

Address to Abd el-Kader Convocation
December 14, 2013
L'Université Jean Moulin de Lyon, France

Dear friends, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this afternoon. I am especially grateful to Fouad Chegui for his invitation to come to Lyon. And I am honored to share this time with Pere Délorme whose dedication and courage have been an inspiration to so many.

Last summer my wife and I were driving from Boston, Massachusetts to Montréal in Québec, Canada. We were using our GPS system to navigate. As we approached the US-Canadian border the GPS began to warn us, “Turn around! Go back! Make a U-turn and go back!” The border appeared on the GPS screen as a thick dark line. Beyond the border everything on the screen was blank.

“Turn around! Go back!” What, I wondered, was so dangerous in Canada? Did my GPS technology know something that I did not? Was I about to enter enemy territory?

Of course, we ignored the GPS and continued across the border. Then, slowly, little by little, the GPS began to download information about the roads and streets of Québec Province. Little towns and larger cities began to populate the screen. Finally the city streets of Montréal appeared. We arrived at our destination where we received a warm welcome from new friends.

I find that most people have an internal GPS system like the one in my car. When they approach a border an alarm goes off. I do not mean a national border, but a religious or cultural border. When we encounter someone from a different religion or culture, a voice from inside us begins to speak like a GPS: “Turn around! Go back! Do not enter there!” Beyond that line that separates us from the other person things look blank, or even dark and dangerous.

So, often we do turn back. We make a U-turn. We back away. Or we cross the street and avoid eye-contact. As a result, we never download any information. We never gain the knowledge that would help us understand another religion or culture. We miss the opportunity to learn. So we never receive a warm welcome. We never arrive to meet new friends.

How different was the example of Emir Abd el-Kader. After the armistice between Algeria and France in 1947, he was taken across a border. He was transported across the sea, into the land of his one-time enemy. Yet, even in such difficult circumstances he crossed that border with courage. He opened his mind and his heart, and so “downloaded” information about 19th century France. What is more, by his patience and his kindness, he opened the minds and hearts of the French and other Europeans. They began to learn about his culture and his faith. So open and loving was he that one of the French nuns who cared for his family wrote, “There is no Christian virtue that Abd el-Kader does not practice to the highest degree.”

If, like Abd el-Kader we dare to cross borders and come to know those whose religion and culture is different from our own, we will also learn much. I would like to highlight three things that we learn through interfaith dialogue.

First of all, we realize that to learn about another religion does not mean that we need to compromise or abandon our own. In fact, the deeper we go into our own religious faith, the better we able are to engage with believers from other traditions. What I offer you in our interfaith dialogue is my best understanding of what it means to be a practicing Christian. What I hope to receive from you is your best understanding of what it means to be an observant Muslim. We enrich each other as we share from the deep conviction and fidelity to our own tradition.

Secondly, most devout religious people in every tradition are committed to mercy and justice. The heart of religion is not in politics or power. It is in the virtues of empathy and

understanding, based on a profound respect for every human being. True religion leads to a commitment to works of justice.

All of our sacred texts call us to justice. The prophet Hebrew prophet Zechariah wrote: The Lord Almighty says, “Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another (Zech 7:90).” Jesus taught us: “Blest are they who show mercy; mercy shall be theirs.... Blest too the peacemakers, they shall be called children of God (Matt 5:7,9).” The Holy Qur’an tells us, “Allah enjoins justice, and the doing of good to others (Al Qur’an 16:91);... Indeed, Allah is with those who are righteous and those who do good. (Al Qur’an 16:129).

In these days of turmoil, injustice and great suffering in Syria, we look again to Abd el-Kader for an example of justice and mercy in action. In July of 1860 there were uprisings and massacres of many innocent people in Damascus. Abd el-Kader, risking his own life, reached out to the Christians who were being threatened. He took more than a thousand of them into his own compound. There he protected and sheltered them, until the danger had passed. The Emir embodies the virtues of justice, mercy, and compassion—virtues cherished by Muslims, Christian, and Jews.

Thirdly, all the world’s great religions have at their center the mystery of God. God who is all-encompassing, all-embracing, manifest yet hidden, ever ancient, ever new, everlasting, most merciful and compassionate. We follow different paths, but it is the One God who calls us into the eternal mystery that sustains all being. God is greater than religion, than any one religion.

Abd el-Kader, in his own spiritual writings, reminds us that no one religion has a monopoly on God. He wrote:

If you think God is what the different communities believe—the Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, polytheists and other—God is that, but also more. If you think and believe what the prophets, saints and angels profess—God is that, but still more. None of God’s creatures worships Him in His entirety. No one is an infidel in all the ways relating to God. No one knows all God’s facets. Each of His creatures worships and knows Him in a certain way and is ignorant of Him in others.

We can learn from one another about God. As we each follow our own particular journey of faith, we must from time to time walk together and learn from each other. We must reach out to others from different traditions, so that we can work together for justice and peace. We must from time to time pray together, each in our own way, to the One, Holy, and Compassionate God of all.

I encourage you to continue to study the life and work of Emir Abd el-Kader. He can teach us all the lessons of mutual respect and common purpose across religious and cultural borders. When your internal GPS warns you and says: “Turn around—make a U-turn!”—instead of that, open your mind, open your heart, and continue along the road, the road of fraternity, the road of respect, and the road of justice.

I would like to end with words from a letter of the Emir to a Catholic bishop in 1860. The Emir wrote: “All creatures—[all persons]—are members of God’s family. Those most loved by God are the ones who do the most good for all God’s family (Letter to Bishop Pavy, 1860).”

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