

## Article

# Pope Francis' Culture of Dialogue as Pathway to Interfaith Encounter: A Special Focus on Islam

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**Abstract:** Pope Francis' leadership has stimulated several debates within the Catholic Church and even in larger segments of the public. One of the most prominently debated issues is the one concerning the relationship with people of different religions and, more specifically, with the world of Islam. Since 2013, the Argentinean pontiff appeared to be unambiguously committed to finding an alternative pathway to the much-publicized category of 'clash of civilisations', which, in the last few decades, has been the reference paradigm in Christian–Muslim relationships. Papal initiatives, gestures and journeys have consistently aimed at a 'culture of dialogue and encounter'. Nevertheless, the present pope's open attitude has encountered severe criticism even inside certain circles of the Catholic world, which have accused him of compromising on theological issues. However, Pope Francis is highly appreciated by leaders of other traditions, including Muslims. In the face of such debate, Bergoglio has often recalled that all his statements and actions are deeply rooted in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. The present article wishes to show how Bergoglio's engagement to establish constructive dialogical rapports with Muslims is an effective way towards the real implementation of the Council while opening avenues for what could be defined as 'interreligious synodality'.

**Keywords:** dialogue; fraternity; identity; synodality; Pope Francis; Islam



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## 1. Introduction: A Road Map for Dialogue

"Interreligious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world, and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities" (Pope Francis 2013a). This sentence, one of the strongest statements we can find in *Evangelii Gaudium* (Pope Francis 2013e), suggests the bearing interfaith dialogue has in Pope Francis' thinking and in his vision of humanity today. Moreover, it reveals a decisive clue for those who wish to grasp the real perspective of the Argentinean pope. Interreligious commitment, in fact, is not only a Christian venture; rather, it crosses the boundaries of the Catholic Church as well as those of any other Church or Christian community. In Pope Francis' perspective, it is a 'duty' for all people who believe, and even for those who claim to have no religious affiliation. *Evangelii Gaudium*, being the first official document of the new papacy, reveals the road map the present pope intended to follow in the years ahead. Yet, already a few days after his election, while addressing a variegated group of representatives of various Christian Churches, of Jewish communities and of different religions, Pope Francis had made clear his vision. On that occasion, he straightforwardly assured the Church's commitment in "promoting friendship and respect between men and women of different religious traditions" (Pope Francis 2013b). It was not just a diplomatic and cordial way of addressing other religious leaders to ensure a good and warm spirit of collaboration. It revealed a very pragmatic and programmatic approach as he clearly listed the main goals for a constructive dialogue among people of communities following different religions.

The responsibility which all of us have for our world, for the whole of creation, which we must love and protect [ . . . ] to benefit the poor, the needy and those who suffer, and to favour justice, promote reconciliation and build peace". (ibid.)

Furthermore, the newly elected pontiff engaged people of different faiths to focus jointly on the commitment to "keep alive in our world the thirst for the absolute". At the same time, he encouraged countering "the dominance of a one-dimensional vision of the human person, a vision which reduces human beings to what they produce and to what they consume: this is one of the most insidious temptations of our time" (ibid.).

A further element in the crucial topic of dialogue—this time considered in a general perspective but nevertheless very much connected with the one among people of different religions—was added only two days later when Pope Francis, following the Vatican protocol for newly elected pontiffs, met all the Ambassadors accredited to the Holy See. On that occasion, after stressing the role of religion as a fundamental element in the present world scene, he clarified that "it is not possible to build bridges between people while forgetting God. But the converse is also true: it is not possible to establish true links with God, while ignoring other people" (Pope Francis 2013b). Consequently, to intensify dialogue among the faithful of different religious traditions is of vital importance. In the broader context of interfaith dialogue, Pope Francis singled out the followers of Islam and those who claim to have no faith. Within a year from his election, in the already mentioned *Evangelii Gaudium*, he devoted two paragraphs to underline the importance of intensifying dialogue among the faithful of different traditions, repeating the same general concern and drawing attention to building positive relations with the followers of Islam. In short, we can argue that, on his occupying St. Peter's Chair, the present pope clearly framed an invitation to dialogue in light of the crucial challenges of the present time (Lefebure 2018, p. 306). Moreover, interfaith dialogue, with special attention to Islam, was not something that he developed during the years of his papacy. The former cardinal of Buenos Aires had interreligious dialogue as a top priority in his agenda already at the beginning of his papal mandate and in the unfolding of the last eight years; he has been timely in grasping signs that suggested how to implement this priority.

The present paper will attempt to examine some aspects of this dimension, giving special attention to dialogue with Islam, which, in all probability, produced the least expected and yet most innovative expression in Pope Francis' pontificate: *The Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* (Pope Francis and al-Tayyeb 2019), often simply referred to as *The Abu Dhabi Declaration*. This charter was co-signed with a very high and internationally acknowledged Muslim authority, Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Ahmed Mohamed Ahmed al-Tayyeb.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Dialogue as a Style

Since the time of John XXIII, Bergoglio is the first cardinal to become pope without having been present at the Vatican Council II (1962–1965). At that time, when bishops of the Catholic Church gathered in Rome around John XXIII, first, and Paul VI, later, Jorge Maria was already a Jesuit but not a priest yet. He was a young teacher in Jesuit institutions in Buenos Aires and other cities of Argentina. Most likely, he had never imagined that his life would have been strongly inspired by the first encyclical letter written and signed by Pope Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam* (Paul VI 1964), the text that truly marked the contents of some of the most decisive documents of the Council: *Unitatis Redintegratio* (Vatican Council II 1964), *Nostra Aetate* (Vatican Council II 1965d), *Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican Council II 1965c), *Dignitatis Humanae* (Vatican Council II 1965b) and *Ad Gentes* (Vatican Council II 1965a). It was in *Ecclesiam Suam* that Paul VI, for the first time in the Catholic world, spoke of what he defined as the "new mental attitude which the Catholic Church must adopt regarding the contemporary world" (Paul VI 1964, n. 58). This new attitude was 'dialogue', which he defined more precisely as an "internal drive of charity which seeks expression in the external gift of charity" (ibid., n. 64). To this new development is devoted the entire third section of the encyclical, where Paul VI suggests that "the Church must enter into

dialogue with the world in which it lives. It has something to say, a message to give, a communication to make" (ibid., n. 65). The Italian pope also described the dialogical style, and, among the many aspects, he spelled out its typical characteristics: clarity, meekness, confidence and prudence. This link with *Ecclesiam Suam*<sup>2</sup>—and to Pope Paul VI, who is the author of the document, handwritten almost without corrections—is vital if we wish to trace back the reasons why dialogue not only has taken a centre stage in Pope Francis' papacy but also, more specifically, has become a true lifestyle.

In fact, the word 'dialogue' can sum up effectively the eight years of the present papacy. From the moment, on 13 March 2013, when he appeared on the main balcony of St. Peter's Basilica façade, the Argentinian pope has commenced an experience of dialogue with those who were in front of him. That evening, he immediately succeeded in establishing a dialogue with all the people who crowded the square and asked them to bless him. In the following days, he continued his dialogue with diplomats, journalists, members of other Christian churches and ecclesial communities and with Jewish people, along with representatives of the main religious traditions. He showed how to respect their sensitiveness as on the occasion when, at the conclusion of his meeting with the journalists and media men and women, instead of imparting his blessing, out of respect for the feelings of those among them who had no faith, preferred to suggest a moment of silence. Later, he was open to dialogue with students, intellectuals, men who had left the priesthood, along with their families, and with women and men who had accused Church personnel of having sexually abused them. Dialogue has become Jorge Maria Bergoglio's style of guiding the Church for which he appointed a group of cardinals from different corners of the globe to discuss how to reform the Roman Curia. He entered into dialogue also with those who live in the peripheries of the world and with outcast or downtrodden communities. Migrants have become some of his favourite partners in dialogue to the point that, before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, he washed the feet of some of them—and one was a Muslim woman—during the Holy Thursday service. He never shied away from establishing a dialogue even with people who have written to him of their sorrows and personal tragedies.<sup>3</sup> Two essential elements of Pope Francis' dialogical approach are silence and listening, which he himself practiced when meeting groups or individuals. He also explained what dialogue is supposed to be, trying to correct wrong ideas and images about them and pleading with people, especially world leaders, to avail themselves of the possibility of dialoguing rather than using violence. In his tireless search for dialogue, he has looked for words, images and gestures that could help people's understanding. He even found a geometrical image—the prism—which helps to explain the richness and conditions of dialogue. Dialogue, in fact, should never aim at uniformity. When it is true, it leads towards unity in diversity, as the prism suggests with its multiple faces.

