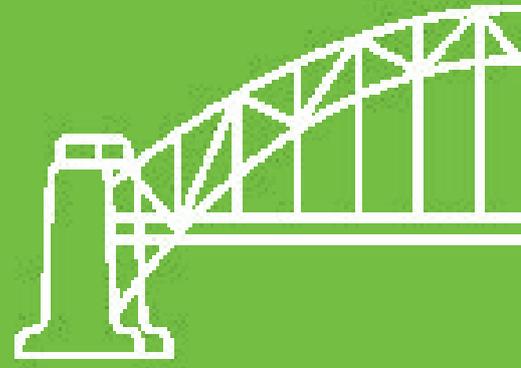




Bridges

Building relationships between Christians and Muslims



No. 91 June 2021

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From the Editor

In March-April, Christians completed the Lenten fast and celebrated the feast of Easter. In April-May, Muslims completed the Ramadan fast and celebrated the feast of *Eid al-Fitr*. For Christians, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit is the fullest revelation of God's love. For Muslims, God's final revelation is the holy Qur'an, which came down from heaven on *Lailat al-Qadr* (the Night of Power/Destiny) in Ramadan.

We share Ramadan and *Eid* messages from the Centre (p. 2) and from the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (p. 8). In 2019 Covid restrictions shut down places of worship and public gatherings. It was a particular joy this year to gather again, to pray, and to share Iftar dinners (p.3).

In May 2021, Pope Francis visited Iraq. He met with Ayatollah al-Sistani in Najaf, heralding a new beginning in Catholic-Shia relations. At Ur he met with the leaders of all faiths and prayed for all the children of Abraham. His trip was a pilgrimage of dialogue, healing and encouragement (pp. 6-7).

Muslims cooperate with Christians in building churches in Egypt (p. 4), and a Christian serves law and order in Muslim-majority Indonesia (p.5). Although the representation of Muslims in movies is improving (p. 4), stereotypes still lead to prejudice and Islamophobia (p. 5). Christians and Muslims can best learn about each other, and about their own religion, through encounter with the other. For example, Sana Afiouni shares how she learnt about Islam by being the only Muslim in a Catholic school (p. 9).

The joy of *Lailat al-Qadr* was marred by the attack on worshippers in Jerusalem's al-Aqsa Mosque (pictured), sacred to Muslims, on the Temple Mount, sacred to Jews, a few blocks from the Holy Sepulchre, sacred to Christians. The cycle of violent retaliation over the next 11 days left more than 248 Palestinians and 13 Israelis killed. This conflict cannot be resolved by missiles and rockets, but by dialogue, encounter and respect for the common humanity of all, leading to a just resolution of the underlying issues of occupation and dispossession.

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Christchurch commemoration

On 15 March, the Australian National Imams Council (ANIC) commemorated those killed in the terrorist attacks in Christchurch on that day two years earlier. **Fr Patrick McInerney** was an invited guest. Speakers included Sheikh Shadi Alsuleiman, President of ANIC, and Dr Ibrahim Abu Mohammed, Grand Mufti of Australia. The testimony of Mrs Rana Elasmr, the victim of a vicious and unprovoked physical attack at a restaurant in Parramatta in November 2019 simply because she was a Muslim woman, was particularly moving. Pregnant at the time, she feared for the life of her unborn child. Ramia Sultan, solicitor and ANIC

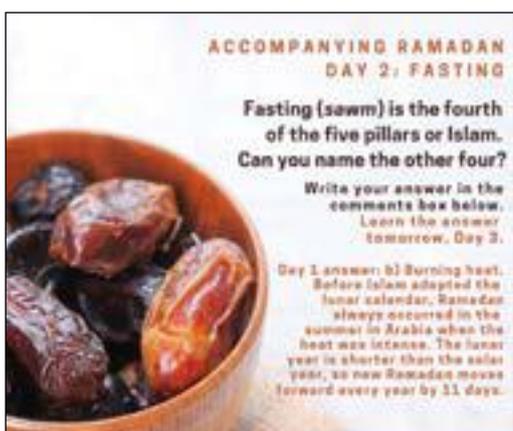
advisor, noted that these attacks are not “unforeseen”. They originate in derogatory remarks about Islam and escalate into violence against Muslims. She noted that Islamophobia is real and appealed for better legal protection. In solemn remembrance, the names of the 51 men, women and children killed on that tragic day were read out and their images displayed on the screen, followed by a prayer for all the victims. For written report see <https://bit.ly/3e3bFvq>. For video see <https://bit.ly/3xACVc8>.



