

## DIALOGUE

# Wings of Unity

Dr Mohammad Ali Shomali (director of the Islamic Centre of England), together with members of the Islamic Seminary of England, visited Sophia University Institute in Loppiano, Italy, in January 2017. In the first of this two part series, we give the background to this extraordinary friendship developing between Muslims and Christians.

**T**his visit represents one of many ongoing encounters between Shi'a Muslims and members of the Focolare Movement. The dialogue between the two groups, which began more than nineteen years ago, has recently focused on a new initiative which will involve closer cooperation and deeper and more meaningful interaction between members of the two communities. The initiative has been formally named 'Wings of Unity' with the first round of discussions taking place in July 2016 and the second in January 2017.

During the latest Wings of Unity conference, Professor Piero Coda delivered a talk entitled 'An Epochal Change: The Culture of Unity in Chiara Lubich'. After this talk, Dr Shomali presented how love for God leads to love for one another. This was followed by a fruitful exchange by participants who come from a variety of religious and ethnic backgrounds.

Professor Piero Coda, President of the Sophia Institute, Loppiano, Italy



The message of unity was reinforced, and the programme concluded with a planning session for future collaborations, including an upcoming summer course in the city of Trent, where Christians and Shi'a Muslims will have the unique opportunity to experience a 'dialogue of life' and build on their understanding of the unity of God and unity in God.

In addition to Wings of Unity, Dr Shomali, was invited to deliver a series of three lectures on Islam, Unity and Peace. The first series were delivered in April 2016. On the eve preceding his academic engagement, Dr Shomali (along with other guests who accompanied him) attended a Q&A session with members of the Focolare community, including students of the Sophia university. The theme was 'Frontiers in Interreligious Dialogue'. The guests were warmly welcomed by Professor Bennie Callebaut who briefly explained the purpose of their visit before asking Piero Coda, the President of the Institute, to say a few words.

## Walking with God

After welcoming the guests, Piero explained in a very personal and heartfelt tone that Dr Shomali's visit goes beyond academic engagement. Below are extracts from his introduction:

*We are very happy to welcome Dr Shomali. This is the second time he has come to give lessons here and we consider him a member of the faculty; our visiting professor. He will give some lessons tomorrow on a course we have, where different religious representatives explain how they are working for peace and fraternity. This is a wonderful experience and quite a unique course on the university stage. In addition to this, I have to say that we have another initiative, a kind of gift from God. Today before*

Photo: Michele Zanzuchhi/CN



Mausoleum of Fatima, Qom, Iran.

*dinner we prayed together and we renewed the pact of unity that we made in July. In this beautiful place God has made us feel friendship and brotherhood. Last year when Mohammad came to give his lectures, he came to my office, and I am not sure how it happened but we spoke for two hours and we came to the realisation that we needed to deepen this dream that is a fruit of the unity that comes from God and makes us walk together. Something clicked. I remember that Bennie was also there. We said that we must do something together. I felt that this was something coming from God and that we have to do something about it... We asked ourselves: What shall we name this new initiative? This walking together to understand the source of unity that is God, who is present in all of our religious experiences, where we share in the charisma of Chiara Lubich. We all identify with it because it is not only Christian but belongs to all. To this question*

*Mohammad without hesitation said, 'Wings of Unity'. So the Wings of Unity initiative was born in Sophia. We met for three days in July with a small group of twelve people from the seminary. We deepened our understanding of unity from our two perspectives. This was an experience of profound unity from which we were motivated to go forward and transmit to new generations this passion and this path for unity. This also gave birth to the idea of having a summer school where twenty Muslims and twenty Christians will study together. This will be held mostly at Tonadico where Chiara first had this inspiration for unity. Therefore, Dr Shomali is here not only to give his lesson but to continue our walk, and in the following days we will explore other ways to deepen our experience. This is a beautiful thing that brings the Islamic Centre of England and Sophia University Institute closer together; God has placed a pearl in our hands.*

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Below are extracts from the session that followed where students from Sophia university asked Dr Mohammad Shomali questions:

**Pietro from Bologna:** *Could you tell us why you got involved in interreligious dialogue and what dialogue means to you?*

**Dr Shomali:** *Our interest in dialogue came very naturally. We did not have any kind of training, any kind of mandate, or any experience. In 1997 we were in Manchester, UK, and we thought that since we're living in a prominently Christian country, we have a good opportunity to learn about Christianity. So in addition to our studies, we tried to find friends among Christians with whom we could have dialogue. At the time we were just looking for friends, but we ended up finding brothers and sisters. Interestingly, it was through the Focolare that we were introduced to Christianity, the Roman Catholic Church, and other denominations.*

*Now almost twenty years after our initial involvement in interreligious dialogue, I can see that, although we had no experience or prior knowledge, God helped us to come together. In the process, we found many people in our community who also appreciate having dialogue and they have joined us in our journey; and thanks to God, we can now go forward.*



*We have reached a point that not only do we look at interreligious dialogue as a necessity in our lives in the twenty-first century, but we also see it as a deep responsibility towards God and humanity. We hope that through this important initiative, 'Wings of Unity', in Sophia, we will be able to prove to God our deep thirst for understanding what he asks of us, in order to pave the way for the unity of humanity.*

*If we really struggle in the way of God, he will help us, and this means using all of the resources at our disposal; holding discussions with you and trying to benefit from you, your resources, and your wisdom. And the same goes for you. I cannot only be active in my own circle and communicate with my Muslim sisters and brothers and then tell God that I have exhausted all my energy in understanding what he wants from us. But if we work together with openness and humility, then we no longer bother about whether the initiative comes from me or you – that won't be important at all. It is important that we open ourselves to God and he will help us to understand what the next step is. Therefore I think this is a great gift of God, and if he finds value in us, he will help us to share this gift with other people who are very much in need of knowing about these initiatives.*

*The very fact that we are so close and we feel like one family, the intensity and strength we get from our unity is what the people of the world should know about and I hope that with your support, energy and input the next generation will go even further.*

**To be continued next month**

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