

⁸ http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20161208_messaggio-l-giornata-mondiale-pace-2017.html.

⁹ <https://www.agensir.it/quotidiano/2016/8/1/papa-francesco-conferenza-sul-volo-di-ritorno-da-cracovia-non-si-puo-dire-che-l-islam-sia-terrorista/>.

¹⁰ H. Corbin, *L'immaginazione creatrice. Le radici del sufismo*, trad. it. di L. Capezone, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2005, p. 119.

¹¹ Jalal al-Din Rumi, *Mathnawi. Il poema del misticismo universale*, vol. II, a cura di G. Mandel Khan, Bompiani, Milano 2006, p. 139.

¹² Cf., per esempio, E. Moosa, *What is a Madrasa?*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill (Usa), 2015.

¹³ Cf. D. Pioppi, *Declino e rinascita di un'istituzione islamica: il Waqf nell'Egitto contemporaneo*, Istituto italiano di Studi orientali, Università degli studi di Roma La Sapienza, Roma 2006.

¹⁴ Cf. *Déclarations communes islamo-chrétiennes (1954-1995 c. / 1373-1415 h.): textes originaux et traductions françaises, Choix de textes*, présentés par J. Nasri Haddad, sous la direction de A. Dupré la Tour et H. Nashabé, Dar el-Machreq, Université Saint-Joseph, Beyrouth, 1997. Gli altri volumi sono solamente in arabo.

¹⁵ <https://www.acommonword.com/>.

¹⁶ <http://ammanmessage.com/>.

¹⁷ <http://www.marrakeshdeclaration.org/>.

¹⁸ Si possono consultare i documenti di al-Azhar sul suo sito ufficiale: <http://www.azhar.eg/AzharStatements>. Il Documento di al-Azhar sul futuro dell'Egitto è tradotto in inglese, francese e tedesco. Le traduzioni sono pubblicate con il testo arabo dalla Biblioteca di Alessandria in collaborazione con al-Azhar: *Al-Azhar Declaration on the Future of Egypt, Rajab 1432 A.H. - June 2011*, al-Azhar and the Bibliotheca Alexandrina Coordinating Committee. Il libretto è disponibile online: <https://www.bibalex.org/Attachments/english/elazhar.pdf>.

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The spirit of the human fraternity

Building mutual understanding
and meaningful engagement.
An Indonesian Muslim's perspective



INTRODUCTION

The *Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* Document (hereon as *Human Fraternity Document*), signed on 4 February 2019, is closely linked to the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra aetate* (literally meaning "In Our Time"), proclaimed by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on 28 October 1965. For the Catholic Church, the *Nostra aetate* is a major leap forward, allowing greater inclusivity and engagement with other religious communities. Endorsed by the Council, which comprises 2500 bishops from around the world, the Declaration has lived to see four Popes. The current Pope Francis at a meeting with fraternal delegates from other churches and religions on 20 March 2013 quoted once again *Nostra aetate*. Thus, in many ways, *Nostra aetate* is to do away with negative stereotypes that were usually given by Christians toward Jews and other religious communities. Although there was still much to be desired for in terms

of the Catholic Church's endorsement of religious pluralism, *Nostra aetate* introduced the spirit of solidarity, a sense of interdependence between and among people and communities across religious traditions. By default, such solidarity requires the obligation to do good unto others.

Meanwhile, the *Human Fraternity* Document, which was co-signed by Pope Francis of the Catholic Church and Grand Imam of al-Azhar Ahmad al-Tayyeb in February 2019, in the Introduction states: «It is a document that invites all persons who have faith in God and faith in human fraternity to unite and work together so that it may serve as a guide for future generations to advance a culture of mutual respect in the awareness of the great divine grace that makes all human beings brothers and sisters».

A series of declarations follow showing that the signatories of this Document know well the dire situation that the world is currently facing. What is more, both the Pope and Grand Imam seem to perceive the negative potentiality that religion could be politicized or instrumentalized, which could result in the destruction of the human civilization. The spirit of the *Human Fraternity* Document thus assumes that human fraternity is indeed part of God's divine plan and will. This Document, agreed upon and signed by the two religious leaders, who represent two of the largest faith groups in the world constitutes a watershed event that is important, timely and strategic. After all, with the combined forces of the Catholic and Muslim communities, which amount to at least one third of the whole humanity, this *Human Fraternity* Document has the prospect to move the hearts and minds of Catholics and Muslims alike to coexist and work together for a better future for the humankind.

Following the *Human Fraternity* Document, Pope Francis, in October 2020, issued *Fratelli Tutti*, which essentially called "On Fraternity and Social Friendship" and prominently mentions the *Human Fraternity* Document and another previous influential Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'* ("On Care for Our Common Home"). Thus, *Fratelli Tutti*, which comprises eight chapters, situated the importance of these documents in a much broader context, relevance and significance. *Fratelli Tutti* has now been translated into Bahasa Indonesia and used as an official text by the Catholic leadership and congregations throughout Indonesia.

WHAT THE HUMAN FRATERNITY DOCUMENT MEANS FOR INDONESIAN CATHOLIC LEADERS

Clearly, the *Human Fraternity* Document means a lot to the Catholic Church leaders around the world, not excluding Indonesia. For the purposes of this article, three Catholic leaders were interviewed on the subject of Pope Francis' engagement with the Muslim world and how the *Human Fraternity* Document would mean for the Catholic congregations in and around Indonesia and how it relates to Catholic-Muslim relations.

