

# Muslims, Ramadan and Parish Life

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LtoR: The Hon Tony Bourke MP, Sheikh Yahya Safi, The Hon Jason Clare & Patrick McInerney.

Muslims suffer from a bad reputation due to the widely reported behaviour of a few of their co-religionists, whose criminal actions are in violation of traditional Islamic principles and clear Quranic injunctions. To condone this bad reputation by remaining silent or to contribute to it by repeating media-built stereotypes is a violation of the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour." (Ex20:16; cf. Deut 5:20) I believe we have an obligation in justice and in charity to counter such ill-informed prejudice. Here are a few very simple ways in which I do this, ways which can very easily be implemented in any parish to counter the negative stereotypes and to build more positive attitudes within our Catholic communities.

During the month of Ramadan, when Muslims fast from dawn to dusk, I regularly include the following in the Prayers of the Faithful at Mass:

For our Muslim brothers and sisters, that by the bodily discipline of their fasting and the spiritual devotion of their hearts, they may find grace and favour in God's eyes. Lord, hear us.

Apart from its intercessory value, this prayer alerts the congregation that Muslims are in fact our sisters and brothers - in shared humanity, as fellow monotheists, as joint inheritors of the Abrahamic faith tradition - who are also engaged in the spiritual quest. This prayer might also provoke some interesting conversations

with parishioners on Catholic teaching in relation to Muslims, for which the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate* is an excellent starting point:

The church has also a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to humanity. They endeavour to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden plans of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God's plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own.

Although not acknowledging him as God, they venerate Jesus as a prophet; his virgin Mother they also honour, and even at times devoutly invoke. Further, they await the day of judgement and the reward of God following the resurrection of the dead. For this reason they highly esteem an upright life and worship God, especially by way of prayer, alms-deeds and fasting.

Over the centuries many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. The sacred council now pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding; for the benefit of all, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values. (NA, #3)

Secondly, on the occasion of *Eid al-Fitr*, the feast which marks the end of Ramadan, I visit the local mosque for Eid prayers. Out of respect for the more traditional religious culture of Islam, I dress formally, wearing a Roman collar, so that I am visually identifiable as a Catholic priest, just as the Muslim religious leader is identifiable by his garb. As an act of solidarity, on behalf of the Christian/Catholic community, I greet the Imam and other members of the congregation, offering them good wishes on their feast day.

I admit that for someone not familiar with Islam or Muslims, a visit to a mosque on such an occasion might at first be a bit

daunting. It is almost certainly going outside of one's comfort zone! Even I, who was assigned to Pakistan for over twenty years and now work fulltime in Christian-Muslim relations, can sometimes feel a bit awkward walking into a crowd of total strangers, but I can assure you that my effort is very much appreciated, evidence for which is the number of Muslims who say to me, "Thank you for coming."

On one such occasion two years ago, two Muslims, quite independently of each other, told me they had that morning received a Facebook message showing a church notice board with a greeting to Muslims on the occasion of Eid. The Facebook post had been shared literally thousands of times, creating, as one of them said, "a tsunami of good will".

To make the visit a little less awkward, it can be good to have a "security blanket", not something to hold onto, but something to give. For that purpose, I go to [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/interrelg/index.htm](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interrelg/index.htm), the page of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue on the Vatican website. I download the message for the end of the month of Ramadan, format it, print off multiple copies, put them in envelopes and give them out as Eid cards to the Muslims I meet at the mosque (a Muslim equivalent of Christmas cards!). An added bonus is that the Vatican message often gives you something to talk about with your Muslim hosts. Again, this message coming from the highest level of the church bureaucracy is very much appreciated.

Finally, as with the month of fasting, so also with the day(s) of feasting, one could include a prayer of the faithful for Muslims, again alerting the Catholic congregation to our spiritual bonds with the Muslim community, perhaps even sharing in the homily something about your visit to the mosque and the church's teaching in relation to Islam and Muslims.

In these times in Australia and the world, particularly given the present turmoil in the Middle East and North Africa which have their repercussions in the related migrant communities in Australia, when Islam and Muslims and Muslim-majority countries are in the press for all the wrong reasons, these are simple ways in which we can build positive attitudes within the Catholic community and show leadership in reaching out in friendship to the Muslim community. ☺