



Monastic Encounter

Monastic
Interreligious
Dialogue (MID) in
Great Britain & Ireland

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Breaking down the barriers of fear



It was an earth-shattering moment which led to barriers breaking down and interfaith friendships being formed for Sister Mariangela Yator and the sisters of Saint Joseph's Monastery in Assisi. Growing up in the Philippines, Sister Mariangela knew how prejudice and mistrust can sometimes exist between followers of different faiths. Opportunities to meet people from other religions were rare in the heavily Christian country, and interreligious dialogue never seemed like a necessary or urgent undertaking.

All of this changed when a major earthquake struck Assisi in 1997 and almost destroyed the Benedictine monastery of Saint Joseph where Sister Mariangela was then residing. In the aftermath of the earthquake, the sisters temporarily relocated to Parma. It was there that they were invited to a conference of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue taking place in the city. "We were a little afraid at first, because we were unaccustomed to meeting followers of other religions" confesses Sister Mariangela. "We sat at the back of the hall, but we were forced to talk to people during the coffee break. We soon noticed a common humanity which we shared, and barriers of fear were broken down." Friendships were formed and Sister Mariangela became her community's interreligious dialogue representative, beginning years of work which has led to meetings with Popes and even the Dalai Lama.

"I've learned that dialogue needs to begin with friendship. It's easier because friends can openly share with one another, even our differences" explains Sister Mariangela, speaking from Kylemore Abbey in Ireland where she has been on sabbatical since stepping down as Abbess of her monastery in Italy. "Our dialogue is generally experiential, rather than doctrinal, which means we create a good rapport with people we consider to be our brothers and sisters." Sister Mariangela believes studies in philosophy and theology strengthened the foundations of her own faith, making dialogue easier with others.

In a world of chaos and conflict, monasteries are the ideal training grounds for interreligious dialogue, according to Sister Mariangela. She explains: "Monks and nuns should be experts in dialogue because our community life brings together people from many different walks of life, puts us in the same place and pushes us to understand one another, accept one another and generally get along! Our experiences in the monastic life give us something which can be offered to believers of other faiths and helps us to dialogue with and encounter one another, to resolve conflicts and to heal prejudices."

Mariangela Yator OSB is a former Abbess of Monastero San Giuseppe in Assisi and is now on sabbatical at Kylemore Abbey in Ireland.

Charles de Foucauld's desert legacy



Bishop John MacWilliam writes about the legacy of Charles de Foucauld in the Sahara today:

Greetings from the Algerian Sahara. The different stages of the life of Saint Charles de Foucauld are well known: French aristocrat, spoiled playboy, soldier for the fun of it, explorer, and then, after his conversion at Saint Augustine's church in Paris, monk, priest of the diocese of Viviers, and hermit-gardener at Nazareth, before coming back to North Africa for the rest of his life.

Charles wanted to go to Morocco but couldn't, so in 1901 he settled in Beni Abbès for a while, in the hermitage where the Little Brothers of the Gospel welcome pilgrims and visitors to this day. There, he began his mission of rescuing slaves and working to abolish slavery.

After two years there, he felt called to a new mission among the Tuareg people in the Hoggar mountains in the south of Algeria. He settled in what is now the town of Tamanrasset, where he learned the Tamachek language, wrote a dictionary, founded a fraternity and lived among the nomads, where he helped and protected them in their need, and, above all, lived a life of prayer in intimate union with his Saviour, Jesus Christ. He said that he wanted to be known as a 'universal brother', opening his heart in charity towards all, no matter their race or culture or faith. In that he mirrored the life and sacrifice of Our Lord.

So how does the Church continue that mission in the same Sahara today, 106 years after Charles's sudden and tragic death at Tamanrasset in 1916?

Since the arrival of the first missionaries in the region in the 1870s, the Church has recognized that the people of this vast two-million square kilometre region were largely secure in their Muslim faith and did not want to be 'coerced' into becoming Christians. When Charles arrived there, he had no difficulty in assuming the same charism – a brother to all, a priest to the few Christians (mostly military), and a man of simple lifestyle and profound faith in the love of God expressed in Jesus.

Over the years, as many as twenty different religious institutes have been founded, drawing on the inspiration of Charles de Foucauld, both in his Nazareth days and in his Sahara days. Of these, five are present in Algeria today. All the missionaries in the diocese today live in the same basic spirit of simplicity and fraternity among our Muslim neighbours, building on years of trust and mutual respect which is ingrained in the hearts of those who know us. There are now five places in the Sahara where the 'Charles de Foucauld spiritual family' is still present. We can take them one by one.

As already mentioned, since 1967 the Little Brothers of the Gospel have a fraternity in the place where Charles lived from 1901 to 1903, a joint community with the Little Brothers of Jesus, at Beni Abbès. Their Christian presence is important in that oasis town on the edge of the great dunes of the Western Erg. The Little Sisters of Jesus also have their house in Beni Abbès, but they have had to temporarily withdraw. Their garden, which provides for the community, is well-cared for by Muslim neighbours.