We are in the epoch of globalization, and we think about what globalization is and what unity would be in the Church: perhaps a sphere, where all points are equidistant from the centre, all equal? No! This is uniformity. And the Holy Spirit doesn't create uniformity! What shape can we find? Let us consider a prism: the prism is unity, but all its parts are different; each has its own peculiarity, its charisma. This is unity in diversity. (Pope Francis 2014c)

These years of Pope Francis' presence at the helm of the Catholic Church have shown that, unlike in past centuries, Christian identity cannot be grasped, understood and deepened by negating 'otherness' of any type. It rather emerges from establishing and keeping a constant mutual relationship of friendship with the 'other', accepted in his or her diversity and, therefore, uniqueness (Salvarani 2016, p. 30).

### 3. Different Levels of Dialogue in Pope Francis

The dialogical approach in and by the present pontiff finds its expression at different levels. It is worth examining them, taking into account two more elements. First, we should never underestimate the fact that the present pope is not a European and, although his culture and faith upbringing have deep roots in the Italian origins of his family,<sup>4</sup> the South American perceptivity has clearly shaped his personality and his theology. His way of speaking, for instance, is full of images that have little to do with the typical western, European imagery.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, in his personality, doing is far more important than speaking. An action or a gesture is able to convey contents and meanings much more effectively than a sentence that expresses a way of thinking or an intellectual perspective, which could be understood only by a few people. This does not imply that Pope Francis runs short of deep theological thinking as some seem to argue when they state that his theology is weak. On the contrary, he masters an articulated theological and philosophical thought that is strongly rooted in his own pastoral experience and takes into account people's spirit and perception of reality. In fact, the so-called 'theology of people' was a decisive source of inspiration and an important factor in his formation.<sup>6</sup> In other words, for Bergoglio, action and thought are always deeply interconnected, but the second has to be rooted in the first and generally never precedes it. His vision in this regard can be better grasped and appreciated at three levels: actions, words and thought.

#### 3.1. *Interreligious Dialogue in Pope Francis' Gestures*

As already briefly mentioned, events, actions and gestures are basic factors for extra-European cultures, which have the tendency to place action before reasoning and narratives based on facts—often personal life-experiences—before concepts. In this perspective, reflection does happen but because of a certain action or a series of actions, which offer the matter on which to reflect. Accordingly, more often than not, Pope Francis clearly shows his thinking through actions and events. A significant example may be offered by his concepts of the 'peripheries' of the Church and of the Church as a 'field hospital'. At the beginning of his pontificate, for many observers and Churchmen and -women, both expressions sounded new and creative yet intriguing. The new Pope himself never explained them through a reasoning. Rather, he progressively clarified them through his actions. In fact, his first trip outside Rome was to Lampedusa, an almost unknown tiny island in the Mediterranean Sea, which has become famous only in the last decade, being the arrival point of thousands of migrants coming from North Africa and trying to reach Europe. Lampedusa is a true periphery not only of the Catholic Church but also of the society at large. Other such places—such as Lesbos, in Greece, and Ciudad Juárez at the Mexican–American border—followed as 'peripheries' visited by Pope Francis. The latest confirmation and, probably, the strongest sign of this option for the 'peripheries' and his appreciation and support for the suffering Churches came with his trip to Iraq, where he was not embarrassed to hold events and celebrations against the backdrop of bullet-ridden walls and among debris of destroyed cities. This scenario dramatically and sharply contrasted with the elegant and elaborate stages traditionally built and assembled for hosting papal visits and events in other parts of the world. These gestures helped to make clear for everyone the ecclesiological meaning and dimension that 'peripheries' and the Church as a 'field hospital' have for the present South-American pope.

The same holds true for his attitude toward interreligious or intercultural dialogue. Pope Francis chose to dialogue with people, irrespective of their cultures and religions. Many of the migrants and the people he listened to during his trips were Muslims. In the Republic of Central Africa, he not only paid a visit to a local imam, Kobine Layama, and to the Muslim community but also went on, crossing the borders of Christian and Muslim areas of Bangui, and he entered the local mosque. Later, he invited the imam on board of his car in order to show the crowd and country leaders how Muslims and Christians can be together and friends. In Bangladesh, he spoke to some representatives of the Rohingya people who suffered rejection by Myanmar and Bangladesh and found

themselves at the centre of international contention, which deprived them of a land to reside. Theirs, as many others, is a truly humanitarian crisis. In Sri Lanka, the Pope allowed a local Hindu *swamy* to put a saffron-coloured shawl around his shoulders as a sign of respect and acknowledgement of moral authority. In the heart of Santa Marta, his residence, the author of this article witnessed him doing something similar, when, at the end of a Buddhist–Christian meeting, while greeting all the participants, he accepted garlands from some Buddhist monks. It was not a religious symbol or ritual but a sign of moral and religious esteem. Often, these gestures have encountered bitter criticism in some Catholic and Christian circles, which accuse Pope Francis of allowing ‘pagan’ symbols and rituals in the Church. In this connection, the most evident and talked-about happenings were the dances performed inside St. Peter’s Basilica by some Amazonia indigenous people on the occasion of the Synod, which was focused on the issue of their land being destroyed by international financial and economic interests.

All these events—and many more could be mentioned—are instances of a dialogue of life, characterized by Pope Francis’ openness to welcome the religious and cultural ‘other’, whom he appreciates for his or her religious richness and cultural background. They are all gestures that show his willingness to build bridges and to create an atmosphere of trust that drives away the temptation of both syncretism and proselytism in order to contribute to a culture of genuine friendship and encounter. They are actions that remain as icons speaking to people’s mind and heart much more effectively than documents and statements. The event that, in all probability, carried the strongest meaning and seems to be destined to carry long-lasting consequences, is what happened in Abu Dhabi in mid-February 2019. It was the first time that a pope visited the Arabic Peninsula, the heartland of Islam. Pope Francis met a committee of high-ranking dignitaries of the Muslim world—the *Muslim Council for Elders*<sup>7</sup>—and attended an interreligious conference focussing on peace, where he addressed the audience along with Ahmad al-Tayyeb, Grand Imam of al-Azhar in Cairo. At the end, the two religious authorities co-signed the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, something that never happened before. There was a great deal of body language involved in the different moments of this visit: the pope walking hand in hand with the Grand Imam and local Prince and other evident signs of warmth (hugging and hand-shaking).

Finally, among the great signs of his commitment to dialogue, we have the event at the Plain of Ur in 2021. That simple ceremony meant to remind the common origin in Abraham of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The image of the big tent raised for the occasion in the middle of the desert, where Pope Francis prayed along with Muslims in a land devastated by recent destructions inflicted by Daesh, remains as an icon of peace and brotherly understanding among people who claim to have a common origin in father Abraham. Significantly, on the way to Ur, the pope paid a visit to Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Al-Husayni Al-Sistani in Najaf. There was no official news about the discussions that took place during the meeting, but the few photographs that have been published evoke an iconic image: a warm first official meeting of Pope Francis with one of Shia’s highest authorities.

The examples mentioned so far—and many more could be mentioned—are precious for two reasons. On the one hand, they were helpful to allow Pope Francis to establish a close relationship with the people he met, and they show to others how relevant for him the engagement to build links among people and communities is. All this helped leaders and the faithful of other traditions to be open to the pope’s words, to his invitations, while erasing fear and scepticism, especially about the possibility of a hidden agenda, such as proselytism. On the other hand, through his gestures, Pope Francis has given a meaning and explanation to some of his words addressed within the Catholic Church, inviting the people of God to open up towards those who are different, especially from the cultural and religious viewpoint. In fact, Pope Francis views the grace of God that Christians experience in Jesus Christ nurturing the life of people who follow other religious paths. That is why he believes that Christians can learn from other traditions (Lefebure 2018, p. 307).



