



# Christian-Muslim Relations

GUIDELINES FOR CATHOLICS  
IN THE DIOCESE OF PARRAMATTA

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# Foreword

Interreligious dialogue is a welcome phenomenon of our times. Its fruits are bountiful: building of friendships and strong community ties, and, most importantly, commitment to walk the path of justice and peace together.

In the Diocese of Parramatta, we have been blessed with many opportunities to meet our Muslim brothers and sisters. The Catholic – Muslim dialogue is proceeding steadily.

I commissioned this booklet, addressed to Catholics, as a word of encouragement and of reassurance. I thank the authors for the way in which they have expressed complex matters simply and clearly.

With faith in the One, Eternal God, Living and True, I warmly recommend this publication to you.

+ Kevin Michael Manning  
Bishop of Parramatta

## Introduction

In the Diocese of Parramatta we have been fortunate to have had many enriching experiences of dialogue with Muslims. We have had large gatherings in Greystanes and Castle Hill, and smaller ones in other venues. We have celebrated the birthday of Prophet Muhammad in St Patrick's Hall, Parramatta, and have co-hosted dialogue sessions with our Muslim brothers and sisters.

Individual parishes have reached out to Muslims in times of distress or difficulty, and have responded to overtures of friendship and dialogue from Muslim communities in our suburbs. We are grateful to God for all that has been achieved.

It is good that there are Catholic people in our Diocese who are committed to, or interested in, inter-religious dialogue. Some are not yet involved. They may be uncertain about the Church's position on dialogue with Muslims or may fear the unknown. This booklet is designed to help: to reassure you that the Church supports interreligious dialogue; to remove some of the mystery attached to what Muslims believe; and, most of all, to encourage you to take some small steps in friendship and dialogue.

## A Catholic Vision

As Catholics, we believe that God has created the whole world and we believe that God loves what He has created. God knows and loves each person, whatever religion that person belongs to. God also knows why a person has chosen to accept and to be faithful to a particular religion. The Catholic Church teaches that, in mysterious ways known to God alone, God is working through other religions in order to fulfill God's own mysterious plan for the world. Since our Catholic outlook on the world provides us with such a broad and all-inclusive vision of all people and their religions, we tend to have a positive approach to all people and their religions. In considering people of other faiths as our brothers and sisters, we are following Jesus who did not want to exclude anyone from the possibility of being his brother or sister. "Anyone", he says, "who does the will of God, that person is my brother, and sister and mother" (Mk. 3.31-35).



## What is interreligious dialogue?

Interreligious dialogue simply means that we try to relate with brothers and sisters of other faiths as Christ would have related with them. It could simply be in the form of a greeting in the street or in the shopping centre.

It could be a more intimate sharing of convictions and traditions. Interreligious dialogue refers to any effort to understand and to respect people from other faith traditions.

Every meeting with another person changes us in some way. When we enter into relationships with Muslim brothers and sisters, we may also feel that we are changing. Sometimes we may even be afraid to change and prefer to remain as we are. But Jesus said that we must change and become like little children. Interreligious dialogue is one way of changing ourselves so that we become more like true disciples of Jesus.

## The benefits of interreligious dialogue

Many people have discussed the issues dividing Christians and Muslims during the course of several centuries. It is therefore unrealistic to expect to find a final solution to these issues. The bitterness and hatred that result from wars based on religion take a very long time to heal. Both Christians and Muslims harbor tragic memories of the bloodshed that has taken place in the past. Each succeeding generation tells the story from its own point of view. As a result, there is much misunderstanding and prejudice in the way we feel and think about each other. It is so important for Christians and Muslims to leave behind their bad memories of the past and to try to understand history from another point of view.

Lack of knowledge of history has also led to a great deal of misunderstanding regarding each other's beliefs and traditions. Christians need to hear about Islam from a Muslim point of view and Muslims need to hear about Christianity from a Christian point of view. If we go on repeating our view of things without consulting one another, these misunderstandings will only increase. Efforts to understand each other through inter-religious dialogue can prevent tensions and rifts from becoming destructive.

Seeing a Muslim make a public expression of his faith can encourage a Christian to re-examine his or her own faith and urge a Christian to move to a deeper level of faith awareness. Certainly, Muslims and Christians can affirm and encourage one another as they live out their lives of faith in a secular environment.



## Muslims in Australia

The largest group of Muslims in Australia are Australian-born. The two largest ancestral groups are Lebanese and Turkish but Australia has Muslims from many countries and continents. In fact, the first Muslims to live in Australia were the Afghan and Indian cameleers who were involved in the exploration of Australia's interior in the 1860s, and were employed on the Overland Telegraph in the early 1870s. Today the highest concentration of Muslims in Australia is in Sydney. Like most migrants to Australia, migrant Muslims tended to settle in cities, close to relatives or friends.

The majority of Australia's Muslims are *Sunni*. Historically, the difference between the *Sunni* and *Shi'a* groups of Muslims related to disagreements about rightful successors to the Prophet Muhammad.

