

Interview with Michael L. Fitzgerald, M Afr

Roman Catholic Archbishop Michael L. Fitzgerald, M Afr, has been one of the key persons in the Christian-Muslim dialogue. Formerly the Secretary (1987-2002) and President (2002-2006) of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue of the Vatican, he now serves as the Apostolic Nuncio to the Arab Republic of Egypt and Holy See's delegate to the League of Arab States. He is the author (with John Borelli) of Interfaith Dialogue: A Catholic View (Orbis, 2006).



ACR: Could you briefly explain to us what you do as the papal nuncio to Egypt and delegate to the Arab League?

Fitzgerald: As Papal Nuncio I represent H. H. Pope Benedict XVI first to the Catholic Churches in Egypt and secondly to the Government of the country. I have used the term “Churches” in the plural deliberately, since we have in this country a variety of Catholic Churches: Coptic Catholic, Melkite, Maronite, Syrian Catholic, Chaldean, Armenian Catholic and Latin. My task is to act as an intermediary between these Churches and the Holy See, exchanging information and also giving encouragement through visiting the different dioceses of the Coptic Catholic Church and also through attending different celebrations and meetings. I also have contact with the leaders of other Churches and also with Muslim religious leaders.

With the Government of Egypt it is also a question of exchanging information, sometimes representing the views of the Holy See on certain questions and at other times conveying the position of Egypt to the Holy See. There is also a certain amount of networking with other ambassadors belonging to the ample diplomatic corps.

As Delegate to the League of Arab States I am invited to attend the opening sessions of meetings held at the headquarters of the Arab League in Cairo, whether at the level of Heads of State or of Ministers, and also the briefings at the conclusion of these meetings. Other activities in the field of intercultural dialogue are also in the planning.

ACR: Has your experience as a diplomat been very different from that as the head of Vatican’s office for interreligious dialogue? And, now based in Cairo, do you see things differently from in Rome?

Fitzgerald: As Secretary and later President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue it was my privilege to travel widely in order to talk about dialogue or to attend different meetings. As Nuncio I am expected to

spend my time in the country to which I have been sent. I do not think my views have changed, but certainly it is interesting to be in Egypt which is a hub of diplomatic activity, especially with regard to the Middle East.

ACR: Since Sept. 11, 2001, the Muslim extremism has been very much a focus of attention, especially in the Western media. As you see it, how much is Islam as a religion a real factor in today's global situation with much tensions and conflicts? Or, conversely, how much potential does Islam have to create peace and harmony between and within communities?

Fitzgerald: It is true that 9/11 has focused attention on Islamic extremism, but it must be remembered that there are other many sources of violence. Recently there have been continuous attacks against Christians in India from the part of Hindu extremists, and there is much violence in certain countries of Latin America which has nothing to do with Islam.

The vast majority of Muslims wish to live peacefully, and their religion can help them in this. Yet it is true that where Islam dominates, the situation of those who do not belong to this religion is often difficult.

ACR: Coming back to where you are now, how are Christians perceived in Egypt or in the wider Arab world? What do you think is the majority view about the dialogue with Christians?

Fitzgerald: I would not like to speak of the Arab world as a whole, since the situation differs from country to country.

The official discourse in Egypt is that all Egyptians, whether Muslims or Christians, are all citizens of one country and are therefore equal. Yet in fact a certain amount of discrimination against Christians exists. This has given rise to an organization, Egyptians against Religious Discrimination, in which both Muslims and Christians are active. On the other hand, Christian schools, and especially Catholic schools, are highly appreciated for the good education they provide, and the Church's social outreach is also admired. So the influence of the Catholic Church in Egypt is greater than its numbers.

Although Muslims and Christians are used to living side by side in Egypt, there does not seem to be much interest in formal religious dialogue. Perhaps the majority does not feel the need for this dialogue, and those of the minority are rather defensive in their attitude. Dialogue among people of a more secular outlook takes place around the theme of citizenship.

ACR: As far as the Roman Catholic Church is concerned, the dialogue with Muslims as an official and institutional endeavour was introduced only at the Second Vatican Council, and therefore is a relatively recent venture. What is your assessment of the past (roughly) four decades of the dialogue? How much progress has been made?

Fitzgerald: Progress has been made in the setting up of structures for dialogue. These structures include not only the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in the Vatican, but also various Church commissions at the regional and local levels. Such commissions provide guidance and training for people engaged in dialogue, as well as keeping up contacts with leaders of other religions. Thus dialogue is encouraged and sustained and not just left to the initiative of a few individuals. Moreover the Catholic Church has the solid basis of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council from which to operate.

Structures have also appeared on the Muslim side. The Permanent Committee of Al-Azhar [University] for Dialogue with Monotheistic Religions is one example. The recent bonding of a number of Muslim scholars, Sunni and Shi'a alike, who are inviting Christians to engage in dialogue with them, has also provided another loose structure.

I think that another sign of progress is the willingness of Muslims, not only in their diaspora, but also in the heartlands of Islam, to open up to people of other religions, to Buddhists for example.

A further sign of progress is the readiness of both Christians and Muslims to study the religion of the other in a serious way. This gives hope for a truly respectful dialogue.

ACR: Some on the Christian side are skeptical about the dialogue with Muslims and insist on taking a “tough” or “realistic” approach. Some of them complain, for example, that Christians in Muslims countries are not granted full religious freedom, unlike Muslims in Christian countries. Some others argue that Islam and democracy are incompatible. What is your response to these assertions and concerns of hard-liners?

Fitzgerald: The basis of truly fruitful dialogue is mutual trust, and this has to be built up by fostering mutual understanding. Therefore it is unhelpful to be looking for quick results. It is certainly unprofitable to engage in slanging matches. Where there is an atmosphere of confidence, difficult questions such as religious freedom can be addressed. It is true that there are restrictions to religious freedom in many majority Muslim countries, but the situation is not static and there are grounds for maintaining a hopeful outlook.

ACR: Some scholars seem to suggest that Islam has not gone through “Reformation,” and this is what exactly Islam needs to, in order to be “modernized.” Do you agree?

Fitzgerald: I am always rather wary of generalizations and simplifications. Here in Egypt I have more opportunity for contact with Orthodox Churches. These Churches have not gone through a “Reformation”, nor do they feel the need for this. Why should this be looked for in Islam? On the other hand, there is a need to take into account the historical developments that have taken place in

each religion and that are still taking place. Moreover one should recognize the variety within the Islamic world, just as there are many different ways of living Christianity.

ACR: What in the future do you wish to see happen on the Muslim and Christian sides respectively, for greater mutual trust and cooperation?

Fitzgerald: Religious leaders have a particular responsibility, since they shape the views of the members of their respective communities. I should like to see greater contact between those who are preparing for ministry within the Christian communities and those training to be Imams so that later they will more easily cooperate in facing up to problems which affect all people, whether Christians or Muslims or belonging to other religions or none.