The same Spirit everywhere brings forth various forms of practical wisdom, which help people to bear suffering and to live in greater peace and harmony. As Christians, we can also benefit from these treasures built up over many centuries, which can help us better to live our own beliefs. (Pope Francis 2013a, n. 254)

### 3.2. Interreligious Dialogue in Pope Francis' Words

Pope Francis spoke and continues to speak extensively about dialogue. Most probably, his gestures, though they have carried great meaning in themselves, would have been less powerful if not substantiated and supported by his words. Moreover, dialogue has not been a rare or occasional topic in his messages, speeches and official documents. On the contrary, we can well define it as a 'constant', as we have already seen, from the very beginning of his mandate. It may be interesting to pay special attention to some of the words or definitions Bergoglio uses in this regard. He himself coined some of them that have entered the dictionary of dialogue. Moreover, his approach and the way of using them enriched and further articulated others.

'Journey' is the first word that can be singled out. Pope Bergoglio often uses it, although it is a term that has long been associated with dialogue. He has mentioned it interchangeably with 'pilgrimage', and both—journey and pilgrimage—are key terms in dialogue. Already, at the conclusion of his first encounter with people after his election, in St Peter's square, he said: "And now, we take up this journey: Bishop and people" (Pope Francis 2013f). Since then, Pope Francis has very often described 'dialogue' with these two nouns, practically using them as synonyms. A significant example is found in the words he addressed to the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem.

In our earthly pilgrimage, we are not alone. We cross paths with other faithful; at times we share with them a stretch of the road and at other times we experience with them a moment of rest which refreshes us. Such is our meeting today, for which I am particularly grateful . . . We are experiencing a fraternal dialogue and exchange which are able to restore us and offer us new strength to confront the common challenges before us. (Pope Francis 2014e)

An important frequent addition to these two terms is the adverb 'together'. This combination—journey together and pilgrimage together—makes his definition of dialogue as a 'journey together', where this dimension of *togetherness* assures a communitarian dimension to the dialogical experience, which has to be mutual in order to be true. A significant example is the statement made in Cairo.

Precisely in the field of dialogue, particularly interreligious dialogue, we are constantly called to walk together, in the conviction that the future also depends on the encounter of religions and cultures. (Pope Francis 2017b)

Another term deeply linked to the first one is the 'way', a word that is very relevant in the context of religions. It is well known how, initially, Christianity was defined with this term in Antioch for the first time, before Jesus' followers could be called 'Christians'. At the same time, we also have to acknowledge that Oriental religions recognize themselves in this definition: for instance, Taoism ('tao' means 'way') and Hinduism propose different 'marga' (way) as ways to realisation. Bergoglio, while dialoguing with Rabbi Abraham Skorka in Buenos Aires, had commented that each person, in his or her personal experience of God, has to start journeying in search for Him. The then cardinal of Buenos Aires admitted that there might be different paths to reach God, through suffering, joys, light and darkness (Bergoglio and Skorka 2013, p. 13).

'Culture of encounter' is another definition—this time a phrase revealing a concept—part of Bergoglio's dictionary in the context of interreligious and intercultural dialogue. Often, it is associated with similar formulas: 'culture of proximity' or 'culture of closeness'. All these are Bergoglio's neologisms,<sup>8</sup> which apply, even if not exclusively, to the context of dialogue among people of different faith traditions. For instance, Pope Francis spoke about this 'culture of encounter' when he addressed the academic world.

The university is a place where the culture of closeness develops, a culture of closeness. This is a proposal: a culture of closeness. Isolation and withdrawing into one's own interests are never the way to restore hope and bring about a renewal. Rather, it is closeness; it is the culture of encounter. Isolation, no. Closeness, yes. Culture clash, no; culture of encounter, yes. (Pope Francis 2013a)

A fourth term that often emerges in Pope Francis' vocabulary in dialogical contexts is '*silence*', a word that is often coupled with '*listening*'. In this respect, a text, which is highly significant in the context of dialogue, is the one the pope addressed, years ago, to the participants of an international conference organised by the *Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies*, PISAI.

In recent years, despite some misunderstandings and difficulties, progress has been made in interreligious dialogue, and with the Islamic faithful. *Listening* is essential for this. It is not only a *necessary condition* in a process of mutual comprehension and peaceful coexistence, but is also a *pedagogical duty* in order to be able to "acknowledge the values of others, appreciate the concerns underlying their demands and shed light on shared beliefs". (Pope Francis 2014a)

A couple of years later, while meeting some imams, leaders of the Muslim community in England, he focussed again his very short address on this theme of '*listening*' and '*silence*'. These words appeared to be apt in a moment when, because of several terrorist attacks in Western Europe and England, the dispute against Islam was so vociferous, and, at times, violent, that dialogue appeared to be almost impossible.

I like to think that the most important work that we have to do today, among us, in humanity, is the work "of listening": listening to each other. Listening to each other, without rushing to give a response. Welcoming the words of a brother, of a sister, and then thinking to offer my own . . . When people have this capacity for listening, they speak with a low, calm voice . . . Instead, when they do not have it, they speak loudly; they even shout . . . In addition, when you listen and you speak, you are already on the right path. (Pope Francis 2017a)

We can find a further contribution to the dictionary of dialogue by Pope Francis in his speech at the *Founder Memorial* in Abu Dhabi, minutes before he and the Grand Imam al-Tayyeb signed the *Document on Human Fraternity: 'know your brother or sister'* (Pope Francis 2019).

Alongside the famous ancient maxim "*know yourself*", we must uphold "*know your brother or sister*": their history, their culture and their faith, because there is no genuine self-knowledge without the other. As human beings, and even more so as brothers and sisters, let us remind each other that nothing of what is human can remain foreign to us. It is important for the future to form open identities capable of overcoming the temptation to turn in on oneself and become rigid. (ibid.)

Finally, we have to underline how, in the context of dialogue, the present pope has given a new meaning and a very central place to the word '*fraternity*'. Bergoglio is not the first one to use this word. The term has a long history, both in the socio-political field—it is one of the three main goals of the French revolution and, as someone says, the most forgotten of the three<sup>9</sup>—and in the religious, especially in the Christian world. For sure, Pope Francis, by putting forward once again the centrality of the common belonging of all human beings to the same family, has given a great contribution to its rediscovery and appreciation. At the same time, he has made '*fraternity*' a central category of his message, as demonstrated by the Encyclical Letter "*Fratelli Tutti*" (Pope Francis 2020), which deepens '*fraternity*' from a different perspective and with a keen and innovative reading in today's context. It is surely of great significance that, at the end of the document, among those he mentioned as sources of inspiration for the latest Encyclical Letter, he names also Mahatma

Gandhi, a Hindu and a pioneer in the venture of dialogue among the faithful of different traditions.

### 3.3. *Interreligious Dialogue in Pope Francis' Thoughts*

At this point, let us turn to consider the conceptual dimension of intercultural and interreligious dialogue in Bergoglio's approach. The focus will be on proposing some elements that appear to be typical of his perspective: a 'culture of dialogue', dialogue as a 'duty for all' and need for a clear identity, empathy, 'incomplete thinking and fraternity'. In order to explore these concepts, we need to take into account that they have a deep connection with his South-American cultural background and his Jesuit formation.

#### 3.3.1. A Strategic View: Building a Culture of Dialogue

Already, Paul VI had a clear strategic view of dialogue among people of different cultures and religions. In his opinion, dialogue was never an end in itself, nor was it ever just an aimless exercise. For Montini, who deserves the priceless merit of having understood ahead of time the centrality that dialogue among people of different traditions was destined to have, it was clear that the goal of dialogue is one of contributing to build and to preserve peace.