There are more than 100 mosques in Australia; most are in Sydney and in Melbourne. The building of a mosque is the responsibility of the local Muslim community but in many cases these efforts are supported by donations from the countries from which the local communities originate.

The imam is the prayer leader of a mosque but the community, usually through a committee, runs the activity of the mosque. A mufti is a scholar of Islamic law and gives an opinion or response to questions of Islamic law. A sheikh is a leader but the term is not confined to a religious context.

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## Coming closer to Muslims

It is generally accepted that in order to understand or to come closer to people, we should try to see things from their perspective. As Christians, we are closely related to our Muslim brothers and sisters in an historical as well as in a religious sense. So it should not be too difficult for us to see the world from their point of view. This does not mean that Christians can agree with Muslims in everything. It simply means observing what our Muslim brothers and sisters are saying and doing without letting any preconceived ideas prevent us from seeing whatever is good and praiseworthy. Maybe we need to pay more attention to the negative prejudices and assumptions we may have about Islam and its teaching. If we read or listen to the Qur'an without maintaining an attitude of respect and openness we will never hear anything positive or inspiring.



## What does the Catholic Church say?

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has been very clear about how we, as Catholic believers, can relate with Muslim brothers and sisters. The Second Vatican Decree, *Nostra Aetate*, states:

“Upon the Muslims, the Catholic Church looks with esteem. They adore One God, living and enduring, merciful and all-powerful, Maker of heaven and earth, and Speaker to men. They strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as did Abraham, with whom the Islamic faith is pleased to associate itself. Although not acknowledging him as God, They venerate Jesus as a Prophet. They also honour Mary, his virgin mother. At times they call on her, too, with devotion. Further, they await the Day of judgment when God will give each person his due after raising him up. Consequently, they prize the moral life and give worship to God, especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting.” (*Nostra Aetate*, 3).

We can also recall that Pope John Paul II invited leaders of different faith traditions to a meeting in Assisi in January 2002, and that their joint declaration stated:

“We commit ourselves to frank and patient dialogue, refusing to consider our differences as an insurmountable barrier, but recognizing instead that to encounter the diversity of others can become an opportunity for greater reciprocal understanding.”



More recently, in 2007, a group of distinguished Muslim scholars and leaders issued an invitation to dialogue: “ A Common Word Between You and Us”. Pope Benedict XVI has responded positively to this letter. Indeed, the theme “Faith in God and Love of Neighbor as the Foundations for Interreligious Dialogue” was the core document for an important interreligious meeting held in Cairo in February 2008.

In April 2008, during his visit to the US, Pope Benedict met with a group representing non-Christians. Speaking of interreligious dialogue, he said:

“As we grow in understanding of one another, we see that we share an esteem for ethical values ... The world begs for a common witness to these values. I therefore invite all religious people to view dialogue not only as a means of enhancing mutual understanding, but also as a way of serving society at large.”

## Does the Qur'an respect non-Muslims?

The Qur'an has a very positive attitude to people who are not part of the Muslim community and does not demand that every person should become a Muslim. On the contrary, according to the Qur'an every human person can reach fulfillment provided he or she believes in God and does the right thing. In Surah *Al Baqarah*, verse 62, we read as follows:

“Surely the believers and the Jews,  
Nazareans and the Sabians, whoever believes  
in God and the Last Day, and whosoever does right,  
shall have his reward with his Lord  
and will neither have fear nor regret.”

The *Nazareans* are the Christians, and the *Sabians* were a religious sect living at the time the Qur'an was revealed. Muslims believe that Almighty God keeps every person in his care, and that there is therefore no need for us to worry about the faith or lack of faith of another person. Each person has his or her own responsibility before God. The Qur'an encourages each person to attend to his or her own affairs and to let God look after the eternal destiny of others.

On the other hand, there are some verses in the Qur'an that would appear to be advocating fighting and violence against non-Muslims. We must remember that the Qur'an was revealed during a specific period in history and that the circumstances of that time are reflected in the text. Each verse has to be understood in terms of the context in which it was revealed. It would be unfair to try to understand the Qur'an without respecting the long tradition of interpretation already done by Muslims. In today's world, some people take verses from the Qur'an and make them apply in a literal way without showing any consideration for the way that most Muslims understand these verses. The Qur'an certainly does not support indiscriminate violence against any group or person.





believing that God is one of three. Because of their strict monotheism, Muslims tend to shy away from language about God as Trinity. Over the years, Christian theologians have found ways of showing that Christians also believe in the unity of God while professing Jesus to be divine. Verses in the Qur'an that seem to caution Christians in their belief can actually help us to reflect more deeply about what we profess as believers. The Qur'an does not speak out against Christians. On the contrary, the Qur'an has very positive things to say about Christians.

## Is Christ the only way to God?

St John's Gospel tells us that God sent His only Son into the world so that the world may be saved (John 3.16-17). We also read "No one can come to the Father except through me" (John 14.6). Besides, the lame man was cured in the name of Jesus and it was "by this name and by no other" that he was cured (Acts 4.10). The purpose of these verses is to tell Christians that their faith in Christ should be the first priority in their lives. In other words, these verses encourage Christians to make a more radical commitment to Christ. They do not reject people who have different beliefs. None of these verses can be used to draw conclusions about the religious life of non-Christians, a topic quite foreign to the context and purpose for which these verses were written.

