

Interreligious Engagement in the Holy Land – Why?

Address to the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre

Thomas A. Baima
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Your Excellency, Archbishop ListECKI, Most Reverend Bishops, Very Reverend and Reverend Fathers, deacons in Christ, Your Excellency, Sir Max Brown and members of the Lieutenancy Council, Knights, Ladies and honored guests.

In this address, I want to offer an answer to the key issue related to the Equestrian Order's work involving ecumenical and interreligious activity in the Holy Land. That issue is stated, succinctly and completely in the one-word question: Why? I, myself, have heard this question from many, many people over the years since I first set my foot on the soil of the Land in 1994. I have heard it from committed Catholics, from seminarians during Mundelein Seminary's unique 10 week Study-Pilgrimage, from Knights and Ladies as they learn about the work of the order, and even from other Christians: Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant. In light of this, I must acknowledge this as an authentic question. Authentic questions deserve serious answers.

Such a question, and its answer is important to the knights and ladies, to the Church, to the peoples currently living in the Land, and to the world. The question is important in far reaching ways, that I can only begin to describe in this address today.

But even the beginnings of an answer will be quite valuable, for the answer puts us into contact with the very core of our identity as an international association of Catholics who have been given a mission by the successor of Saint Peter.

To answer that question in terms of the mission given to the Equestrian Order by the Holy Fathers, I'm going to talk about two subjects not usually central in an address on ecumenical and interreligious affairs. They are evangelism and **moral theology**. I know that both will be of interest to the Archbishop of Milwaukee, as they have been concerns of his through his entire priesthood. But I do not choose them as an homage to another local ordinary. Rather, I choose them because of their singular importance to the mission of the Order – an importance which reaches far beyond the Order and is the same reason Archbishop Listecki has devoted so much of his priestly life to their promotion. The unifying element between the two is *credibility*, because neither evangelism nor virtue ethics can exist without it. The issue of credibility has taken on new meaning in the life of the Church in America in the past weeks and months. So, I don't think I will have to push too hard in this talk to convince you of its importance. Instead, I want you to keep the word, *credibility*, in mind as I proceed throughout this address because it will be the mortar that cements the building stones of my argument together.

The more formal title of my talk could be “Why has the Roman Pontiff specifically directed the Equestrian Order to engage in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue as an essential element of our mission?” To approach an answer, I would direct you to article two of the Constitutions of the Order, where we read the following:

The Order has for its purposes:

1 - to strengthen in its members the practice of Christian life, in absolute fidelity to the Supreme Pontiff and according to the teachings of the Church, observing as its foundation the principles of charity of which the Order is a fundamental means for assistance to the Holy Land;

2 - to sustain and aid the charitable, cultural and social works and institutions of the Catholic Church in the Holy Land, particularly those of and in the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, with which the Order maintains traditional ties;

3 - to support the preservation and propagation of the Faith in those lands, interesting in this work the Catholics scattered throughout the world, united in charity by the symbol of the Order, and also all brother Christians;

4 - to sustain the rights of the Catholic Church in the Holy Land

These four purposes each provides a portion of the answer to my question of Why.

Now, as you heard in the introduction, I'm a theologian. It is a theologian's job, to receive the teaching of the Church, from Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium; to explain it clearly to the clergy and faithful so that they see the connection of the individual doctrines with the organic whole of the revelation, which is fundamentally the person of Jesus Christ. Additionally, the theologian is to suggest to the Magisterium ways to develop the teaching so as to support the mission which has the Church as its instrument. This morning, I want to explain what each of the four purposes of the Equestrian Order mean, practically, in light of our Catholic faith and to suggest that they embed a spirituality of dialogue in the very soul of the Order.

The doctrine *of* the church *about* the church we recite each Lord's Day in the Profession of Faith. We say:

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father (and the Son), who together with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who spoke through the prophets, and in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, I confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins and wait for the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting, Amen.

Why is the Church one, holy, catholic and apostolic? Well, to quote our former Lieutenancy Prior, Francis Cardinal George, it's because only a church with those qualities could fulfill the mission proclaimed by Christ. Cardinal George forcefully would say, [now listen carefully], "The Church does not have a mission. The Mission has a church."

What's the mission? To Go, and make disciples of all the nations . . . This is the fundamental task of evangelization. Pope John Paul II got very specific. He taught that evangelization involved proclaiming the gospel *with the aim of conversion; baptizing and forming Christian communities, and of humanizing culture*. It's a comprehensive vision of mission. I want you to notice that he describes these three in terms of the evangelizing mission. I also want you to notice that it is not the individualist Protestant frame of reference we associate with evangelization here in America. It is a communitarian frame of reference, which is a characteristic of Catholic cultures.

Well, if that's the understanding of mission, then why do we run schools for Muslim students, provide health care and hospital services throughout the Middle East,

financially support other religious communities, when they don't seem to convert? Isn't conversion the metric which is defined by John Paul's vision?

Yes and no. Or perhaps, yes, but not yet.

The same Magisterium has taught that "the evangelizing mission of the Church is a 'single but complex and articulated reality.'"¹ There is only one, single evangelizing mission. Yet, to achieve it, different and interrelated activities are required. Dialogue *and* proclamation are thus, inseparable. Each interpenetrates the other. It would be false to suggest, as some have, that dialogue alone is sufficient today in the context of religious pluralism. But it is equally false to suggest, as too many do, that direct proclamation alone can achieve the mission.

