

Report on the Canterbury Conference

—

St. Nicholas Tavelić Network for Morisco Catholics

The St. Nicholas Tavelić Network for Morisco Catholics, or 'Tavelić Network' for short, is an organisation established for the purpose of meeting the pastoral, sacramental, and catechetical needs of converts within the Muslim world to the Catholic Faith, especially the many underground communities of said converts. As of the current date (31/08/2024), the organisation is assembling the necessary paperwork to set up a UK-based CIO for the purpose of better facilitating these needs.

A brief outline of the history of the Network is due. For some years prior to February of this year, members of the faithful from Muslim backgrounds began to connect through social media platforms and understand the many difficulties and similarities of one another's experiences; this was especially the case when coming to understand the difficulties of those converts living within Muslim countries, often lacking recourse to the sacraments and even being barred from attending the Sacred Liturgy. In a few cases pastoral help from clerics and Religious was outright refused. These difficulties, despite bearing greatly on the converts, understandably arose from the security concerns of the existing local Catholic communities who had regularised relations with the local Muslims and their governments. Whilst there was no official network at this point to organise, the community was beginning to grow and assemble informally.

During February of this year (2024), some members of this informal community providentially came into contact with a priest, who cannot be named for the sake of security, willing to work with us as a spiritual director and to baptise converts in those areas in which it is impossible for them to receive sacraments.

The aforementioned priest, after listening to and being deeply moved by the grievances of those converts, who lacked access to sacramental integration into the Church, he resolved to travel across North Africa in March to baptise the first cohort of our friends who were judged the most properly disposed to receive the sacrament of Faith. However, even after baptism, our brothers and sisters, who have adopted for themselves the name 'Morisco', titled after those Catholics who were of Muslim origin after the Spanish reconquista, continued to suffer ill treatment from the local Catholic community, even from the clergy. Testimonies about these situations were collected and sent with an appeal to the Holy Father by this priest. The Holy Father responded within three days with a handwritten letter, expressing shock at the situation, the severity of which he was not aware of.

In this letter, the Holy Father instructed us to continue the work of preaching, giving the sacraments, and catechising. He exhorted us to be at peace with the local Bishops, but promised his assistance if the situation saw no improvement. It was this letter which prompted those of us within the United Kingdom to hold a conference in Canterbury, meeting with the aforementioned priest for six days, in order to deal with each area of our objectives and needs. These areas were as follows.

(1) Inculturation

It was determined that inculturation should be dealt with twofold: *in generalis*, and *in specie*.

For the *pars generalis*, we acknowledged that inculturation needs to be considered as to its end, and in line with the four pillars of the Faith taught in the catechism after the fourfold example of the nascent Church, as recorded in the book of Acts, these being namely: the transmission of the Christian faith, the liturgical life, the moral life in Christ, and prayer.

With regards to end, we understood that inculturation was not merely something necessary in order to facilitate a more effective outreach to Muslims by reducing a cultural gap, nor to merely improve the quality of life for converts. Rather, inculturation was recognised, as per the doctrine of the Church, to be a moral obligation upon us converts, springing forth from that identity formed by our redemption, healing, and consecration in the sacraments of baptism and confirmation. We understood inculturation to spring from a manifold obligation derived from the first and fourth commandments: baptism purifies the soul and each thing in it, and begins the elevation of all those things. All of these fruits are then owed to God, by way of their being gifted to the Church, who is also owed them; Christ the Head and His Mystical Body form one *totus Christus*. Furthermore, all these things we have received prior to our baptismal purification have been received from parents, teachers, nations, and civilisations; all of these are owed as a sacrificial offering to God in His Church.