Moving 1400 kilometres (870 miles) further south, we come to Tamanrasset, where Charles settled in 1903 and where he died 13 years later. Today, there is a fraternity of the Little Brothers of Jesus there, living a life of prayer and solidarity among the people of the region: Tuaregs, Algerians from the north and migrants coming from countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Also in Tamanrasset is the community of the Little Sisters of the Sacred Heart, who arrived there in 1952. Faithful to the traditions of Charles de Foucauld, the sisters (at present one religious sister and one lay volunteer) carry out charitable activities among the local women in need, the poor, the sick, the homeless and others. They also regularly visit Christian detainees in the local prison for a time of prayer and sharing. Just next to their home is the (restored) building in which Charles lived, the 'Frigate' (so called because of the long, thin boat-like shape of the building, which was made necessary by the lack of trees for a roof).

Eighty kilometres (50 miles) to the north east of Tamanrasset lies the plateau of Assekrem (2780 metres above sea level), in the Hoggar mountains. Charles de Foucauld spent several months there in 1911. Today, there is a fraternity of Little Brothers of Jesus, who welcome both retreatants and other visitors, many of them tourists, to this beautiful place with its spectacular sunsets. A place of calm and prayerful isolation, it is also one of the few places in the world where the clear skies and lack of pollution allow for detailed meteorological measurement.

In 1929, Charles's tomb was moved from Tamanrasset to El Goléa (called El Menia today) where he now lies near the church of Saint Joseph. The cemetery is cared for by two priests of the Priestly Fraternity Jesus Caritas, as well as the Sisters of Our Lady of La Salette. It is hoped to renovate the tomb and the church in the future. Being a tourist town, with its old fortress, its palm groves, its spa and the same splendid dunes that are found 600 km to the west in Beni Abbès, the sanctuary receives many visitors and some pilgrims, though not from abroad at present.

Mention should be made of two other oasis towns with links to Charles de Foucauld. In the north of the diocese is El Abiodh sidi Cheik where, in 1933, the Little Brothers of Jesus were founded by Father René Voillaume. Their fraternity closed in 2015, as did the house of the sisters two years later, but we hope to re-establish a Christian presence there next year. In the north-east of the diocese, at Touggourt, we find the Little Sisters of Jesus in their 'mother-house' – where the congregation was founded by Ven. Little Sister Magdeleine of Jesus (Madeleine Hutin) in 1939. They are known locally as the Blue Sisters.

As we can see, the spirit of Charles de Foucauld continues to witness to Christ through the little communities, fragile though they be, scattered here and there in the great Sahara. Thanks to worldwide support, by prayer, by material means and by the new missionaries we hope for, that presence will bear fruit alongside Saint Charles.



John MacWilliam was educated at Worth Abbey School before embarking on a career in the military. He later joined the Missionaries of Africa (known as 'The White Fathers') and was sent to north Africa, where he has served as Bishop of Laghouat in Algeria since 2017.

Lessons from Jerusalem



I'm writing this reflection one year after arriving in the Holy Land as part of my monastic formation. Right now the sun is setting over the Old City of Jerusalem as, in the street below my window, Muslims hurry home to break the fast and Jews head to the Western Wall to pray. We are in the middle of Ramadan, the week-long Jewish Passover is underway, and it's halfway between the Western and Eastern celebrations of Easter. This all takes place in a small walled city, filled with returning pilgrims absent after years of border closures, all against a backdrop of heightened security amid intercommunal tensions.

It's a fascinating place to be, and a great privilege. I'm fortunate to have a good grasp of the local languages, which has allowed me to get to know everyday people, listen to their stories and form relationships which might have been harder were I just another passing pilgrim. There's lots to write about my experiences, but space is limited and so I want to mention one thing which has had a profound impact on me: the commitment people have to their own faith and its various practices. Yes, we have many differences – theological or otherwise – and I'm not proposing some form of syncretism, but instead wondering how our different religious commitments and observances can inspire us as we journey on our own path of faith. There's much to learn from the Muslims and Jews here in the Holy Land, not to mention what can be learned from our Eastern brothers and sisters who have their own way, character, or 'flavour' of being Christian.

A few weeks ago I was walking along the Jaffa Road, on the side-lines of the Jerusalem Marathon. I noticed there was a prayer tent to allow recitation of the Jewish morning prayer, or 'Shacharit', before the event. Along the route I spotted some participants jogging along in their athletic garb yet, at the same time, still wearing their kippot and tzitziyot, the fringes hanging from their running shorts. It struck me how, for a religious Jew, their awareness of God and observance of religious commandments permeates everything they do, so that they remember God when they sit at home, when they lie down, and even when they run a marathon!

It's a lesson learned by a Christian from a Jew, and is just one learning experience among the many that fill daily life in here in the Holy Land if one is open to the invitation and willing to learn.

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