Solidarity in the digital age

In April-May, Centre staff posted video greetings on the CCCMR Facebook page to wish their Muslim sisters and brothers a blessed Ramadan and *Eid al-Fitr*. The digital greetings are just one way to express solidarity with Muslims as they embark on a month of fasting and prayer in accordance with Quranic direction. The Ramadan message attracted more than 500 views and numerous comments from Muslims

who were touched by the message. It was also shared 33 times to date! The *Eid* video message, released on 13 May, similarly reached hundreds of people and received comments of appreciation.



In addition to the video greetings, this year the Centre ran a daily Facebook post throughout the 30 days of the month of Ramadan, sharing information and inviting followers to answer general questions about Islam, as provided by the booklet *Accompanying Ramadan*, authored by Cardinal Michael Fitzgerald MAfr. You can still view our video messages and the Q&A posts on our [Facebook page](https://bit.ly/2Q8MaPW), <https://bit.ly/2Q8MaPW>.



Meeting Ayatollah Al-Ansari

by Fr Patrick McInerney

During his March 2021 visit to Iraq, Pope Francis made history by meeting His Eminence Ayatollah Al-Sistani in Najaf, Iraq (see feature p. 6). It was an outreach to the Shia Muslim community, paralleling the rapprochement with Sunni Muslims through the Imam of Al-Azhar, Sheik Ahmad Al-Tayyeb. Following their example, Cardinal Gregory and Imam Sayyid M. B. Kashmiri met in Washington. I posted reports of these meetings on Facebook. Seeing these posts, a representative of

His Eminence Ayatollah Al-Ansari, who represents Ayatollah Al-Sistani in Australia and New Zealand, contacted me proposing a similar meeting between Catholic and Shia leaders in Sydney. As a preliminary, I was privileged to meet Ayatollah Al-Ansari in his residence. I invited him to the Interfaith Iftar co-hosted by the Diocese of Parramatta and the Centre, and he reciprocated by inviting me to a meal in his home. I look forward to the meeting between bishops and the Ayatollah. For Pope Francis and Ayatollah Al-Sistani see <https://bit.ly/3u2s1K4>. For Cardinal Gregory and Imam Kashmiri see <https://bit.ly/2R3DGK5>.

Interfaith Iftar with friends

April and May were filled with invitations from Muslim friends to join them for Iftar (the meal at dusk to break fasting during Ramadan). Some were more formal affairs, such as the Premier's Iftar, or those hosted by an organisation or school, such as Amity College.

Others are more intimate and personal. Centre staff, **Fr Patrick McInerney, Ryan Epondulan** and **Kim Chong**, are grateful for the hospitality they received as they joined in breaking the fast with their Muslim friends. In return, the Centre, along with the Diocese of Parramatta, hosted an Iftar on 26 April at the Novotel in Parramatta. Representatives from the Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish and Sikh communities came together in breaking the fast with our Muslim brothers and sisters. A mesmerising moment was observing the *maghrib* prayer (pictured), where representatives from different faith backgrounds stood behind our Muslims friends in spiritual solidarity, praying, meditating, reflecting, each according to their tradition. For more, see Catholic Outlook <https://bit.ly/3o77UrW>.



