of *Dilatato Corde*, the online journal of Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique, she recalled that:

"One day, while visiting a Muslim family to speak to the parents of one of our students, I found myself alone in a room with the old grandmother as I waited for the mother of the girl to arrive. The old lady did not attempt to speak to me or welcome me. I do not think she was aware of my presence at all. She was completely immersed in an intense state of prayer, with the Holy Qur'an open on her knee. I will never forget the serene, recollected expression on her face. I had an awed feeling that I should take off my shoes, for I was standing on holy ground.

The intensity of her contemplation made that small room into a mosque or, for me, an oratory. I prayed silently too, and I felt we were somehow united. This experience of graced insight was broken by the bustling arrival of the mother, and we went on to talk school business, the old lady remaining wrapped in silent prayer. It was a small event which had then, and still has, an eternal significance for me."

In addition to the dialogues she participated in and organized in Great Britain, especially the yearly gatherings with the Buddhist monks and nuns at Amaravati, interfaith retreats at Turvey Abbey, and the annual meeting of the coordinators of the various European Commissions that was held in London in October 2010, Sister Lucy was able to participate in the first two international dialogues with Iranian Shi'a Muslims that took place in Rome in 2011 and in Qum, Iran, in 2012. When the dialogue was held in England in 2019, the participants stopped at Turvey Abbey on their way from Ealing Abbey in London to Ampleforth Abbey in North Yorkshire to visit Sister Lucy and to take part in the Sunday eucharistic celebration.

Born on 4th December 1939, Sr Lucy was in the 63rd year of her religious profession, and in her 30th year as a member of the community at Turvey Abbey. May she rest in peace.

**- William Skudlarek OSB is a monk of Saint John's Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota, and is Secretary-General of Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique.**

Edited by Br Justin Robinson OSB

MID Co-Ordinator for Great Britain and Ireland  
Glenstal Abbey, Murroe, Co. Limerick, Ireland

midgbi@glenstal.org

www.midgbi.org