We feel impelled to mention our cherished hope that this intention of Ours of holding a dialogue and of developing it under all the various and changing aspects which it presents, may assist the cause of peace among men . . . The mere fact that we are embarking upon a disinterested, objective and sincere dialogue is a circumstance in favour of a free and honorable peace. It positively excludes all pretence, rivalry, deceit and betrayal. It brands wars of aggression, imperialism, and domination as criminal and catastrophic. It necessarily brings men together on every level . . . It strives to inspire in every institution and in every soul the understanding and love of peace and the duty to preserve it. (Paul VI 1964, n. 106)

Pope John Paul II maintained and further developed the same perspective. The Polish pope, in the midst of the Cold War, with a serious and concrete danger of a nuclear conflagration, sensed that religious leaders could have a key role as promoters of peace and dialogue. This prophetic view constituted the background of the Day of Prayer for Peace he convened in Assisi on 27 October 1986, as Wojtyla himself explained on that day.

For the first time in history, we have come together from everywhere, Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities, and World Religions, in this sacred place dedicated to Saint Francis, to witness before the world, each according to his own conviction, about the transcendent quality of peace . . . Either we learn to walk together in peace and harmony, or we drift apart and ruin others and ourselves. (John Paul II 1986b)

He repeated similar moments in the 1990s, during the Balkans war, which carried strong ethnic and religious components, and again in the months following the attack and destruction of the Twin Towers that represented the climax of the terroristic strategy masterminded and implemented by several groups in the name of Islam. Bergoglio's election came in the midst of a chaotic world scenario made up of political tensions at the national and international level, with terrorist attacks repeatedly claiming innocent lives in the name of an apparent religious motivation. The new pope defined the overall world precarious unbalance as a "piecemeal third world war" (Pope Francis 2015a), a very effective formula coined by him. This was, according to Pope Francis' reading, the unavoidable result of a much sought-after and pursued culture of hatred, discrimination and violence. That is why, from the very beginning of his pontificate, the Argentinean pope tried to counteract all this through what, in turn, he called 'culture of encounter', 'culture of friendship', 'culture of dialogue', 'culture of proximity/closeness'. In Pope Francis' perception, a sharp paradigmatic shift is required. This new culture, in fact, must replace all those that dominate the present world-scene without keeping the 'person'—man and



woman—and creation at the centre of their interests. His idea of a ‘culture of peace’—or of ‘dialogue’ or of ‘encounter’ or of ‘friendship’—is fundamental for a sustainable economy, for a new geopolitical order and for an eco-friendly future. It is, therefore, an all-compassing category that involves humanity at different levels.

This is a proposal: a culture of closeness. Isolation and withdrawing into one’s own interests are never the way to restore hope and bring about a renewal. Rather, it is closeness, it is the culture of encounter. Isolation, no. Closeness, yes. Culture clash, no; culture of encounter, yes . . . this culture which does not indiscriminately level out differences and plurality—this is one of the risks of globalization—nor does it take them to the extreme, causing them to become causes of conflict. Rather, it opens to constructive dialogue. (Pope Francis 2013a)

In order to achieve this new type of culture, certain elements are required, and they represent the pillars of Bergoglio’s thinking regarding dialogue.

### 3.3.2. Dialogue, a Duty for All

As mentioned at the opening of this article, the fourth section of *Evangelii Gaudium* opens with a strong statement voicing Pope Francis’ firm conviction that “interreligious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world, and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities” (ibid.).<sup>10</sup> On the one hand, as a general consideration, we can acknowledge that such a statement shows to what extent the magisterium has evolved even from the time of the publication of *Nostra Aetate*. On the other, we need to put this statement in context as the world situation has changed sharply since the mid-1960s.

In fact, among the many developments after the end of the ‘Cold War’, at the closing of the second-last decade of the past century, the world has witnessed a progressive return of religions—not only of religion as a category—into the public sphere. This return has represented an absolute surprise to many who were strongly convinced that religion was on the way out of the public scene of life, especially in Europe and in some other parts of the Western world. The well-known political scientist Peter Berger (2014), for instance, after having argued for decades that modernity implies an unavoidable decline of religion, had to admit his mistake and started speaking of a process of de-secularization of the world.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, Samuel Huntington’s successful idea of ‘clash of civilisations’ made its appearance (Huntington 1996). The American historian’s perspective expected religion to play a decisive role in the new panorama, more as a problem than as a solution. The events of 9/11, the climax and the most tragic of a series of terrorist attacks with a religious connotation, seemed to have dramatically confirmed Huntington’s theory, which was further proved right by a constant growth of politicisation of religions and new acts of violence, apparently perpetrated in the name of religious traditions. In the context where religions seemed to be part of—or, even worse, the cause of—the problem, dialogue emerged more and more as a key word. Nevertheless, the approach towards it has seen contrasting positions: some were, in fact, in favour of the dialogical attitude while, for many, it appeared to be a naïve approach or an inflated concept. For sure, no one had ever had the courage to define it as a ‘duty’ for believers as well as people who have no faith.

However, in Pope Francis’ perspective, the statement of *Evangelii Gaudium* n. 250 in no way was an isolated episode. In the months following its first publication, the Pope showed that he possesses a clear vision of dialogue as a pivotal element towards creating the right conditions for peace by softening tensions and facilitating conciliatory processes in what he called, as we have already mentioned, “a true world war fought piecemeal” (Pope Francis 2015a).

### 3.3.3. Dialogue, a Way to Discover and Strengthen One's Own Identity

Since the time of the publication of *Nostra Aetate*, the Catholic Church has always strongly recommended the need for clear identities in order to ensure a fruitful dialogue. Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI have often underlined this aspect, which represents an unavoidable condition for dialogue among people of different cultures and religions. Pope Francis too has repeatedly come back to this point, underlining how identity is a foundational condition without which it may be even dangerous to venture into dialogue. “It is always worth remembering, however, that for dialogue to be authentic and effective, it presupposes a solid identity: without an established identity, dialogue is of no use or even harmful” (Pope Francis 2015d). Bergoglio has been always convinced that both partners need to be well grounded in a full and forthright presentation of their respective convictions. As dialogue progresses, certainly, this process will accentuate how varied the different beliefs, traditions and practices are. Still, the more the dialoguing protagonists are honest in presenting their convictions, the more they will be able to see what their cultures and religions hold in common. This will open wide new avenues for mutual esteem, cooperation and friendship (Pope Francis 2015b).

We cannot engage in real dialogue unless we are conscious of our own identity. We can't dialogue, we can't start dialoguing from nothing, from zero, from a foggy sense of who we are. Nor can there be authentic dialogue unless we are capable of opening our minds and hearts, in empathy and sincere receptivity, to those with whom we speak . . . A clear sense of one's own identity and a capacity for empathy are thus the point of departure for all dialogue. (Pope Francis 2015c)

Today, we live in a world where globalisation tends to homogenise differences. In this context, religions and cultures tend to succumb to the temptation of selling goods in order to answer only the market appeal. That is why it becomes crucial—as individuals and communities—to be aware of and to maintain one's own identity. The protagonists of dialogue require what Pope Francis defines as the “the duty of identity”, which needs to converge constantly towards “the courage of the otherness” (Pope Francis 2017b). Only in doing this will everyone and every community succeed in not renouncing their richness and uniqueness, which can be offered to the ‘other’. In fact, in order to meet positively those who are different from us and from our own people and groups, differences cannot be ignored or, even worse, flattened. As in the prism, every face has a contribution to make to the overall shape of the object.