Celebrating Eid al-Fitr

Marking the end of Ramadan is the religious feast of *Eid al-Fitr*. **Fr Patrick McInerney** and **Ryan Epondulan** joined in celebrations at mosques, community centres and friends' homes. They handed out greeting cards and this year's Ramadan and *Eid al-Fitr* message from the Pontifical Council of Interreligious Dialogue in recognition of the special festival (see page 8 for the message). Many Muslim friends and acquaintances approached Fr Patrick and Ryan in appreciation of their continuous support of Muslim communities.

Muslims can help build churches in Egypt

Muslims are now permitted to collaborate with Christians in building any of the 44 churches currently under construction and the restoration of 16 historic churches in Egypt. The approval by the Egyptian government comes after a *fatwa* issued in January by the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Shawki Allam, allowed Muslims to “work or take part in the construction of churches for a salary”. This is seen as a radical change in the Muslim-majority country, where it was considered taboo and even blasphemous for Muslims to take part in the construction of Christian places of worship. Tom Doyle of Uncharted Ministries says this was a big step to “better relations between Muslims and Christians”. *Condensed and adapted from <https://bit.ly/3nEemqm>.*



Tragedy in Yemen by Patrick McInerney

I spent two memorable summers in the Yemen in 1984 and 1985, ministering to the expatriate Catholic community, mostly hospitality and health workers from Asia and aid workers from Europe and North America. Hence, I have a soft spot for the country and its people. That is why I am saddened by this news report: “The civil war in Yemen is currently the world’s worst humanitarian catastrophe. A hundred thousand Yemenis have died, more than eight million are displaced, and 80 percent of the population is on the brink of starvation.” An internal

conflict escalated into a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Iran supported the Houthi rebels in the north, while the USA provided military support to the Saudis. Bombing targeted schools, hospitals, factories and weddings. President Biden has changed policy. Let us hope and pray that hostilities cease immediately so that humanitarian aid reaches the long-suffering people. *For details see <https://bit.ly/33BfvWl>.*

Muslim representation changing for the better

A series of panels on Muslims in entertainment at this year's Sundance Film Festival has signaled a positive change in Muslim representation in media. After 9/11, Muslims went from being largely invisible to being regularly portrayed as terrorists or villains in film and television. In news coverage, "terrorist" is almost exclusively applied to those associated with Islam. This has real-world effects. A 2015 study found that exposure to negative portrayals "increased perceptions of Muslims as aggressive, increased support for harsh civil restrictions of Muslim Americans, and increased support for military action in Muslim countries". Thankfully, more shows are including Muslim characters who are not linked to terrorism. Drama series *Transplant* features a Syrian Muslim doctor (pictured). Hulu's *Ramy*, created by Arab-American and Golden Globe-winner Ramy Youssef, has been lauded for its depiction of American Muslims. Other shows like DC's *Legends of Tomorrow*, *The Bold Type*, *FBI* and *Orange is the New Black* also feature prominent Muslim characters. "The tide is finally turning. Not only do we want to represent you authentically, we actually want you to tell your story," said producer, writer and director Cherien Dabis at the Festival. *Condensed and adapted from <https://cnet.co/3hiqbRV>.*





Indonesia appoints Christian as police chief

For the first time in almost 50 years, Muslim-majority Indonesia has welcomed a Christian police officer to be the nation's new police chief. President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo personally nominated Comr. Gen. Listyo Sigit Prabowo for the post. Prabowo is the first Christian and the third from a religious minority to be appointed in the national role since the country's independence in 1945. Prabowo said he will champion religious freedom, promote diversity and "create a trustworthy and transparent policy, to be the protector of all citizens of the nation". The Communion of Churches

in Indonesia states that the new chief's religion was not the basis of his appointment, but what he has accomplished for the country. They added that Prabowo's appointment "shows that every citizen has the same rights to reach a position of leadership". *Condensed and adapted from <https://bit.ly/3f19cgr>.*

Islamophobia on the rise, reports UN

In March, the UN Human Rights Council released a report highlighting growing Islamophobia and excessive surveillance of Muslims in countries around the world.

