

## A LETTER TO POPE BENEDICT XVI ON CATHOLIC WITNESS TO MUSLIMS

To Benedict, elder and bishop of the church sojourning in Rome,  
*khaliifat amiir al rusul*;

From Abu Daoud, husband, father, missionary, teacher;

Blessed be God who in these last days has sent his anointed one  
in the power of his Spirit to announce the good news of his king-  
dom.

I have worked now for years in the area of Christian witness to  
Muslims, both in the Middle East and in the West. I submit to you  
for your consideration these small steps which, with God's bles-  
sing, will bring in multitudes of new faithful to the Church, and  
God will be glorified in his Son.

The first reform I suggest is regarding Holy Scripture. One of  
the most recurrent themes in conversion narratives of Muslims is  
the reading of the Bible. Yet how many hundreds of thousands of  
emigrants live throughout the West without access to the bible in  
their own language? What if parishes in areas with significant  
immigrant populations were told they had to have bibles available  
in those languages--perhaps Arabic, Urdu, Farsi, Pashto, Turkish,  
or something else? What if each sleepy Catholic parish became a  
*de facto* source of distribution of Scripture? I am not talking about  
proselytism, or even evangelism. Just a coherent policy that  
would advise the local parish priest or administrator that a) his  
bishop and the bishop of Rome would make sure he always had  
bibles available in the languages of the local immigrant communi-  
ty, and that b) that the bibles in question would not have to be  
paid for by the parish. Even in most fundamentalist Islamic coun-  
tries if a person *asks* for a bible, it is not considered to be antago-

nistic to Islam to give him one. On the contrary, to *not* give the enquirer a bible, or at least a portion of it, strikes me as an egregious lack of hospitality and generosity. Yet how many thousands across Europe would quietly and privately repair to the local parish to request the bible or New Testament in their own language? With a sensitive pastoral response--an invitation to return with any questions, or perhaps a recommendation to start with Matthew or 1 John, or maybe both--the harvest truly is great. And other than postage and some contacts with various bible societies around the globe, there is no need for an expensive and time-intensive evangelistic program.

The second reform I am recommending in relation to Catholic witness to Muslims is in relation to dreams and visions. A key reason listed in the conversion narratives of Muslims is a dream or vision. Often this is of Messiah himself, but other times of an angel or saint like John the Baptist or the Blessed Virgin. What if each diocese were instructed, as they are with exorcists today, to discern among their clergy (or laity?) an individual (or several) with the charism of interpreting dreams and visions? If we think this is not a genuine ability imparted from God we need only recall the stories of Joseph and Daniel, both of whom had this gift, and both of whom glorified God in the presence of pagans through it. A small publicity campaign--small ads in local publications read by immigrants, notices at the church doors--letting people know that, if they have had dreams or visions which they cannot explain, that someone with experience in that field is ready and willing to talk with them. Again, the method is passive. Some initial work would have to be done, as dioceses would need to discern God's guidance regarding local Catholics who have the charism of interpretation, but after that, and a very minimal monthly expenditure for ads, we can realistically expect at least a few thousand new Catholic Christians who have come from an Islamic background. To drive this point home, let me tell you

about a Muslima in a Middle-Eastern country who had a dream of the Virgin. She, at no small cost to her own security, sought out a local Roman Catholic priest and told him of the dream. He wept as he listened to her, but his final answer was that this was God's way of telling her to be a more devout Muslima. Is this a legitimate interpretation? Was this decision not led by fear of persecution rather than a genuine apostolic faith? But we do not have a spirit of fear, but of love, power, and a sound mind.

The third reform I recommend is this: each bishop must discern how new disciples coming from Islam should be baptized. Here there is no panacea. Each diocese is different and the question of baptism must be handled in a wise but apostolic manner. In the Middle East (where I have lived for several years) the general practice among Catholics is to refer Muslims who inquire about baptism to evangelicals, or simply tell them (as above) that they must find their salvation in Islam through greater self effort. Of course Muslims requesting baptism are adults, and thus are (ideally) baptized by the local bishop. Catholic bishops in the Muslim world have shown a very strong tendency towards favoring the security of their material goods (schools, clinics, churches) over the sporadic and risky requests posed to them by the Muslim seeking to know Christ, or for that matter the ex-Muslim who does know Christ and is seeking the sacrament of initiation into the church which the bishop oversees. The complications are, well, complicated. But we are called to be shrewd and wise by our Master. If the bishop needs to be able to deny that he has baptized a new Christian, then let him specify an old, retired priest or monk to do this. Or a very old and devout lay person perhaps. Or a visiting cleric whose expulsion from the country will not be harmful. Or something. But let there be a policy of some sort. In the West, the policy most worthy of emulation is your own: unapologetic, public, and bold. There are many secret disciples of Christ out there, even in the West. Some feel at home in the va-

rious evangelical congregations which, much more than Catholic congregations, accept them as brethren. But I strongly suspect that there are many who find in the hierarchy and liturgy of the Latin Church a much stronger attraction than they find in the spontaneous devotion (and sometimes emotionalism) of evangelical Christianity. In the West, let them be baptized by the head pastor of their local church--their bishop.

But let there be a policy. Let there be a custom. Let there be a tradition--written or unwritten, publicized or not. And again, this is not theoretical. I know well a new disciple of Christ who has been seeking baptism for some time. He has suffered for his faith more than most Christians ever will, and he knows the Scripture better too--having read the entire book several times. Yet the local Latin priest in his home city eventually chased him away and said he would call the police if he showed up again. Why? He was from a prominent Muslim family. The priest was correct in suspecting that persecution of the tiny Christian community (of all churches and denominations) would ensue, but what if there had been a quietly-communicated policy in place? What if the believer had been discretely told to visit a certain person in a certain town? All of this, to be sure, after his devotion to and comprehension of the Good News had been certified. As it stands right now, this young man was recently baptized by an evangelical pastor/elder. He was turned away from the church where he first sought fellowship. Is the fault his? With a sensitive policy in place (and here there was absolutely no possibility of the local bishop baptizing him--he controls far too many institutions and properties to make that worthwhile) this young man could have been a new, vibrant Catholic Christian. But he is not, and will never be. He is not in communion with you because of your brother bishop, and if he were to visit your church, St John Lateran in Rome, he would not be permitted to take communion from you.

These are three small reforms which I submit to you. The financial cost is minimal. The evangelistic benefits are great. The harvest of souls is eternal. Let us not be ashamed of the Gospel.

“There is a river, the streams whereof make glad the city of God, The holy place of the tabernacles of the Most High.” May God give us, his slaves, to drink of this water.

*On the feast of the martyr saint Piaton, year of our Lord 2010, or the 22nd day of Shawwal, 1431 AH.*