### 3.3.4. ‘Incomplete Thinking’, a Key Dialogical Awareness

The concept of ‘incomplete thinking’ is, most probably, the main original novelty of Bergoglio's perspective. We can trace the roots of it in his Jesuit formation. The confirmation comes from the fact that he speaks about this category almost exclusively while conversing with groups of Jesuits (Spadaro 2013). ‘Incomplete thinking’ calls for a way of looking at and reflecting on reality that has to be open, flexible, creative, generous and never tired of searching (Accattoli 2017). It is an attitude that calls for a horizon, which cannot be reached, making the genuine searcher ceaselessly surprised by new discoveries and, at the same time, restless in front of an inner abyss (Pope Francis 2014d). All this calls for ‘creativity’, another category that is close to Pope Francis and explains much of what we have seen as far as his gestures and terms are concerned. The field of dialogue needs creativity as it is hard to foresee how things and processes may progress and develop. The dialogical process involves at all times a mysterious dimension and, therefore, only at the end of the dialogical experience can the partners achieve understanding and discovery. Moreover, ‘incomplete thinking’ is a category that is crucial in the search for Truth, which is very much part of interreligious and intercultural dialogue. Already, Pope Benedict XVI had advised ‘how not to possess the Truth’, with great courage and clarity, a few days before leaving the Vatican: “We do not possess the truth, the truth possesses us” (Benedict XVI 2012). Pope Francis fully inherits this approach when, soon after his election, in a written

dialogue with an Italian journalist, he argues that “rather than ourselves possessing truth, it is truth which embraces and possesses us” (Pope Francis 2013c). This implies that we all need humility of heart, which makes us capable of recognizing that no one can be the master or the owner of the Truth (Pope Francis 2013a). Moreover, the search for Truth can never be a lonely search as “Truth, according to the Christian faith, is the love of God for us in Jesus Christ. Therefore, truth is a relationship . . . truth, being completely one with love, demands humility and an openness to be sought, received and expressed” (Pope Francis 2013c).

### 3.3.5. Empathy as a Basic Dialogical Attitude

To the centrality of identity and the necessity of the awareness of possessing an ‘incomplete thinking’, Pope Francis adds ‘empathy’ as a basic attitude for making the process of dialogue effective. The identity the present pope mentions has nothing of the rigidity that this term often carries, almost implying that to be aware and preserve one’s own roots means to opt for a defensive attitude against the ‘otherness’. The preservation of one’s identity is, in pope Francis’ understanding, the condition for offering the ‘other’ the uniqueness that one has and, at the same time, for accepting the other’s as a gift. This process requires an attitude of openness facilitated by the effort of fully understanding the other side of the process. Here lies the value of empathy that, as the Greek root suggests, allows each partner involved in dialogue to open up to the other while fully welcoming his or her way of thinking, of believing and of living. As suggested already in 1986 by Frederick Whaling, it is necessary to try to know the other’s religion or culture by penetrating the sense of what it means for that other to *be* a Hindu, or a Muslim or a Buddhist. It is a matter of looking at the world from the other’s viewpoint (Whaling 1986, pp. 130–31).

Pope Francis explained this process in a most effective form in the course of a speech addressed to the Asian bishops in Seoul.

Finally, together with a clear sense of our own Christian identity, authentic dialogue also demands a capacity for empathy. For dialogue to take place there has to be this empathy. We are challenged to listen not only to the words, which others speak, but to the unspoken communication of their experiences, their hopes and aspirations, their struggles and their deepest concerns. Such empathy must . . . lead us to see others as brothers and sisters, and to “hear”, in and beyond their words and actions, what their hearts wish to communicate. In this sense, dialogue demands of us a truly contemplative spirit of openness and receptivity to the other. I cannot engage in dialogue if I am closed to others. Openness? Even more: acceptance! Come to my house, enter my heart. My heart welcomes you. It wants to hear you. (Pope Francis 2014b)

In synthesis, the capacity for an empathic approach enables a truly human dialogue in which words, ideas and questions arise from an experience of fraternity and shared humanity. In fact, the climax of a true empathy is to reach the point of fully understanding as my own the suffering and the pain of the other. “May we learn to understand the sufferings of others?” said Pope Francis, on the occasion of his visit to the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem in 2014. This is not only a catch phrase. It carries—along with the whole concept of ‘empathy’—a theological and anthropological dimension and approach that has its roots in the common Father who has created all men and women as his children (ibid.).

### 3.3.6. Fraternity and ‘Mercy’—Central Categories for Dialogue

Finally, we cannot fully understand and appreciate Pope Francis’ commitment to interreligious dialogue without the categories of ‘mercy’ and ‘fraternity’, to which he has devoted his last Encyclical Letter.

As the purpose of this paper is also that of underlining dialogue between Christians and Muslims, it may be significant to mention the value of mercy, which is very central in Bergoglio's teaching, even before he became Pope Francis. In fact, he started speaking of 'mercy' and 'compassion' soon after his election, inviting the whole Church to rediscover this dimension. Mercy is so central in his approach to God and to men and women that, in 2015, he called the whole Church to celebrate a Jubilee Year of Mercy. In his papal bull proclaiming the yearlong event, he underlined the need for constantly contemplating the mystery of mercy that, apart from being the wellspring of joy, serenity and peace, is a "supreme act by which God comes to meet us". That is why, in his understanding, mercy is "the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life" (Pope Francis 2015d, n. 2).

Moreover, mercy and compassion are the foundation for fraternity, which is the central category of Pope Francis' thinking, not only in interfaith dialogue but also his priority issues: the care of creation and the urgent and impelling necessity for economic and financial justice in the world. This strong link emerges with clear evidence from the centrality the parable of the Good Samaritan has in *Fratelli tutti*. The episode is a significant image of the exercise of mercy and of the idea that we are all children of the same Father, God.

There is an aspect of mercy that goes beyond the confines of the Church. It relates us to Judaism and Islam, both of which consider mercy to be one of God's most important attributes. Israel was the first to receive this revelation, which continues in history as the source of an inexhaustible richness meant to be shared with all mankind . . . The pages of the Old Testament are steeped in mercy . . . Among the privileged names that Islam attributes to the Creator are "Merciful and Kind". This invocation is often on the lips of faithful Muslims who feel themselves accompanied and sustained by mercy in their daily weakness. (ibid., n. 23)

The centrality of mercy in Bergoglio's perspective represents an important point of contact with the Islamic tradition (Lefebure 2018, p. 314). The confirmation comes from the appreciation by a number of Muslim leaders and intellectuals. Significantly, the Pakistani British scholar, Amineh A. Hoti, speaking about Pope Francis, dwells on the attention he pays to the value and practice of mercy. In fact, acts of compassion and mercy have characterized the Prophet's life, and Pope Francis, by performing some of them, helps Muslims to connect to their own faith (Hoti 2018, p. 165). Hoti significantly affirms: "my faith, Islam in line with the Abrahamic faiths, taught me compassion, mercy and an emphasis on humanity . . . It is this focus on humanity that makes Pope Francis special" (ibid., p. 147). Moreover, the Indian British scholar Ataullah Siddiqui seems to be on the same line of understanding when, without mentioning the words 'mercy' and 'fraternity', he writes in the same spirit.

Our relationship is an interconnected relationship to our fellow human beings and to our environment . . . to reach the Most High, one must go through the empathies, the pain and the suffering of the people, as well as the joy and happiness of his creation around us. In doing so we recognize the other and our unique ability to relate to the others and so find meaning, security, and mutual assistance. (Siddiqui 2018, pp. 169–70)

It is in this perspective that we come to the concluding section of this study, in which we will examine the relationship between Pope Francis and Islam.

#### 4. Pope Francis and Islam

Jorge Maria Bergoglio comes from the continent where Islam has the lowest number of followers. Argentina counts around half a million Muslims, and their presence is traditionally less felt than that of the Jewish community. However, the former cardinal of Buenos Aires established a friendly relationship with Omar Abboud, former General Secretary of the Argentinean Islam Centre and, in general, he was perceived as a 'pro-

dialogue’ cardinal by the Muslim leaders, who confirm that “he always showed himself as a friend of the Islamic community” (Lefebure 2018, p. 306).