Titled *Countering Islamophobia/Anti-Muslim Hatred to Eliminate Discrimination and Intolerance Based on Religion or Belief*, the report notes that in surveys conducted in 2018-19 "nearly four in 10 Europeans held unfavourable views about Muslims".

Results from a USA poll shows that "30 per cent of Americans view Muslims 'in a negative light'." The report also highlighted that many states respond to security threats with "measures which disproportionately target Muslims".

Further, in states where Muslims are in the minority, they are frequently targeted based on stereotypical 'Muslim' characteristics, such as names, skin colour and clothing. The document calls for governments around the world to fight discriminatory practices against Muslims across all settings – from police enforcement to the filtering of Islamophobic content on social media. Further interfaith dialogue between communities and outreach programs at various levels are strongly encouraged. *Condensed and adapted from <https://bit.ly/3yyXbM1>.*



UN Secretary-General António Guterres speaking at the al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo in April 2019, where he underscored the need to fight Islamophobia.



Violence against Australian mosques

The terror attack on worshippers at mosques in Christchurch in March 2019 by an Australian perpetrator spurred researchers from Charles Sturt University, The University of Sydney, and The University of Tasmania to survey, in 2020, 75 mosques throughout Australia about their experiences of violence from 2014 to 2019. More than half (58.2%) of participating mosques had experienced targeted violence in that time, which included arson, graffiti and other vandalism. Beyond attacks against mosques, attendees experienced Islamophobic violence, such as physical assault, verbal abuse and online abuse and hate mail, including death

threats. Just under 40% of the mosques reported verbal abuse of their attendees in 2019. In addition, 17% had received threats of violence (with one actual physical assault), while 20% experienced objects thrown at them or the mosque. Researchers suggest a national, independent hate crime reporting system is needed to capture the experiences of targeted communities in Australia. The Islamophobia Register Australia (<https://www.islamophobia.com.au/>) offers a forum through which some Muslims can report their experiences of Islamophobic violence. *Condensed and adapted from <https://bit.ly/3f7R8q5>.*

Pope Francis in Iraq, 5-7 March 2021

Rev Dr Patrick McInerney reflects on Pope Francis' historic visit to Iraq as His Holiness continues the apostolic mission of interreligious dialogue

It was an historic trip – the first time a pope visited Iraq. It was a risky trip – due to the dual threats of violence and the pandemic. It was a shepherd's trip – showing solidarity with a people who, for nearly two decades, have suffered the ravages of war.

Iraq has been in upheaval since the 2003 invasion. At that time, Christians numbered 1.5 million in a total population of about 39 million, but numbers have plummeted to less than 400,000. The Christian community is one of the oldest in the world, dating back to the first century. It suffered vicious persecution under the so-called 'Islamic State'.

Pope Francis' three-day visit to Iraq highlighted three themes: dialogue, solidarity and peace.

On his arrival in Baghdad he greeted Catholics, other Christians, civil representatives and leaders of other religions: "May God grant that we journey together as brothers and sisters in 'the firm conviction that authentic teachings of religions invite us to remain rooted in the values of peace [...] mutual understanding, human fraternity and harmonious coexistence'" (*Document on Human Fraternity*, Abu Dhabi, 4/2/19). "May no one be considered a second-class citizen."

In the holy city of Najaf, the Shia equivalent of Rome, near the shrine of the first Shi'ite Imam, Ali ibn Talib, Pope Francis met His Eminence, Ayatollah al-Sistani, one of the most revered leaders in Shia Islam. They talked for 45 minutes, much more than had been scheduled. The Pope thanked the Ayatollah for having "raised his voice in defence of the weakest and most persecuted" during the violence afflicting Iraq. The Ayatollah "affirmed his concern that Christian citizens should live

like all Iraqis in peace and security, and with the full constitutional rights". The historic meeting heralded a new stage in Catholic relations with Shia Islam, who number 10 percent of all Muslims.