In relation to this, the internal structure of the converts' demographic and the different problems faced by people belonging to different polarities within it was carefully considered. For example, some converts were from a highly secularised background, whilst others from a firmly religious background. This meant that for some, inculturation would be at risk of being seen merely as a tool for making them more comfortable in their conversion. For others, it would be seen as associated too closely with their personal trauma. In some cases, where converts had been subjected to an initial formation in an (usually online) environment dominated by non-Catholic Christian undercurrents, and mostly centred upon polemics, they had unconsciously adopted ideological axioms which rendered offensive to them elements of the

Catholic Faith which they considered reminiscent of Islam, let alone those elements of Islamic culture which were compatible with Catholic articulation, worship, and life.

Furthermore, in each of the four areas, it was agreed that inculturation would need to follow a careful differentiation of the elements found within Islamic cultures. We were tasked with compiling a 'DHD' document, which would differentiate 'divine, human, and diabolical' things.

'Divine things' were composed of those truths of Christian revelation which had been found in the beliefs of Muslims, such as the prophethood of Abraham, the virgin birth of the Messiah, the beatific rest, etc. In our inculturation of these truths we seek to communicate them in a way familiar to those of an Islamic background, showing how the Catholic faith understands these things in a manner more direct and intimate than Islam, and how it leads them to their supernatural fulfilment in God.

'Human things' were composed of those elements which were from a natural, or purely human, origin, especially those of Christian pre-Islamic origin; some of these were considered to be valuable, such as the strong emphasis upon *tawhid*, the unity of the Godhead, and others to be incidentally harmful. We seek to clarify, in light of the supernatural, how the Catholic faith understands the natural aspects of these things more completely, and distinguish between the practices we can incorporate with those that we cannot.

'Diabolical things' were composed of those things believed and practised by Muslims which were false, or even intrinsically harmful. These last were important to consider, as it was recognised and agreed that we needed to develop ways in which a project of inculturation would correct against them in all four areas. This end would be achieved by two means: firstly, demonstrating the way in which the Church corrects against these errors through its guidance. Secondly, to make manifest that these errors not only depart from the Catholic Faith, but also from natural reason, and thus better conveying that a true submission to God is perfected within the Catholic Faith.

One of the converts from our network thought of an interesting analogy for this structure of relations between Islamic elements and the Catholic Faith: Islam could be seen as a 'broken' or 'distorted' mirror, and from this analogy two insights could be discerned: Firstly, that there are certain less appreciated yet authentic elements which are reflected, though poorly and in an incomplete manner, within Islam. Secondly, just as natural power cannot restore the brokenness of a mirror, so too are Islam's faults unable to be solved except by that Spirit of Healing – only to be found within the Catholic Church through the deposit of Faith entrusted to her.

For the *pars specialis*, we came to acknowledge in all four areas a surpassingly vital significance:

First, that the Catholic Faith must become expressible according to a certain elevated use of terminology used within Islamic philosophy and theology, rather than attempting to coin new terms, whilst strongly correcting against the falsehoods present within those sciences. This is elaborated on further in section 5.

Second, that the Catholic Faith must be able to be celebrated in such a manner as making use of those *good and true* things which had been in common within the Islamic and Latin Catholic liturgical traditions throughout their respective histories. In this light, we were particularly concerned with the *Ordo Initiationis Christianae Adultorum* (OCIA) being carefully followed in all of its rubrics. Certain authentic aspects of the daily modular prayer (*salah*) can also guide and inform the process of producing inculturated adaptations to the *liturgia horarum*. Moreover, in collaboration with the relevant experts, to develop suitable styles of recitation of the Holy Scriptures, in order to facilitate a reverent use within a homiletic context and beyond.

Third, that the Catholic Faith possesses various ethical elements which have departed from public awareness today and which have equivalents, albeit sometimes distorted in intention or execution, in Islamic ethics *akhlaq* and jurisprudence (*fiqh*). For example, the importance of the virtues of *modestia* and *pudicitas* as regards their relation to veiling, in a catechetical context, as is discussed below in section 4.

