

September 6-7, 2014

THE SAME GOD?: THE CHURCH'S RELATION WITH ISLAM



Good theology is all about making distinctions, and sometimes those distinctions are very subtle. The Catholic Church's teaching on Islam is quite nuanced and has developed over the years. But in the present day, that teaching has taken on an entirely new meaning, as we struggle with serious issues in the world. In 1965, the Vatican II Council Fathers issued *Nostra Aetate*, the "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions," a relatively brief (fewer than 1600 words) but seminal document. While much of it focused on our relationship with Jews, it is worthwhile to highlight some of the key aspects of that teaching with respect to our relationship to people of the Muslim faith. Let me cut to the chase on a thorny question— Do we worship the same God?

After treating Jewish-Christian relations, the document shows forth esteem also for those who hold the Muslim faith. The key passage reads: "The Church has also a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth (Cf. St. Gregory VII, Letter III, 21 to Anazir [Al-Nasir], King of Mauretania PL, 148.451A.), who has spoken to men. They strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God's plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own." That passage itself offers the above footnote, referencing the pope's 1076 A.D. letter to Anazir, the Muslim Emir (local chief) of Mauritania, in present day Algeria.

Now this citation requires some context. The letter was a diplomatic thank you of sorts from the Pope, relating that despite their differences, the Emir acted charitably in this manner. The Pope had agreed to Anazir's request that he dispatch a bishop to minister to the Catholics who fell under the jurisdiction of the Muslim leader. Can you imagine that happening today? Gregory also thanks the emir for some gifts, as well as word that he had freed some Christian prisoners as a good-will gesture. In this letter, Pope Gregory VII stated: (emphasis added)

'Almighty God, who wishes that all should be saved and none lost, approves nothing in so much as that after loving Him one should love his fellow man, and that one should not do to others, what one does not want done to oneself. You and we owe this charity to ourselves especially because we believe in and confess one God, admittedly, in a different way, and daily praise and venerate him, the creator of the world and ruler of this world.'

The key Latin phrase (*unum Deum, licet diverso modo*) could be rendered literally as "we believe and confess one God, although, in a diverse manner." To my thinking, in no way did Pope Gregory's letter imply that we worship the same God. In common speech, "same" carries with it a particular meaning, it connotes an identity, one that I do not believe is justified in this case. Call it nit-picking, but as I indicated above, these distinctions are critical. It is one thing to say that Muslims worship "one God" or even "the one God," while quite another to imply thereby that we worship the same God in the same mode or manner. We do not. Muslims can worship one God (the hallmark of any monotheistic religion) while at the same time failing to acknowledge God as a Trinity. The Vatican II document recognizes that, "Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion." (*Nostra Aetate*, #3)

Pope St. Gregory VII was a skilled diplomat; his words are extremely important, but ought to be read against a tense backdrop of geo-political realities. It should also be noted that in less than a generation from the time of this letter, the first Crusade was launched to reclaim the Holy Land— but that's for another Pastor's Page! St. Gregory

VII even proposed in that same letter to send along two aides in hopes of establishing possible commercial ties. His letter is a marvelous glimpse into a tense period of history between the Church and the changing landscape of North Africa in the middle ages. Sound familiar? I have been giving this issue a great deal of thought and prayer as of late. I have much more reading and studying to do, but I suspect this will not be my last word on this subject.

- I was delighted to be invited to participate in a ground-breaking ceremony at Saint Agnes School, my former parish school. Through a transformational gift from John Nasseff and Helene Houle, they broke ground on a brand new Student Activities Center. As wonderful as that is, it is the dual commitment to a solid Catholic atmosphere and rigorous academics that accounts for an increase of 9% in enrollment since last year. Congratulations.
- The Pope offered words of encouragement to a large interreligious gathering in Rome, culminating in a soccer match in Olympic Stadium that included players representing the Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim and Shinto religions. The Pope said the event was “a highly symbolic gesture to show that it is possible to build a culture of encounter and a world of peace, where believers of different religions – preserving their identities ...can live together in harmony and reciprocal respect.”
- Speaking of sports, I will not waste valuable column space making a Minnesota Vikings prediction because I am “out of my league” when it comes to the NFL.
- Scotland is preparing for a September 18 referendum on the question of independence from Great Britain. While the Catholic bishops of Scotland have not taken an official position, they have made it clear that religious freedoms are “absolutely essential to a modern democratic society and we should always be vigilant of those who would seek to limit them.” Actor Sean Connery favors independence, while Scottish Tennis Star Andy Murray has stayed silent as he competes in the U.S. Open in New York.
- Cappuccino and a Kolachi, anyone? I gave two tours of the Cathedral last Sunday– one to a group from Italy and another from Lonsdale. Ours is truly a universal Church!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel

Rector