In Ur, birthplace of the Patriarch Abraham, addressing a multi-faith gathering, Pope Francis recalled the stars, the number of which would be Abraham's descendants: "Today we, Jews, Christians and Muslims, together with our brothers and sisters of other religions, honour our father Abraham by doing as he did: we look up to heaven and we journey on earth."

The stars of heaven remind us of the source of our unity: "This is true religiosity: to worship God and to love our neighbour. In today's world, which often forgets or presents distorted images of the Most High, believers are called to bear witness to his goodness, to show his paternity through our fraternity. [...] From this place, where faith was born, from the land of our father Abraham, let us affirm that God is merciful and that the greatest blasphemy is to profane his name by hating our brothers and sisters. Hostility, extremism and violence are not born of a religious heart: they are betrayals of religion."



Pope Francis prays with religious leaders during his visit to Iraq in March.

On the theme of earthly journey, he noted, "... we are called to leave behind those ties and attachments that, by keeping us enclosed in our own groups, prevent us from welcoming God's boundless love and from seeing others as our brothers and sisters. We need to move beyond ourselves, because we need one another".

The corollary of these heavenly and earthly dimensions is that we must work for peace. "There will be no peace as long as we see others as them and not us. [...]" Anyone with the courage to look at the stars, anyone who believes in God, has no enemies to fight. He or she has only one enemy to face, an enemy that stands at the door of the heart and knocks to enter. That enemy is hatred." He concluded with the 'Prayer of the Children of Abraham' (right).

In Mosul, amid the rubble of churches destroyed by ISIS, Pope Francis introduced a prayer for the victims of war with these words:

*If God is the God of life – for so he is – then it is wrong for us to kill our brothers and sisters in his Name.
If God is the God of peace – for so he is – then it is wrong for us to wage war in his Name.
If God is the God of love – for so he is – then it is wrong for us to hate our brothers and sisters.*

At the final Mass in Baghdad, Pope Francis used a paradoxical expression, "To cleanse our hearts, we need to dirty our hands ...". In other words, it is only by taking responsibility, by caring for others, that we can overcome the divisions in our hearts and in our world.

Speeches of Pope Francis:

Meeting with Civil Society, Baghdad: <https://bit.ly/3nJm6Y3>; Meeting with Christians, Baghdad: <https://bit.ly/33b9GP3>; Interreligious Meeting, Ur: <https://bit.ly/2S7qIvh>; Homily in Cathedral, Baghdad: <https://bit.ly/3e7FWcv>; Prayer for the Victims of War, Mosul: <https://bit.ly/3gNnSWK>; Visit to Qaraqosh Community: <https://bit.ly/3eJrXZt>; Homily in Erbil Stadium: <https://bit.ly/3xDzVvS>

Commentaries on Visit:

Lamb, "Pope and Ayatollah", The Tablet: <https://bit.ly/3vxVcFo>; O'Connell, "Pope Francis makes history", America: <https://bit.ly/3nNRXqN>; Lamb, "Pilgrim of Peace", The Tablet: <https://bit.ly/3gNsfcC>

Pope's prayer for the children of Abraham

Almighty God, our Creator, you love our human family and every work of your hands: As children of Abraham, Jews, Christians and Muslims, together with other believers and all persons of good will, we thank you for having given us Abraham, a distinguished son of this noble and beloved country, to be our common father in faith.

We thank you for his example as a man of faith, who obeyed you completely, left behind his family, his tribe and his native land, and set out for a land that he knew not.

We thank you too, for the example of courage, resilience, strength of spirit, generosity and hospitality set for us by our common father in faith.

We thank you in a special way for his heroic faith, shown by his readiness even to sacrifice his son in obedience to your command. We know that this was an extreme test, yet one from which he emerged victorious, since he trusted unreservedly in you, who are merciful and always offer the possibility of beginning anew.

