

Which is the Bridge that unites us and gives Peace to the World?

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Given the theme of the day which deals with peace and the means of establishing it by communicating, I will begin by conveying my greetings to you by using two expressions which, by a fortunate coincidence, rhyme with one another: *Es-Salâmu 'alaykum* and *Pax vobiscum*. This greeting normally constitutes a pledge of peace and the guarantee of complete security against any form of possible aggression. It also offers the advantage of contributing to the happiness of those who address it as well as those who return it, since it is said: Blessed are the "peacemakers" (*makarioi oi éirénopoloï*): for they will be called children of God. (Matthew 5: 9). I can not help recalling in this respect that the word *Islâm* itself is taken from the *salama* root expressing the idea of "peace" that we hear in *Es-Salâmu 'alaykum*.

One can preach profitably in two ways: by good speech and by example. To illustrate this point, I will summarize briefly what may explain why I am honored to be among you today. Based on a *Tariqa*, in other words a Fraternity, founded in the 13th century by Sheikh Abu l-Hasan ash-Shadili, the Sufi community, which I run since 1990, was established by my father in Paris in 1951. As the community expanded, particularly because of the birth of children, it soon needed a larger setting and a healthier environment. My status as a professional beekeeper enabled me to acquire, in 1994, an estate in the countryside, in the south of the city of Dijon, the capital of Burgundy known worldwide for its mustard and its fine wines.

The site that was expected to allow me to develop my professional activity included many buildings, most of them old, which had to be rehabilitated, to create dwellings and a place of worship called a *zawiya*. I discovered at the signing of the purchase contract that this place was historic. This was the place where Robert de Molesme (1029-1111) had founded the great monastic Order of the Cistercians in 1098. I thus found myself on the primitively unhealthy, marshy and woodland, which the first monks cleared and made hospitable to establish their abbey, "oratory" as much as "laboratory", in accordance with the Benedictine motto *orare et laborare* ("to pray and to work"). The original well of the founding Father is still there. As at that time the place was covered with

reeds, the *new monastery* took the name of Abbey of Cîteaux (a *cistel* designating a "reed"). Two years after their arrival, the monks moved their general center of activity two kilometers to the south to benefit from the abundant waters of a river and they assigned the original location, the clay of which was rich in iron, to the work of forging and tiling: the place is still called today *La Forgeotte*. Shortly thereafter, while the few aging and healthless monks suggested that the new Order was doomed to disappear and that it would have been only an episodic return to strict observance of the Monastic Rule of Saint Benedict, arrived a providential savior. With about thirty companions, the one who was later to be called Saint Bernard gave the necessary and decisive impetus to ensure the survival and then the expansion of the Cistercian Order. The latter soon covered Europe and in a few decades included hundreds of monasteries to reach more than 1500 in 1250.

Our arrival in July 1994, which quickly affected more than 150 people, could not go unnoticed. We were no longer in the context of the anonymity of the cities, and very quickly some natives would consider us as Saracens who have returned. Luckily, the monks were our closest neighbors, and since good neighborly relations were of major importance in Islam, this was one of our primary concerns. So I went, with a group of brothers, to knock at the door of the Abbey in order to establish the best possible relationship. Wearing our woolen robes, we were welcomed by Father-Abbot Dom Olivier, who was in the first year of his abbatial office. We thus got acquainted with the monks who themselves were in their usual white uniform. The moment was solemn and it was then that I asked for the protection of the Father-Abbot for our community, evoking the prophetic precedent in this respect. It must be remembered that the apostolic function of the Prophet Muhammad was first attested by Christian monks. On two occasions, and well before his mission, the young Qurayshite Muhammad had been recognized as the expected future Prophet of the Arabs. During a trip to Syria, he was identified as such when he was only twelve years old. It was a monk named Bahira who, versed in the sacred writings and acquainted with certain prophecies, spotted him during his stopover in front of his convent, and who, having interrogated him and having verified certain physical signs on him, was convinced of his future apostolate. The diagnosis was confirmed fifteen years later, during a second trip to the same place, by the monk Nestor who was probably a successor of Bahira. Subsequently, at the advent of the new religion, it was the cousin of his wife, Waraqa ibn Nawfal, who had embraced Christianity, who testified to the authenticity of his elective role. Soon after, when confronted with the persecutions that were multiplying, a first group of Muslims was forced to emigrate from Mecca and found refuge in