#### 4.1. *Christian–Muslim Dialogue Not a Smooth Path*

Before going further in exploring Pope Francis’ attitude and experiences of dialogue with the Muslim world, it may be significant to examine the background against which Bergoglio’s contribution made its appearance in 2013. In fact, in the previous years, the journey in this specific context of dialogue had been far from simple and smooth. The Regensburg incident, which had made Benedict XVI an unintentional protagonist, was still rather fresh. Moreover, the unfortunate quotation by the German Pope was accompanied by statements regarding religious freedom for Christians in Muslim nations, which were taken as interference in the internal national matters of some countries, such as Egypt. As a result, the relationship between the al-Azhar of Cairo and the Holy See was almost frozen. In addition, other Muslim institutions and leaders slowed down in their commitment of dialogue with the Catholic Church. Since his election, Pope Francis has promoted a discrete but progressive diplomacy on several fronts. First of all, he visited countries with a majority Muslim population—Jordan (2014), Turkey (2014), Albania (2014), Bosnia Herzegovina (2015), Azerbaijan (2016), Egypt (2017), Morocco (2019) and Iraq (2021)—and among them, for the first time, he touched the ground of the Arabian peninsula in Abu Dhabi (2019). During these visits, he met with local imams and sheikhs, entire groups of religious leaders or students on the way to qualify as future imams (for Europe), such as in Morocco. He entered mosques for moments of great spiritual intensity. As already mentioned, he chose to wash the feet of a Muslim woman during the Holy Week celebrations, and he welcomed to the Vatican several Muslim groups and authorities. We cannot forget four imams from England, who travelled to Rome a few weeks after a bloody terrorist attack had targeted London. More recently, during his trip to Iraq, on the way to the plain of Ur, he paid a visit to Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Husayni al-Sistani, one of the leading spiritual leaders of Iraqi Shia Muslims and one of the most senior scholars in Shia Islam. With this gesture, he sent a clear message to this minority portion of Muslims that he is not interested in building a relationship and understanding only with Sunnis. To these gestures, we have to add many phrases, which Pope Francis addressed to ‘Muslim sisters and brothers’ over the years. Probably, the most surprising were the ones he spoke at the end of the *Angelus* on Sunday 11 August 2013, when he invited all people present in St. Peter’s Square to remember the end of the period of fasting of Ramadan, which Muslims were concluding on that day.

I would like to greet the Muslims of the whole world, our brothers and sisters, who recently celebrated the end of the month of Ramadan, dedicated in a special way to fasting, prayer and almsgiving. As I wrote in my message for this occasion, I hope that all Christians and Muslims will work to promote mutual respect especially through the education of the new generations. (Pope Francis 2013d)

At the same time, he carefully and tactfully committed to rethread the relationship with al-Azhar Mosque and University, which, among the internal problems Islam is experiencing, remains somehow a reference point for a good segment of Sunni Muslims. Several Vatican offices, such as the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, discretely accompanied and supported his personal courageous initiatives.

An encouraging sign from the Muslim side came when, in May 2016, at the pope’s invitation, the Grand Imam al-Tayyeb travelled to the Vatican. After meeting Pope Francis, the Sheik’s comment was prudent but significant: “Let us resume the path of dialogue and hope that it will be better than it was before” (al-Tayyeb 2016). His response to Francis’ welcoming gesture was not long in coming. In 2017, the Grand Imam welcomed Pope Francis in Cairo, inviting him to an International Peace Conference. The result of this process was evident, two years later, when, at Abu Dhabi, the Pope and the Grand Imam made history by co-signing a common statement: *The Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*.<sup>12</sup> It was the first time that a Pope signed a document along



with another religious leader and authority. In brief, gestures, words and documents accompanied the dialogue the Argentinean pope proposed and pursued with Islam and its followers. At the same time, a deep theology has constantly represented the solid platform on which to build from this mutual encounter.

#### 4.2. Christian Theological Foundation for Dialogue with Islam

The ground of this theological approach is the one that *Nostra Aetate* indicated at the end of the Vatican Council.

The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honour Mary, His virgin Mother; at times, they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the Day of Judgment . . . Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting. (Vatican Council II 1965d, n. 3)

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis dedicates two fundamental paragraphs—nn. 252–53—to this aspect. On the one hand, Francis shows himself to be well aware of the complex historical phase that Islam is going through at the internal level, with growing tensions between Sunnis and Shias, and on the international level where Islam is widely considered as a source of violence and political imbalance. Moreover, many—though not all—of the migrants who reach the shores of Europe or of other countries are Muslims. This has provoked a sharp—and, for some Church leaders, worrisome—rise of Muslims’ presence in many traditionally Christian countries. Many in the Western Christian world, even in Catholic circles, fear an Islamic strategic invasion for the replacement of Christianity. Against this complex and volatile situation, the pope underlines that “we must never forget that they [Muslims] profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, who will judge humanity on the last day” (Pope Francis 2013a, n. 251). In tune with *Nostra Aetate*, he proposes an appreciation of some of the theological tenets of Islam to the point of inviting Christians to look at Muslims not simply from a stereotyped perspective.

The sacred writings of Islam have retained some Christian teachings; Jesus and Mary receive profound veneration and it is admirable to see how Muslims both young and old, men and women, make time for daily prayer and faithfully take part in religious services. Many of them also have a deep conviction that their life, in its entirety, is from God and for God. They also acknowledge the need to respond to God with an ethical commitment and with mercy towards those most in need. (ibid., n. 252)

At the same time, Pope Francis does not leave any room for dangerous compromise or absurd naïveté. He rather calls for a sense of identity on both sides and, from a more social and political angle, asks for mutual respect and freedom of worship for Muslims moving to traditional Christian countries and for Christians living in the midst of a Muslim majority.

We Christians should embrace with affection and respect Muslim immigrants to our countries in the same way that we hope and ask to be received and respected in countries of Islamic tradition. I ask and I humbly entreat those countries to grant Christians freedom to worship and to practice their faith, in light of the freedom, which followers of Islam enjoy in Western countries! (ibid., n. 253)

In the end comes the invitation for everyone to avoid dangerous generalisations. The papal document reminds everyone to acknowledge that “authentic Islam and the proper reading of the Koran are opposed to every form of violence” (ibid.). In summary, we can argue that these parts of *Evangelii Gaudium* present a road map of the pope’s perspective regarding relationships between Christians and Muslims.

More recently, special significance has to be given to the trip to Iraq, which offered Pope Francis the possibility of celebrating a meeting in the Plain of Ur, “where faith was born” (Pope Francis 2021). His intention was evident. From the land of Abraham, he wished to affirm that “God is merciful and that the greatest blasphemy is to profane his name by hating our brothers and sisters” (ibid.). This awareness of enjoying a common ground, once again, did not prevent the Pope from saying clear and strong words against the abuse of religion. He reiterated his adamant conviction that “extremism and violence are not born of a religious heart: they are betrayals of religion” (ibid.). True believers, whatever religion they may follow, cannot be silent when terrorism abuses religion. Commitment to interfaith dialogue, especially between Christians and Muslims, should not leave any window open to the smallest doubt: “peace alone is holy and no act of violence can be perpetrated in the name of God, for it would profane his Name” (Pope Francis 2017b). These past years of Pope Francis’ commitment to dialogue with the Muslim world can be summarized in three aspects, the pillars of his dialogical approach: “the duty to respect one’s own identity and that of others, ... the courage to accept differences ... [and] sincerity of intentions” (ibid.). These three categories represent the fundamental keys for any dialogue, especially for dialogue among people of different cultures and religions and even more when Christians and Muslims are protagonists of this commitment to build a culture of dialogue and understanding. On the one hand, the three categories facilitate a culture of encounter and, on the other, they prevent falling into the dangerous traps of naïveté, fear, compromise and syncretism. In fact, in the context of what political scientists, referring to the present world situation, call ‘chaos-land’, people of faith have to be on the forefront in the effort to help the human family to renew the capacity of reconciliation, which requires the shedding of all fears and doubts. Courage and audacity are two virtues that should characterize this commitment. Christians, Muslims and Jews are strongly invited to be aware of the universal dimension of the human family, which can open up to a new capacity for reconciliation, for acquiring a vision of hope and for building concrete paths of peace, as the Document co-signed in Abu Dhabi amply demonstrates.