We thank you because, in blessing our father Abraham, you made him a blessing for all peoples. We ask you, the God of our father Abraham and our God, to grant us a strong faith, a faith that abounds in good works, a faith that opens our hearts to you and to all our brothers and sisters; and a boundless hope capable of discerning in every situation your fidelity to your promises. Make each of us a witness of your loving care for all, particularly refugees and the displaced, widows and orphans, the poor and the infirm.

Open our hearts to mutual forgiveness and in this way make us instruments of reconciliation, builders of a more just and fraternal society.

Welcome into your abode of peace and light all those who have died, particularly the victims of violence and war.

Assist the authorities in the effort to seek and find the victims of kidnapping and in a special way to protect women and children.

Help us to care for the earth, our common home, which in your goodness and generosity you have given to all of us.

Guide our hands in the work of rebuilding this country, and grant us the strength needed to help those forced to leave behind their homes and lands, enabling them to return in security and dignity, and to embark upon a new, serene and prosperous life. Amen.

Christians and Muslims: Witnesses of Hope

Message for the Month of Ramadan and *Eid al-Fitr* from the PCID

Dear Muslim brothers and sisters,

We at the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue are glad to offer you our fraternal good wishes for a month rich in divine blessings and spiritual advancement. Fasting, along with prayer, almsgiving and other pious practices, brings us closer to God our Creator and to all those with whom we live and work, and helps us to continue walking together on the path of fraternity.

During these long months of suffering, anguish and sorrow, especially during the lockdown periods, we sensed our need for divine assistance, but also for expressions and gestures of fraternal solidarity: a telephone call, a message of support and comfort, a prayer, help in buying medicines or food, advice, and, to put it simply, the security of knowing that someone is always there for us in times of necessity.

The divine assistance that we need and seek, especially in circumstances like those of the current pandemic, is manifold: God's mercy, pardon, providence and other spiritual and material gifts. Yet, what we need most in these times, is hope. At this time, then, we think it fitting to share with you some reflections on this virtue.

As we are aware, hope, while certainly including optimism, goes beyond it. While optimism is a human attitude, hope has its basis in something religious: God loves us, and therefore cares for us through his providence. He does this in his own mysterious ways, which are not always comprehensible to us. In these situations, we are like children who are certain of the loving care of their parents, but are not yet able to comprehend its full extent.

Hope arises from our belief that all our problems and trials have a meaning, a value and a purpose, however difficult or impossible it may be for us to understand the reason for them or to find a way out of them.

Hope also carries with it belief in the goodness present in the heart of every person. Many times, in situations of difficulty and despair, help, and the hope it brings, can come from those whom we least expect.

Human fraternity, in its numerous manifestations, thus becomes a source of hope for all, especially for those in any kind of need. Thanks be to God our Creator, and

to our fellow men and women, for the quick response and generous solidarity shown by believers and also persons of good will with no religious affiliation in times of disaster, whether natural or man-made, like conflicts and wars. All these persons and their goodness remind us believers that the spirit of fraternity is universal, and that it transcends all boundaries: ethnic, religious, social and economic. In adopting this spirit, we imitate God, who looks benevolently upon the humanity he created, upon all other creatures and upon the entire universe. This is why the growing care and concern for the planet, our "common home", is, according to Pope Francis, yet another sign of hope.

We are also aware that hope has its enemies: lack of faith in God's love and care; loss of trust in our brothers and sisters; pessimism; despair and its opposite, unfounded presumption; unfair generalizations based on one's own negative experiences, and so forth. These harmful thoughts, attitudes and reactions must be effectively countered, so as to strengthen hope in God and trust in all our brothers and sisters.

In his recent Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis speaks frequently of hope. There he tells us: "I invite everyone to renewed hope, 'for hope speaks to us of something deeply rooted in every human heart, independently of our circumstances and historical conditioning. Hope speaks to us of a thirst, an aspiration, a longing for a life of fulfilment, a desire to achieve great things, things that fill our heart and lift our spirit to lofty realities like truth, goodness and beauty, justice and love... and it can open us up to grand ideals that make life more beautiful and worthwhile' (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 1). Let us continue, then, to advance along the paths of hope" (No. 55).