Abyssinia (*Ethiopian Empire*) with the Negus (*the Monarch*). Of Christian faith, the latter assured them of his royal protection. One can evaluate, from this simple summary, what the Muslims owe to the Christians of the time!

Accepting my request, the Father-Abbot of Cîteaux, whose benevolence towards us never ceased, accepted generously to watch over the protection of our small community. A friendship was thus sealed and it became even stronger in the course of time. Meetings to share our experiences on our respective community and spiritual lives were organized and became regular. On a monthly basis, we began by exchanging our views on the data of our Sacred Texts, our rites, etc. Then the question of a common prayer soon came up.

Since there was no question of conforming to any form of syncretism, it was agreed to accomplish together a "prayer of the heart" whose silent nature would make it possible to escape any problem of compatibility. Subsequently, the desire for a shared invocation having been manifested, it was necessary to find a text suitable for it. The choice was made for a magnificent prayer by Gregory of Nazianz (329-390) which was perfectly appropriate. Addressed to the one and supreme God, the praise begins with this call: *O Thou Who art beyond all, what else may we rightly call Thee?* It goes on to say: *All things, both the speaking and the speechless, proclaim Thee... To Thee is the prayer of all... O Most-Named, how then shall I address Thee?* Other initiatives were also taken as the ritual of washing the hands and the feet to commemorate the Abrahamic rituals of the Oak of Mamre (cf. Genesis 18:1-10) and the good welcome given to Jesus coming as a stranger (cf. Matthew 25:35). To this last reference and its mention *in extenso*, echoes also a holy hadith (*hadith qudsi*) where, on the Day of Resurrection, God makes this reproach to man: "I was sick and you did not visit Me". The man will inquire: "Oh Lord how would I have visited You when You are the Lord of the Worlds?" He will answer him: "Did you not know that one of My servants was sick? But you did not visit him. And don't you know that if you had visited him, you would have found Me near him?"

If the happy rapprochement between our communities enjoyed a blessed space, it must be said that the time was also, from the beginning, particularly auspicious. On August 20, 1994, the new Burgundian seat of the *Tariqa* was inaugurated on St. Bernard's Day. It turns out that this date marked a rather exceptional moment of conjunction. That year, on the 20th of August, the solar calendar corresponded to the *Mawlid an-Nabi*, that is to say on the anniversary of the Birth of the Prophet on the 12th of the month of *Rabi al-Awwal* of the lunar calendar. The likelihood of such a coincidence is low, given that the year is 365 days and a quarter according to the first calculation and 354 days and a

third according to the second, which results in a lag of approximately 11 days between the two annual cycles and one year roughly every 33 years. What added value to this astonishing and rare conjunction is that it seems to have occurred precisely at the very birth of the Prophet, if one relies on the data of Martin Lings, the author of a biography of the the Prophet (cf. *Le Prophète Muhammad*, chapter 7, p.33, Paris, 1977).

In order for this kind of harmony to exist, so that the ensuing peace can last, it is necessary, above all, that the actors would be people predominantly animated by right intention and goodwill, having in view the interest of God in their work. To be convinced of this, it should only remember the praise transmitted by Saint Luke (2:14) and based on the Vulgate established by St. Jerome: *Gloria in altissimis Deo and in terra pax in hominibus bonae voluntatis* ("Glory To God in the highest heaven and Peace on earth to men of Good Will ").

It is obvious that this communication is too brief to answer correctly the question: How to bridge our divisions and bring peace to the world? Doubtless, it raises more questions than it answers. I hope, however, that it will be seen as a first contribution to the more than ever necessary implementation of constructive meetings for peace.