Fourth, that the Catholic Faith is able to supernaturally complete and fulfil the spiritual meanings of many aspects of Islam which have been largely lost or forgotten among contemporary Muslims. For example, the beatific life and its rest, which only the continual remembrance (*dhikr*, or *meditatio*) of God can provide for the human heart. Further, to foster devotion among the converts to the patriarchal and prophetic saints who hold significant roles in Islam, with an emphasis on Abraham (*Ibrahim*), the prophet Elijah (*Ilyas*), St. John the Baptist (*Yahya*), and his father Zechariah (*Zakariyyah*). Moreover, in the same vein, para-liturgical emphasis through poetry and chant (*nasheed*) upon the exalted honour of martyrdom (being a *shahid*), among other elements of the faith, was also deemed important.

(2) Liturgy: Ordo Initiationis Christianae Adultorum

It was apparent that a strong desire to encourage a culture of formation among the converts was present, and that a detailed study and adaptation of the OCIA, in connection with the relevant experts in the

scholarship on formation and catechetics, is due in order to achieve this. Further, in our discussions, it was apparent that the benefits of the various rites of this *ordo* were invaluable to this end, due to the practices and dispositions imparted by them. We placed particular attention for now upon the Scrutinies, which lead the converts through an examination of conscience, and the *intense preparation* during the Lenten period seeks to instil the necessary dispositions for an efficacious reception of the sacraments. However, despite their great value, it was recognised that not all of the converts would have sufficient access to these rites due to the limited availability of the priests.

As such, it was determined that an adaptation of the OCIA rites be produced which can be used personally to foster the same effects, alongside a series of spiritual and ascetical guidelines for exercises to be undertaken during the preparatory phases, simultaneous with preparatory catecheses. It was further determined, through a consultation with a leading liturgical scholar, Fr. Gabriel Díaz-Patri, that, whilst being guided by former rituals, the adapted rites were to include certain abjurations of specific and dangerous errors within the Islamic mindset for those preparing to receive the sacraments of initiation. Moreover, an emphasis on the four senses of scripture, with their relation to the life of prayer, was deemed essential to impress upon the converts during this period of formation and ways in which to encourage this through the adapted rites would need to be further studied.

(3) Liturgy: Mass and Liturgia Horarum

Among our discussions, liturgy proved to be one of the most fruitful as its relevance penetrated all other areas due to its catechetical and sacramental role within Catholic faith and practice. Above all, it was unanimously agreed that a spirit of *Latinitas* was to be promoted and fostered within the Sacred Liturgy, and this is already being reached through the teaching of Latin to the converts, since, being able to simultaneously hear and chant the Latin whilst understanding it has a certain effect; better eliciting the affections and better disposing the soul to the graces of contemplation.

As such, it was determined that the liturgy would normatively be chanted, and at the very least intoned. It was identified that a generous attitude in matters such as these should be cultivated within the celebration of the Liturgy: not an attitude seeking only to satisfy the bare minimum rubrical requirements, but rather one that seeks to keep the Sacred Liturgy as effective in its celebration for the salvation of souls as is possible under any given circumstances. So essential was this identification that it was deemed inexpedient, on account of losing access to the great patrimony of the Latin Church, to forgo or not emphasise its use.

This would also be justified through the mediaeval Arabic literary concept of the *fuṣḥatayn*; that there are two languages especially worthy of intellectual, liturgical and sacral use on account of their intrinsic features: Arabic and Latin. Thus, we seek to promote the use of both languages, whilst also implementing the use of certain aspects of the ancient Latin liturgical tradition that are best suited to the sensibilities of piety among our people; for ideal formation takes place in the mother tongue, as teaching does not only pertain to the intellect, but also to the heart. For this, as previously mentioned, further study and consultation with the relevant experts in matters of musicology, liturgical use of Arabic and Latin, and other general matters in regards to the liturgy, its history, etc. is needed.