#### 4.3. Christians and Muslims Called to ‘Co-Operation’ and ‘Co-Witness’

This Charter is an open invitation to Muslims and Christians to work together for educating new generations, promoting human rights and preserving, defending and respecting holy places. Above all, believers of both traditions are called to the commitment of injecting a deep spiritual dimension in today’s world. Building bridges and cooperating for a culture of encounter and dialogue does not mean wasting time in empty discussions or in hair splitting hermeneutics. It has to lead to building something concrete and visible together through cooperation and mutual involvement. As underlined also in Muslim sources, over the last few decades, various charities have cooperated in relief work, particularly in times of serious emergency, such as the Ebola virus in Africa, human trafficking in different parts of the world and the COVID-19 pandemic (Siddiqui 2018, p. 176).

Muslims and Christians can really become allies in the common struggle against social injustice and violence in order to build a more balanced society and peace in the world. In this way, they can be witnesses and not only in their respective religious domains but also in an open common venture, which can be very meaningful in the present pluralistic society where we all live and experience plurality of religions and multiple identities. Men and women of faith who follow Christian and Muslim traditions are, in fact, called to a plurality of missions and *dawah* (call) in order to become a ‘co-witness’. This process demands a re-examination of the respective theologies (ibid.).

What is required is [*in Christianity*] to preach the Kingdom of God—a mission toward God—and in Islam a perception of *dawah il-allah* (a call toward God). The sense of injustice also requires a joint crafting in the social and moral framework that anchors us in the Divine and heals the wounded. (ibid.)

Nevertheless, we should never downplay the importance of keeping respective identities and specificities and, at the same time, being honest and open in dialogue without a hidden agenda that may emerge on the way as a hindrance. Pope Francis spelled out these concerns during his speech at al-Azhar. On that occasion, in fact, he pointed out the crucial importance of the “the duty to respect one’s own identity and that of others” as, he emphasized, true dialogue cannot be built on ambiguity or on compromising on some truths for the sake of pleasing others. Secondly, he indicated that the ‘others’ are not a threat or enemies but ‘fellow travellers’, and that is why we need what he calls “the courage to accept differences”. Thirdly, no one engaged in dialogue should ever forget that this is not a ‘strategy to achieve one’s own goals’ but a “path toward the truth”, and this calls for “sincerity of intentions” (Pope Francis 2017b).

### 5. Conclusions: From the ‘Argentinian Model’ towards an ‘Interreligious Synodality’?

Without any doubt, ‘dialogue’—along with ‘fraternity’—represents one of the main keywords characterizing, at least so far, Pope Francis’ papacy. As already mentioned, the Argentinean pope, long before being elected to the See of Peter, had a remarkably long experience of friendship with Jews, Muslims, and also with Anglicans and Pentecostals in Buenos Aires. The network of relationships and their depth was such that Card. Jean-Louis Tauran, then President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in the Vatican, used to refer to it as the ‘Argentinian model of dialogue’. Its distinguishing mark was—and still is, as those rapports continue—the fact that the experience of dialogue in Buenos Aires developed out of mutual friendship rather than attempts at theological discussions. Dialogue, in fact, does not happen among institutions but rather among people, and it becomes truly significant when the leaders of the different religious communities succeed in establishing among themselves relationships of friendship. This was Bergoglio’s experience with Sheikh Omar Abbud and Rabbi Abraham Skorka.

They were able to understand their respective interests and ideas without ever compromising on their identities and those of their communities. Bergoglio started visiting the Islamic Centre in 2004, being the first bishop to enter it after it was established in 1931. The following year, he joined the Muslim community to mourn the death of the president of the Centre, Adel Made. The relationship grew in such a positive way that even the crises following the Regensburg incident with Pope Benedict XVI had practically no impact in Argentina. At the same time, the cardinal invited Muslim authorities to join in the *Te Deum* service he celebrated with the Catholic community every year. Muslims, until today, give credit to the Cardinal for bringing religious minorities around the same table, creating not only the space for a theological or a spiritual debate but, first of all, a civic forum. In a different way, a deep friendship grew also between Bergoglio and Rabbi Skorka. This time, he inherited the patient and rich experience of his predecessor, Card. Quarracino, who was able to build strong and lasting relationships with the Jewish community of the capital city of Argentina, especially following the bloody attacks on the Association for Israel–Argentina Mutual Assistance (AMIA) in 1992 and 1994. Skorka and Bergoglio grew closer and closer and started collaborating for joint publications and media programs of formation. From this experience, they co-published a very successful book: *‘Sobre el cielo y la tierra’*.<sup>13</sup> Yet, these deep relationships of friendship were open to new dimensions. In fact, as time passed, these leaders started questioning themselves about their contribution towards making a space and creating interest for a greater spiritual dimension in the world. As a true Jesuit, Bergoglio remained a frontier man capable of accepting tensions between identity and pluralism and trying to act in creative ways towards new experiences of mutual acceptance and learning from each other. The ‘Argentinian way of dialogue’, probably, taught the future Pope Francis the great lesson that dialogue cannot be something

rigidly codified. It has to be creative, all the time, and it must grow through its protagonists' engagement to generate processes (see [Iverigh 2014](#)).<sup>14</sup>

This, as explained in this study, became evident as soon as Bergoglio became Pope Francis. In these years spent at the helm of the Catholic Church, he has often appealed to people, groups, communities and nations to engage in dialogue before resorting to violence and war. He himself has had no fear in setting foot on unknown paths, as his experience with the Muslim world has shown. Yet, he has never given the impression of proposing dialogue only as a last attempt to solve problematic and chaotic situations that seemed otherwise to have no solution. His proposal of dialogue has always been one of starting new processes towards unexplored horizons rather than a shortcut towards easy compromises. In his perspective, dialogue has never appeared as a ready-made receipt to find remedies or an easy way out when problems seem to block all other possibilities. Neither did Bergoglio propose dialogue with a sense of naiveté in a very problematic world and Church scenario. Finally, considering specifically the theological and pastoral domains within Christianity, Pope Francis carefully kept away from proposing the dialogical option as a new way to announce the Gospel in view of imposing its truth over other traditions and cultures. On the contrary, he did repeatedly and consistently suggest dialogue to the Catholic Church and its ministers, never missing the opportunity to emphasize how crucial is the duty of avoiding syncretism, on the one hand, and proselytism, on the other. In his perception, dialogue appears to be a precious means to facilitate the fermentation of the Good News in different cultural and religious contexts, helping the growth of relationships between men and women of different religions and beliefs, and even with those who claim to have no religious reference. In this context, a study focussing on the relations between dialogue and evangelisation in the present pope's perspective would be of great interest. For the last forty years, this represents, in fact, an ongoing and thought-provoking debate among theologians and Church personnel (bishops, priests and consecrated men and women without excluding lay people). In the course of time, Pope Francis' contribution to this debate will certainly be appreciated. In fact, while he underlines the dialogical dimension, he never refrains from announcing the Good News with clarity and conviction but with a style and modalities that are inclusive and respectful of other cultures and religious traditions without ever forgetting people who claim to have no religious affiliation.

Probably, in order to approach the real and full dimension of dialogue in Pope Francis' perspective, there is no better text than Chapter VIII of *Fratelli Tutti*. Here, the pope invites religions to contribute to the project of building universal fraternity, which implies also a commitment to social justice and to an economic agenda different from the one imposed by the free market and globalisation that dominates the present world scene, ignoring the dignity of the human being. If the conjunction of dialogue and fraternity, on the one hand, remains a dream, on the other, it does open the way to what we could define as an 'interreligious synodality' ([Czerny and Barone 2021](#), p. 197). As the Argentinian pope invites the universal Catholic Church to reflect in these coming two years—2022 and 2023—synodality could represent the true paradigm shift of the Catholic Church in the Third Millennium. However, as we know, synodality remains a challenge, first of all, *ad intra* within the domain of the Catholic Church and in the effort of enhancing ecumenical processes. Nevertheless, it cannot and should not remain a Catholic or Christian category. The interreligious dialogical perspective can widen and deepen the experience of 'synodality', helping to open it up towards other horizons, such as those of different religious traditions. It invites people to a common pilgrimage where people of different faiths and cultural traditions can walk together, never losing sight of their specific identities but rather focussing on shared common goals. Followers of different religions and people of good will, although not claiming any particular faith, can work together so that fraternity may prevail over divisions of any type. In this way, love and fraternity may win over hatred and peace over war, setting a new roadmap for society and for the Church.