We, Christians and Muslims, are called to be bearers of hope, for the present life and for the life to come, and to be witnesses, restorers and builders of this hope, especially for those experiencing difficulties and despair.

As a sign of our spiritual fraternity, we assure you of our prayer, and we send best wishes for a peaceful and fruitful Ramadan, and for a joyful *'Id al-Fitr*.

29 March 2021

Downloaded from <https://bit.ly/3w3nAPH>.

What being a student at a Catholic school taught me about Islam

My parents had a vision: they wanted to raise global citizens. They hoped their children would grow into open-minded individuals who would serve their community and contribute to positive change. As a result, as a four-year-old Muslim girl from western Sydney, I would make the 90-minute journey every day to a Catholic school in the Hills, where I would graduate 14 years later. As the only Muslim in a Catholic school, I had the responsibility and the challenge of representing Islam. Unlike a typical family who would choose academics over almost anything, my parents were drawn to a school that focused on the importance of values, virtues, and character. After visiting multiple schools and attending many open days across Sydney, they chose Tangara School for Girls.

My schooling experience is encapsulated in the following experience. At 5:24pm on a school afternoon, we prepare our team's case for the debate at 6pm. The room is thick with discussion and the whiteboard is covered with scribbles of ideas, arguments, and possible jokes. As we scramble to write our speeches, the time we're anxiously awaiting is not 6pm, but 5:26pm – the call to *maghrib* prayer (indicating sunset and, during Ramadan, the time to break fasting). Pens are down, papers put to one side, and food is spread across the school desks as we then share dates among the four of us, even though only one of us had been fasting – me. The only Muslim girl in a Catholic school.

The power of difference

For the most part, we were ordinary school children who carried on with our day and worried more about taking turns playing hopscotch than delving into the details of religious differences. In saying this, conversations naturally sparked and this is where the journey towards self-discovery began. Whether it was during religion class or out on the playground, over the years I was often asked many questions: do you believe in Jesus? Why do you fast? Why does your mum wear the hijab?

In this way, such conversations shaped my identity and that of my peers, comprising a parallel journey of mutual self discovery. This was an experience that not only strengthened my identity, but also taught me the skill of navigating differences and diversity in a confident manner.



The centrality of respect

It was in this way that the school's motto, *Ad Summam Virtutem* ("Towards the fullness of virtue"), aligned not only with the values of my family, but of my faith, too. In fact, the value accorded to righteousness and good character expresses the essence and spirit of Islam. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), a leader and role-model for humankind, possessed the highest moral excellence and promoted peace, equality, and justice.

Through this process of discovering one's self, "the other", and commonalities that exist between the two, a beautiful outcome is achieved: greater awareness and therefore greater acceptance of one another. As the Qur'an tells us: "*O humankind! We have made you ... into nations and tribes, so that you may get to know one another*" (49:13).

By attending a Catholic school, I learnt more about Islam and became a better Muslim. Are we prepared to immerse ourselves in the richness of multicultural Australia? Are we prepared to visit different neighbourhoods, or join in a religious or cultural celebration belonging to a different community, by attending, say, a mosque open day, or synagogue, or Buddhist temple? Would you consider sending your children to a faith-based school different from your own faith? I'm glad my parents did. *Condensed and adapted from 'What being a student at a Catholic school taught me about Islam', by Sana Afjouni, ABC, <https://ab.co/3eEp90H>.*

Youth PoWR launches *The Sydney Statement*

Youth PoWR (Parliament of the World's Religions) launched their interfaith charter, *The Sydney Statement: Building Bridges Between Believers from Different Religions*, to media, and a religiously and culturally diverse audience of civic, religious, community and educational leaders, students, interfaith advocates, colleagues, friends, and family, at Sydney Town Hall on 11 March 2021.