We began to clarify these possibilities and the limits for inculturation with the aforementioned Fr. Gabriel Díaz-Patri. Each proposal raised by us in regards to liturgical inculturation was discussed at length. The most significant of these proposals concerned the use of certain customs with a concrete precedent, particularly and chiefly within the Latin patrimony. By Father, we also obtained a further identification of those scholars who can help with specific aims relevant to this, such as Dr. Marcel Pérès in the field of musicology. A meeting with him and some of our Network members has been arranged for the second half of September; this shall produce its own report.

(4) Catechetical Formation

It became apparent to us that during our discussion and reflection on catechesis that many of the converts suffered under ideological axioms and misconceptions that they had inherited from a highly polemicising and Protestantism-dominated culture of online content which left much to be desired. Often these articles, videos, and virtual communities would present arguments against Islam that were mostly rooted either in misguided motivations or were simply arguments of little intrinsic value; relying more on emotional shock factor rather than on establishing legitimate motives of credibility. Some of these arguments even crossed into the territory of the coercive or manipulative methods that recent ecclesiastical circles and Popes have called ‘proselytism’, and condemned by that name.

The effects that this content had upon the converts within our community were noticeable, since it affected both their own relationship to God and their understanding of the virtue of *religio* itself and all that is contained within it. The way in which some converts viewed and understood study and self-formation was also negatively affected, seeing it more so as an undesirable burden, or even conflating it with the process of training for the winning public arguments, which most often serve more so to inflate pride than edify. In other converts, this deficient style of apologetics made them grow a hatred for Islam and those things within it that were even shared by our own tradition like the daily

prayer (*salah*), or shared understanding of *modestia* and *pudicitas*. And so, if they hated these things, they would be unable to begin to understand how our Catholic Faith elevates them to their supernatural fulfilment in God.

It goes without saying that many were unaware of the basic elements of authentic fundamental theology, as this content is sparse and represented by few, if any, online. It was determined that an authentically Catholic initiative of apologetics, whilst at the same time imparting the genuine method of *apologia*, was needed. Furthermore, it was agreed that serious research and consultation would need to be undertaken in order to understand the possibility and limits of using the virtues of certain important Islamic figures, particularly for *initial* converts, within the catechetical material and method, with a focus on how these virtues are perfected in the Catholic Faith beyond what was possible in an Islamic context.

As stated above, *instruction is best done in the mother tongue*, and yet, it was brought to our attention by the converts that many fundamental resources for formation were lacking within Arabic, or that those which were already in Arabic were of a poor quality; not to mention the even worse state of things in other languages used by historically Muslim ethnic groups. In order to create a catechetical method suited to the attitudes and needs of the converts, it was determined that a sustained effort to translate this material into at least Arabic was urgently needed. Currently, one of our converts, already trained in classical Arabic, is in the process of translating the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* among other important texts. However, it was agreed that a list of potential translators would need to be drawn up, funding them to contribute to this essential translation project.

Finally, it was determined that the formalisation of a ‘buddy-system’ was due in order to ensure that converts have trusted mentors who can also serve to hold them to account in their studies and formation in situations where the priests are unable to. This system was deemed essential on that account, and also presented many accidental benefits such as fostering strong communal ties and helping converts to see the Network less as a passive reception of content, but more so an active engagement with it.

(5) Language & Translation

One of the aids to formation, as discussed above, was that of language and the availability of resources within Arabic and in English, as well as other languages. These texts would be vital for two purposes; chief among these was that the converts require access to texts which they can easily read and be formed by. The second purpose of these texts was to the end of improving dialogue with our existing and future

correspondents among Islamic scholars. Translation of important documents relevant to catechesis are already in progress, as was mentioned, and this will continue.

It was determined that a glossary of transferable scholastic terms for philosophical and theological concepts with pre-existing Arabic terms from within Islamic tradition was most suitable for the converts, rather than trying to coin new terms arbitrarily, to aid in the understanding among converts in key aspects of the faith that they typically struggle with, pre-eminent examples being Trinitarianism and the purpose and efficacy of the Life and Passion of the Incarnate Word.