In fact, another verse in the Bible indicates that the Holy Spirit "blows where it wills" and that we cannot "tell where it comes from or where it is going" (John 3.8). The Spirit of God is not confined to our human ways of thinking. We must be sensitive enough to discover the activity of the Holy Spirit in unexpected places for God always remains a God of surprises. There are many indications in the Gospels that point to the way Jesus was surprised to find true faith beyond the traditional and customary expressions of religion in those days. The Spirit of God is not limited to the confines of human structures and institutions – even of religious institutions. The God in whom Jesus believed was the Father both of the honest and of the dishonest alike (Matt 5.45).



## What do Christians and Muslims have in common?

Christians and Muslims believe that God creates, sustains and cares for the world. We both share the belief that human beings have been given a certain period of time in which to make our response to God and that this response will come under the scrutiny of God at a final point in time known as “the Last Day”.

Christians and Muslims consider Abraham as the Father of all those who believe in one God. Just as Abraham put his faith in God and was ready to obey God in every way, so Jews, Christians and Muslims try to give a credible expression of their own faith in God. We all have the desire to express our faith by seeking justice and reconciliation in our relationships with other people. It is clear that Christians and Muslims give priority to moral values such as honesty, faithfulness and compassion and that they share a concern for the environment.

Moreover, Christians and Muslims agree that God has sent certain messengers or prophets to the people living in the world even though these people may have different ways of interpreting some of their messages. Both Christians and Muslims have a common belief in Mary, the mother of Jesus and honour the virgin birth of Christ.

They also share the belief that Christ will come again at the end of time. As long as they remain alive in the world, Christians and Muslims take part in the struggle for a better world.

For Muslims, this kind of struggle is the most significant meaning of the word jihad, which basically means “struggle”. Both Christians and Muslims consider regular prayer to be an important part of this daily struggle.







## The importance of relationships

No exchange can last very long without the support of deepening human relationships. So a basic requirement for a Christian who wants to become involved in interreligious dialogue is to have a personal relationship with Muslims. Outside the context of a living relationship, our contact will remain superficial.

It is not helpful to move into a discussion of doctrine before a good relationship has been established. Even then, it is not always advisable to enter into such difficult areas of dialogue. It may be better to learn about the attitudes and qualities of one another's faith than to discuss the finer points of doctrine. We must remember that the purpose of interreligious dialogue is not to solve problems but to deepen relationships based on genuine understanding and acceptance of differences. Genuine dialogue occurs in a spirit of openness, honesty, respect and patience.

The religious life of Muslims cannot be understood in isolation from their local culture and customs. In any meeting with Muslims, a Christian needs to be alert to this mixture of the universal teaching of Islam and local customs and traditions that influence the expression of a Muslim's belief.

Media accounts of violence should always be understood against a broader background. One does this by remembering that the media usually takes up sensational stories and highlights the more horrendous or unusual aspects of events. The media does not usually bring out the more complicated factors involved in major events that can only be understood by grasping the inter-connections between religion, history and culture.

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## Practical considerations for dialogue

It is good to try to keep the dialogue in the present. You do not have to defend or justify events of hundreds of years ago. It can be enough to say something like: “what you say may be a valid point of view, but I would like to discuss what affects us here and now”.

Never be afraid to admit that you do not know the answer to a question that is put to you. A response like, “ I’m not certain about that, but I will check up on it and get back to you” is perfectly satisfactory. But make sure that you do what you have promised!

It may well happen that fellow-Catholics criticize you, or warn you against getting too friendly with Muslims. Do not try to convince them by rational argument that they are misguided themselves. Keep your responses personal, for example, “ I enjoy meeting new people and learning about different religions” or “I am making friends and building community”, is an effective way of handling the situation. You could try something like “I know that the Church is in favor of interreligious dialogue, and that’s what I’m doing”.

Hospitality is an important part of Muslim life. Muslims regard it as an honour when people visit their homes and share in a meal. Sometimes, when non-Muslims want to return hospitality, they hesitate because they are uncertain about what foods Muslims can eat and about the way in which food is to be prepared. Such hesitancy is understandable but easily solved! Just say that you are not sure and your Muslim friends will come to the rescue. You could open the conversation with something like, “I’m thinking of having fish (chicken/lamb). Will that be all right?”

Finally, any hidden or personal agenda should never play a role in inter-religious dialogue. Partners in dialogue will lose trust in one another if they have a sense that one is trying to convert the other. The more profound conversion that hopefully will take place during interreligious dialogue is a deeper trust in Almighty God.

**“TO HIM WILL YOU ALL RETURN IN THE END WHEN HE WILL  
TELL YOU OF WHAT YOU WERE AT VARIANCE.”**

*Surah Al Maidah, verse 48*



## Publications and Websites on Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations

### Vatican Documents

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