As one of the first in-person interfaith events to return since COVID-19 restrictions eased, it was uplifting to come together to celebrate a new resource for the practice of dialogue. Guests enjoyed performances by the Doonooch Dancers; L-Fresh The Lion; and duet Brian Lorenz and Monique Montez, who sang *The Prayer*; and speeches by Alpha Cheng; Dr Geoff Lee MP, Minister for Multiculturalism; Jodi Mackay MP, Leader of the Opposition and Shadow Minister for Multiculturalism; Rev Dr Patrick McInerney, Project Executive of *The Sydney Statement*, and Director of the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations; Rabbi Benjamin Elton, Chief Minister of The Great Synagogue, delivered by Rabbi Phil Kaplan; Rev Pravrajika Gayatriprana, president of the Ramakrishna Sarada Vedanta Society of NSW; and Youth PoWR committee members, Zubaida Alrubai and Joshua Moses.

The MC, Youth PoWR coordinator Ryan Epondulan, said of the *Statement*: "The members of Youth PoWR identified values and principles for a peaceful, just and harmonious multicultural, multi-religious society, and provided concrete steps for getting there. It forms people for growing interfaith relations which are authentic, honest and respectful. It also educates them about the different ways of carrying out this task."

Keynote youth speaker Alpha Cheng reflected on the murder of his father Curtis, who, when leaving work at Parramatta Police Station, was shot and killed by a 15-year-old boy claiming to act for Islamic State. Alpha's compassionate plea was to not take the easy way out and lay blame at the feet of an entire group of people because of a single act of one extremist. He would not have politicians use his father's death to attack Muslim migration.



Youth PoWR committee members (from left): Zubaida Alrubai, Sophie Vo, Ryan Epondulan, Josusha Moses, Joyce Tangi, Layla Modabber, Bovey Zhang.

In his speech, project executive officer Rev Dr Patrick McInerney acknowledged Australia as one of the most successful multicultural societies in the world but reminded the audience that to maintain this success we must do better. He cited the Christchurch massacre "by one of our own", antisemitism, the rise of hate speech, Islamophobic attacks suffered daily by Muslims, and the shadow of racism cast by White Australia as motivations for pursuing the actions in *The Sydney Statement*.

Rev Dr McInerney also revealed that in the initial responses to the *Statement*, some people thought it was too religious, while others said it was not religious enough; that it was too secular, or not secular and all-inclusive enough; that on some social issues it goes too far, or not far enough. To which Rev Dr McInerney exclaimed: "To the young people who authorised *The Sydney Statement*, I say, if everybody is against it, you must have got it just right! Its purpose is not to affirm the status quo, but to disrupt it. It is a call to action. Some may not agree with parts of the document, for it is made up of many different voices. But it is in respecting differences that we can begin to speak with one another and form a symphony."

The Sydney Statement serves as a preventative and an antidote to threats to Australia's harmonious existence. Now you can be part of it. Youth PoWR invite the wider public to commit to living out *The Sydney Statement* by signing up to it on its dedicated website, at www.thesydneystatement.org.au.

Coming Events

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

June 2021

- 05** UN World Environment Day
- 11** The Most Sacred Heart of Jesus (Catholic Christian)
- 12** The Immaculate Heart of Mary (Catholic Christian)
- 14** Queen's Birthday Public Holiday (NSW)
- 20** Pentecost (Orthodox Christian) AND UN World Refugee Day
- 24** The Birth of John the Baptist (Catholic Christian)

July 2021

- 04** Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Sunday (Catholic Christian)
- 19** *Eid al-Adha* (The Feast of Sacrifice) (Islam) (tbc)

August 2021

- 06** Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord (Catholic Christian and Orthodox Christian) AND Hiroshima Day
- 08** Feast of St Mary of the Cross MacKillop (Catholic Christian)
- 09** *Al-Hijra* (The Migration) 1st of Muharram = Islamic New Year (Islam) (tbc)
- 15** The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Catholic Christian)
- 18** 10th Day of *Muharram* – Martyrdom of Imam Hussain (Shi'ite Islam)

September 2021

- 01** World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation (Catholic Christian)

