

Tunisia: Relations between Christians and Muslims blossom

Accounts of peaceful co-existence between Christians and Muslims. Archbishop Ilario Antoniazzi and journalist Hatem Bourial talk about the good relations between the two faith communities and about shared projects



Archbishop Antoniazzi

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“The Church in Tunisia faces a restriction that cannot be ignored: we can only profess our faith inside churches and buildings of religious congregations but all forms of public proclamation are forbidden. However, the new Constitution has introduced freedom of conscience, an important clause that is lacking in the constitutional charters of other North African countries. Furthermore, relations are good between Christians and Muslims, partly thanks to the hospitable and friendly nature of the Tunisians. I was over the moon when I heard last year that the Nobel Peace Prize was being awarded to the National Dialogue Quartet: this award belongs to the whole nation”. This is how 68-year-old Fr. Ilario Antoniazzi begins his story. He has served as Archbishop of Tunisia since 2013, having spent more than 50 years in the Middle East.

His relations with the institutions, which were already very cordial, improved even further after the terrorist attacks that hit the country in 2015: “Muslim authorities,” he says, “have repeatedly asked me to illustrate the Church’s message: the interest in Christianity and the contribution it can make to peace and the building of social ties, has grown.”

A small flock

The diocese of Tunis, (the only one in the country), is home to around 40 priests of 15 different nationalities and 90 nuns from different congregations; there are nine Catholic schools (from nursery school to middle school) attended by more than 8,000 Muslim students. There are five churches serving 40,000 Catholics, most of whom are foreigners: students from Sub-Saharan Africa and workers from European countries. “Ours is a small but very lively church that seeks to communicate God’s love with humility and perseverance, working for the good of everyone,” the archbishop says. “We try to be credible Christians, conscious of our limitations, we spread the seed with faith: when and how it will produce fruit is completely up to the Lord.”

The priest’s Muslim journalist friend

Hatem Bourial is a dear friend of Fr. Antoniazzi’s: the 58-year-old Muslim is married with a son and works as a journalist and cultural mediator. He describes his relations with Christians as “good, based on respect and closeness”. He studied at the local Marist school and grew up in a multicultural neighbourhood: “My neighbours who were French and of Italian descent, were like a second family to me”. He continued his studies in the United States where he was

hosted by a Catholic family. “Today,” he says, “I have Christian friends all over the world. Culturally, I am definitely a Christian, just as a Lebanese Catholic may call himself a Muslim in cultural terms”.

A centuries-old presence

Reflecting on Tunisian society, he adds: “Co-existence between Christians and Muslims seems to me to be harmonious; I see strong bonds between people. This country has been inhabited by large Christian communities that are currently small but still lively. The Christians living in Tunisia today are signs of a centuries-old presence and they remind us of the long Christian history of this land. Maintaining fraternal ties with them reminds me to keep alive the bond with great Christian figures of the past, with the martyrs and the fathers of the Church, starting with St. Augustine. Cultivating this rich historical knowledge means building a future of fraternity and peace.”

The work of Caritas

Caritas Tunisia is active on a number of fronts: rescuing migrants in transit, offering literacy courses for adults and assisting the elderly and the sick. It has also launched a support programme for poor families: it offers parents the opportunity to learn a trade through professional courses and gives them financial support to help them meet their day-to-day needs and start a small business. “In general, the sums we give out are loans, at least in part,” says Fr. Antoniazzi: “Families are given a responsibility and they promptly pay back what the sum received, proud in the knowledge that that money will go towards helping other people”.

Muslim volunteers

Caritas volunteers include quite a few Muslims: “in the city of Tunis alone, for example, there are over 50 Muslim doctors helping out, then there are the various pharmacists that provide us with free medicines,” the archbishop adds. “They have got involved in our aid work because they have understood that we do not distinguish between people, but work in a disinterested spirit of charity. There is a strong collaboration between us.”

Tunisians discover the world of Christianity

The attack on the Bardo National Museum in Tunis in March 2015, followed by another one three months later on the beach in the resort town of Sousse, left deep wounds in Tunisian society and triggered severe condemnation from the authorities and the entire population. “After the massacre on the beach,” says Fr. Antoniazzi, “the minister for religion asked me to accompany him to the hospitals to visit the wounded. In the months that followed, I was asked to participate in a number of meetings: the Tunisians have shown an interest in discovering more about Christian thinking on a number of specific issues such as forgiveness, peace and social justice. There are those who have never even heard of Jesus or seen a priest. On these occasions I take the liberty of openly quoting pages from the Gospel, the ones that talk about love of one’s enemies.”

The role of mass media

This Christmas too, the archbishop agreed to speak on Bourial’s radio show. Bourial says: “I invited Fr. Ilario, not just out of journalistic duty and as a gesture of attention to our audience,

giving them the chance to discover what this man of faith is made of but also to spread the message of peace at Christmas. When a friendship or mutual understanding translate into concrete gestures, then progress is made. Media around the world have the capacity to promote understanding between different faiths and make an important contribution fostering positive relations between Christians and Muslims; and they must do this. Those who seek understanding and peace, must make their voices heard through the media.”

A convincing testimony

According to Fr. Antoniazzi, truly religious men (of different religions) living together in peace “can testify that co-existence between religions is possible and prove wrong the assumption that religion intrinsically heralds fighting and conflict”. Bourial adds: “They are ‘ferryman’ that steer us towards a more peaceful future and have the duty of testimony. I for my part bear witness to closeness, mutual understanding, the intention of living alongside Christians respecting their differences, this is what dialogue is and this the example that should be set.”

An invitation

Fr. Antoniazzi concludes by saying: “Many perhaps think that Tunisia is an unstable Muslim country, where the Church is not present. But the situation is quite different: the Church is present, it is industrious and it gives hope. We are keen to establish contact with Italian dioceses or parishes and we would be glad to welcome anyone who wishes to come here on a pilgrimage, following in the footsteps of St. Augustine. This country, which is patiently building a democratic future for itself, has a great deal to offer and I invite everyone to visit it. It would be a help to this people and its young, who are sadly forced to leave their country as a result of unemployment.”