Likewise, obtaining access to the Vatican's contemporary Latin dictionary would aid in the creation of linguistic materials for the converts that better facilitate a culture of *Latinitas* through the regular use and application of it in their life. This would also enable the Latin education of the converts to be further solidified through the creation of podcasts and catechetical videos within Latin.

Due to Arabic being only one of many common languages spoken within the Islamic world, it was also agreed that potential translators would need to be sought out and funded in order to have catechetical resources within Urdu, Farsi, Bahasa Melayu, Bahasa Indonesia, etc. Upon reflection, it was also realised that our community was to a large extent limited in that it could only reach those within the Muslim world already competent in English. In order to better reach Muslims, it was determined that English teachers would need to be found and funded to help non-English speaking converts better communicate with the wider community and to aid in their catechesis lessons which take place in English currently. In the long term, we will need to train bilingual converts to the point of required competence for catechising others.

Much of the secondary literature relevant to the conversion of Muslims to Catholicism, that would be vital for our Network and its mission, remains in French and Spanish. An identification and retrieval of this literature is currently in progress, and similar to the other goals identified in this section, it would need the work of translators to make it possible.

(6) Epilogue: Our Priorities & Needs

The priest working with us, after our six-day conference, presented the letter expressing our desires and needs to the Holy Father. He was graciously afforded the opportunity of meeting with him to speak twice, beyond what we expected. These meetings took place on the ninth and tenth of August of this year, almost immediately after the conference.

In their meeting, the Holy Father approved of our planned scholastic symposia with Islamic theologians. Establishing this alternative discourse would change the approach to dialogue that many currently have, moving away from polemical apologists towards more scholastic and academic minded individuals, and changing the environment of inter-religious dialogue between Muslims and Catholics. Further, it will help in minimising the cultural gap between Muslims and Catholics, and thus aid in facilitating conversions.

He also enthusiastically approved of our strong desire for liturgical formation. The Holy Father desired us to find ways to have inconspicuous places of worship for the converts within Muslim countries, and as such, we would need to generate the funding for both renting properties and for seeking legal advice.

Further, the Holy Father has insisted upon the importance of various customs related to the moral life relevant to ancient Christian discipline; notable was his insistence on the retention of the authentic practice of veiling (*hijab*) among female converts, not merely deeming it merely desirable, but even necessary that we exhort them to this.

The Holy Father encouraged us in pursuing a particularly eminent need of ours, that being that we need to find potential, and ideally regular, donors through wide and prolific advertising campaigns; at conferences, through social media, networking, and other means. We need to also identify and network with many more converts across the Muslim world in order to catechise them, receive them into the Church, and create strong communities of common worship and fellowship. Thus, our networking is two-fold, oriented towards finding both financial supporters and fellow converts. It was additionally emphasised that we must identify individuals whose talents are vitally important to our mission and who can be paid a salary to be enabled to work full time for the Network. Father requested in particular that we look for individuals who can help propagate the mission, catechise converts, and work on liturgical inculturation.

Finally, we need to gain further support from the clergy and Westerners in our work through social media and by other means, such as street preaching, and the creation of our own literary resources. We hope that this can contribute to restoring the fundamental place of mission in individual and parochial spirituality.

Above all, it is absolutely necessary that we are included in the intentions of the prayers of many of the faithful. Ideally, we would like parishes to make each Friday a special day of prayer for the conversions of Muslims, dedicated to the Sacred Heart, with a homily on ascetical practice and its connection to

mission, following the example set by the late Franciscan convert from Islam, Fr. Jean Mohamed ben Abd al-Jalil, in the journal '*En terre d'Islam*'.

For the purpose of contacting us:

Our organisation lead
07715937120

syedhasanaa@gmail.com, +44