The different religions, based on their respect for each human person as a creature called to be a child of God, contribute significantly to building fraternity and defending justice in society. Dialogue between the followers of different religions does not take place simply for the sake of diplomacy, consideration or tolerance. In the words of the Bishops of India, “the goal of dialogue is to establish friendship, peace and harmony and to share spiritual and moral values and experiences in a spirit of truth and love”. (Pope Francis 2021, n. 271)

This was already the great intuition of John Paul II when, in 1986, he bravely challenged all resistances—including those within the Roman Curia—to call for a Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi where he invited leaders and representatives of all religions. He had clearly understood that, already at the time of the Cold War, religions could be part of the solution rather than the problem.

The dimension of ‘interreligious synodality’ may truly represent an aspect of what Pope Francis defined as “a conversion of the papacy” (Pope Francis 2013a). This represents an absolute novelty, which is truly possible if the Bishop of Rome remains open to suggestions that “can help make the exercise of [his] ministry more faithful to the meaning which Jesus Christ wished to give [ . . . ] to the present needs of evangelization”. Pope Francis never gave up his commitment to finding “a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation” (Pope Francis 2013a). The *Document of Human Fraternity and World Peace*, co-signed with the Grand Sheik of al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, on 4 February 2019 in Abu Dhabi, offers the greatest evidence to this new dimension of ‘interreligious synodality’, which may truly transform the Church’s mission in the present millennium. *Fratelli Tutti*—which was inspired also by people of other Christian Churches and ecclesial communities (Martin Luther King and Desmond Tutu) as well as by followers of other religions (Mahatma Gandhi) (see Pope Francis 2020, n. 282)—does not claim for the Catholic Church a role of superiority and of self-assigned leadership over other faiths and traditions. On the contrary, it suggests an attitude of service, as an instrument of the unity that characterizes humanity, as already underlined by *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate*. In this perspective, ‘interreligious synodality’ requires from the Church and from all Christians the firm commitment to esteem and respect people of different cultures and religions and those who claim to have none. This implies that, on the Christian side, there should be no claim of primacy or superiority. We need to acknowledge that we are all sisters and brothers. If, today, Pope Francis is widely accepted as a leader in this process of inviting others to dialogue, it is because he does play this role as a service rather than with a sense of supremacy, setting processes in motion rather than claiming authority over others. His commitment, his choices, his words and actions reveal a humble, sincere, discrete and, at the same time, strong commitment to avoid considering himself above others. His attitude, somehow, favours feelings of reciprocity without forcing anyone.

From a theological angle, this ‘interreligious synodality’ may shed new light on one of the most courageous statements of John Paul II. In Chennai (India), in 1986, while addressing representatives of different religious traditions present in the Indian sub-continent, the Polish pope convincingly affirmed: “by dialogue we let God be present in our midst; for as we open ourselves in dialogue to one another, we also open ourselves to God” (John Paul II 1986a). In this vein, Pope Francis, significantly, goes a step further. For him, in fact, openness to the transcendental dimension is the unique contribution that women and men of faith can offer to today’s society and culture. This is obviously more powerful and effective if believers of different religions, all together through their witness, remind today’s humanity that the human being is constitutionally oriented towards the Absolute. This represents a crucial contribution and service to the world. Peace among nations and an effective equality among all men and women can be tremendously enhanced and fostered by a shared acknowledgement of the fact that we are all creatures in front of God. Being His children, we are called to achieve our own fulfilment through a relationship with the Absolute and with one another (Czerny and Barone 2021, p. 206).



... we, the believers of the different religions, know that our witness to God benefits our societies. The effort to seek God with a sincere heart, provided it is never sullied by ideological or self-serving aims, helps us recognize one another as travelling companions, truly brothers and sisters. We are convinced that “when, in the name of an ideology, there is an attempt to remove God from a society, that society ends up adoring idols, and very soon men and women lose their way, their dignity is trampled and their rights violated. You know well how much suffering is caused by the denial of freedom of conscience and of religious freedom, and how that wound leaves a humanity which is impoverished, because it lacks hope and ideals to guide it”. (Pope Francis 2020)

A first powerful example of this common awareness is the shared statement that Francis and Grand Sheikh Ahmad al-Tayyib made in the Abu Dhabi document, where they speak of a “desensitized human conscience, a distancing from religious values and the prevailing individualism accompanied by materialistic philosophies” (Pope Francis and al-Tayyeb 2019). Against such a commonly acknowledged situation, ‘interreligious synodality’ can work to show, on the one hand, an alternative to anthropological and social theories that, by ignoring God, end up in a dominant individualism and materialist philosophy. On the other, ‘interreligious synodality’ can be an effective antidote to “hateful attitudes, hostility and extremism [which] ... are the consequence of a deviation from religious teachings” (Pope Francis and al-Tayyeb 2019). The challenge of this ‘*ad extra*’ dimension of the category of synodality is already expressed concisely in the famous passage of *Ecclesiam Suam*: “To this internal drive of charity which seeks expression in the external gift of charity, we will apply the word ‘dialogue’. The Church must enter into dialogue with the world in which it lives. It has something to say, a message to give, a communication to make” (Paul VI 1964). Pope Francis, after John Paul II and Benedict XVI, has found new and creative ways to implement the great opening of Paul VI.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For a long time, the Mosque and University of al-Azhar had an important role in the Muslim world, above all, among Sunnis. In recent times, its prestige has been damaged by the political scene in Egypt, which somehow involves also the credibility of the Grand Imam of al-Azhar. More recently, this point of reference for Sunni Muslims has maintained remarkable relevance, although the Imam’s words and thoughts are never binding for all Muslims. Shia Islam refers more to other sources of inspiration: Karbala, Najaf and Qum located in Iraq and Iran.
- <sup>2</sup> Bergoglio often refers also to *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Paul VI 1975) as an inspiring text for his pastoral life (see Pope Paul VI 1975, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Vatican City, December 8).
- <sup>3</sup> He often directly calls them from his mobile personal number.
- <sup>4</sup> He often refers to his personal relationship with ‘nonna Rosa’—pope’s grandmother whose name was Rosa. He quotes her sentences and, at times, has spoken of learning the Catholic faith on her lap.
- <sup>5</sup> Regarding this aspect, see (Borghesi 2018a, 2018b; Poirier 2011).
- <sup>6</sup> On this topic, see (Luciani 2018; Scannone 2015).
- <sup>7</sup> The Muslim Council of Elders is an independent international organisation established in July 2014 to promote peace in Muslim communities. The Council unites Muslim scholars, experts and dignitaries who are known for their wisdom, sense of justice, independence and moderateness. They will work together to promote peace, to discourage infighting and to address the source of conflict, divisiveness and fragmentation in Muslim communities. Based in the United Arab Emirates’ capital, Abu Dhabi, the Council is the first institutional body that aims to bring the Islamic nation together by extinguishing the fire that threatens Islam’s humanitarian values and principle of tolerance and put an end to the sectarianism and violence that have plagued the Muslim world for decades (<https://www.muslim-elders.com/en>, accessed on 27 December 2021).

- 8 They were, in fact, part of his dictionary much before becoming pope.
- 9 With the partial exception of the French scenario, fraternity has lived a very marginal journey similar to that of an underground river. At times, it resurfaced but it was not able to adequately irrigate the political terrain until democratic thought became silent about its existence. See (Baggio 2013).
- 10 It may be relevant to note that this sentence is already present in one of Pope Benedict XVI's last speeches pronounced a couple of months before leaving the Vatican (see Benedict XVI 2012).
- 11 Regarding this aspect, see also (Berger 1999, 2014).
- 12 For the entire official text, see: [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190204\\_documento-fratellanza-umana.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html) (accessed on 27 December 2021)
- 13 See (Skorka and Bergoglio 2010). This book had a remarkable success outside Argentina, immediately after Card. Bergoglio was elected pope.
- 14 Austin Iverigh devotes the entire Chapter VIII of his book to these interreligious rapports that Card. Bergoglio entertained in Buenos Aires (see Iverigh 2014).

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