Now, that last line is a pretty bold statement. And it falls on our ears quite hard. But I'm standing by it and for very good reason. Let me paraphrase John 3:16 as only a theologian can: "God so loved the world, that he didn't send a book." Christianity is not a "religion of the book." We have a book, but the book is the testimony of a dialogue between God and humanity which has lasted thousands of years. No, God so loved the world that he sent his son. The Revelation which Christians proclaim is a *person*. And so [here's the point] our presentation of that Truth must also be *personal*.

Now, if you ever tried to find out important information from a website, or even if you went to your doctor and all she did was talk to the computer screen between you, you know what I mean by our human need to be related to personally.

¹ Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1991), no. 2.

What attributes in a church make possible a personal encounter with Jesus? That she is One, holy, catholic, and apostolic. The first two are the attractive attributes. The second two are the extensive ones.² Our unity and holiness draw people to Christ. Our wholeness (which allows our teaching to be transparent) and our historic continuity with the apostles offer confidence. Together, the four marks offer credibility.

So, the mission as Saint John Paul described finds its center in the community of the baptized. It is the community of the baptized, as missionary disciples, seeks to humanize the culture around them. By their moral life and their works, they give attractive witness, so that some will be inspired to engage in personal dialogue and eventually invite proclamation. This scheme connects the dots for the four purposes of our order.

It starts with our unity, which is expressed by the purpose “to strengthen in its members the practice of Christian life, in absolute fidelity to the Supreme Pontiff and according to the teachings of the Church, observing as its foundation the principles of charity of which the Order is a fundamental means for assistance to the Holy Land.” It continues with holiness, through a spirituality whereby we live our Christian life with a special bond “to sustain and aid the charitable, cultural and social works and institutions of the Catholic Church in the Holy Land, particularly those of and in the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, with which the Order maintains traditional ties.” Our catholicity is fostered by our “support the preservation and propagation of the Faith in

² The idea of attractive and extensive attributes is my own which I develop in the years I taught ecclesiology at Mundelein Seminary.

those lands, interesting in this work the Catholics scattered throughout the world, united in charity by the symbol of the Order, and also all brother Christians.” And finally, apostolicity, our historical continuity with the apostles, is expressed by our efforts “to sustain the rights of the Catholic Church in the Holy Land.” This includes the humanization of culture whereby true religious freedom is enjoyed by all persons and communities. Religious liberty is a human right, not a civil one. No government has the power abrogate a human right, only to accept their responsibility to protect it.

Much more could be said, but I want to leave ample time for conversation. So, let me close with a simple story.

If you have not seen the movie, *The Letters*, I strongly exhort you to do so. It is the story of the postulator of the cause of Mother Theresa of Calcutta, and beautifully tells of her call within a call that led to the formation of the Missionaries of Charity. There is a scene in that movie which enacts a true event in Mother’s life. She was in the hospital for the incurable in Calcutta, caring for a dying man. She lavishes personal concern and care upon him. At one point he grabs her hand and demand to know, “Why are you doing this? I’m a Hindu. You’re a Christian. Why to you care?” In response, Mother simply says: “Because I see Christ in you. In serving you, I serve him.”

So, in conclusion, let me pose again the important question: Why? “Why has the Roman Pontiff specifically directed the Equestrian Order to engage in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue as an *essential* element of our mission?” Or in the words of many students, knights and ladies over the years, “Why do we run schools for Muslim

students, provide health care and hospital services throughout the Middle East, financially support other religious communities, when they don't seem to convert? Isn't conversion the metric?"

Yes, conversion is the metric! But to understand how that answer is correct, we must see that there are two dimensions to conversion. The primary one is the conversion of the Knights and Ladies in our very souls to the attitude we saw in Mother Theresa. This primary conversation is to the real presence of Christ in all the peoples of the Holy Land, such that our charity to them is – really – adoration of the incarnate Son of God. The secondary conversion is when the Muslim, Jewish, or Druze students, hospital patients and local neighbors come to believe that we believe, by witnessing our faith in word and action. Both dimensions of conversion are part of the personal dialogue which is nothing less than the kind of witness the Holy Spirit will use to draw all people to seek God, such that proclamation of Christ becomes not only welcome, but fruitful.

As Americans, we are an impatient people. What I am describing does not happen quickly. But I will leave you with something Father Eamon Kelly at the Notre Dame Center told a group of pilgrims. He praised the work of the Franciscan Order, whom we know staff the shrines and provides such important pastoral care to pilgrims. Many of us have experienced that. But Father Kelly told us something many people do not know. When the Christians were expelled from the Holy Land, only the Franciscans were allowed to stay, because the Sultan had recognized Francis as a man of God, what the Muslims call a righteous monotheist. But though they were allowed

to stay, they could not perform public services. For seven hundred years the Franciscans could not say Mass publicly. Here's my point: providence (the plan of God) sometimes demands patience. Which in the end reminds me of Mother Teresa's most famous dictum: "God did not call me to be successful. He called me to be faithful."

Thank you. I look forward now to conversation with you.