When the *Human Fraternity* Document came about in 2019, Father Agus Sulistyo, who heads the Commission on Relations with Religions and Beliefs in the Diocese of Surabaya, East Java, said: «We received it with open arms. When we discussed it in our Commission, we were genuinely happy, and we have followed up with concrete steps and measures, which we have all implemented»¹. Sulistyo further said:

The *Human Fraternity* Document states: «In the name of God who has created all human beings equal in rights, duties and dignity, and who has called them to live together as brothers and sisters, to fill the earth and make known the values of goodness, love and peace». This means that any differences, problems or any issues arising should not be automatically label as "religious". We need to research on it and analyze, as they often arise out of political, socioeconomic and other factors [...]. We try hard to distance ourselves with politics and political events such as the direct presidential and local elections. This is purely humanitarian in nature. Humanitarianism manifested concretely in the spirituality of the religions that people have chosen. That is the basic principle².

Meanwhile, Wasit Supodo, member of the Commission on Relations with Religions and Beliefs, in the Mater Dei Parish in Madiun, East Java, has many things to say about the implications of the *Human Fraternity* Document. Supodo has initiated many interfaith activities in East Java. In 2016, where he founded the *Madiun Peace Forum*, a grassroots organization that provides a platform for youths from various faith backgrounds to inten-

sively interact and discuss issues of common concerns. When the recent bombing of the churches in Surabaya, East Java, and Makassar, South Sulawesi, occurred, «we spontaneously came together and convened social activities»³. Some of the activities of the Madiun Peace Forum have been to connect, among others, with the Muslim community, notably the Nahdlatul Ulama (Nu), which Indonesia's largest Muslim organization, and Ansor, an autonomous youth wing of the Nu. In June 2019, after the signing of the *Human Fraternity* Document, the Forum held discussions with the Muslim community. According to Supodo, the Ansor representative, Gus Anam, mentioned about the Medina Charter, which was a compact initiated by the Prophet Muhammad among the Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities in the city of Medina, after the Prophet was forced to exile from his hometown of Mecca (now Saudi Arabia). Supodo explained:

«The *Human Fraternity* Document has a spirit similar to the Medina Charter. That is why I insist that this spirit must be expanded and spread constantly at the grassroots level. Unfortunately, the pandemic has caused some delays in our activities». Furthermore, «to my Nu colleagues, this *Fraternity* Document was said to be: Very Nu!» in the sense that it projects the Islam in Indonesia that teaches *rahmatan li'l 'aalamiin* [blessings for the multiverse]⁴.

A more elaborate perspective is given by Father Martinus Joko Lelono, Head of the Commission on Relations with Religions and Beliefs, Yogyakarta Vicars, and also Lecturer in the Faculty of Theology at Wedabhakti. According to Father Lelono, who received his Ph.D. degree in Inter-Religious Studies from Icrs:

The relations between Catholicism and Islam became quite heated when Pope Benedict in 2006 went to Regensburg⁵, and then "the Common Word" (*Kalimatun Sawa*). Now, in 2019, there was an iconic meeting between the leader of the Sunni Muslim world, who is considered the most representative and authoritative Muslim intellectual. And for that, al-Tayyeb was chosen as the representative. I believe this meeting served as an icon for unity⁶.

Furthermore, Father Lelono said:

The themes that were chosen were blessings for humanity, human fraternity, and did not touch upon the names of God whatsoever, not did it mention Jesus or Muhammad for that matter. Rather, the idea centered on humanity. The Document does not begin with a call, rather with a collective consciousness⁷.

The Catholic leaders in Indonesia therefore see the meeting and subsequent signing of the *Human Fraternity* Document as a prospective way forward for the Catholics to engage Muslims. The Catholic leadership obviously realizes that its congregation is living in the sea of Muslims in the largest Muslim nation on earth. This puts the Catholics in Indonesia in a precarious situation, and would have to succumb to the "majoritarianism" that more often than not override the multiculturalism that the country prides itself to foster and promote.

The problem has been further exacerbated by the rising tide of conservatism in the country. This is marked by the increasing visibility and "noise" from self-proclaimed, hardline Islamic groups, which vow for power, while pressuring the government to succumb to their narrow interests and short-term political objectives. This is especially relevant during and in the run-up to national elections and strategic local elections, where these groups have not only been used as an important social mobilization tool for politicians, but also vote getting machine.

RESPONSES FROM INDONESIAN MUSLIMS

As alluded to in the previous section, the *Human Fraternity* Document has proliferated many discussions, seminars and webinars by both Catholic and Muslim communities, organizations and groups. It signals the interest among Indonesians in all kinds of efforts to contribute towards bridge building, notably between the Catholics and Muslims. The *Human Fraternity* Document has clearly inspired religious and civic leaders at both the national and local levels.

While the Catholics perceive the spirit of the *Human Fraternity* Document closely linked to the *Nostra aetate*, Muslims have associated it with the Medina Charter, a politico-religious compact among Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities facilitated by the Prophet of Islam Muhammad some 1.400 years ago. Such historical grounding has had a positive effect in terms of the Muslim response. Moreover, the Document has helped different religious communities, organizations and groups to come together in order to break the wall of distrust and barriers that have been separating them. For Muslims, the Medina Charter is no doubt an inspiration for those seeking greater engagement with other religious communities. It represents the familiar face of Islam that is gentle, peace loving and open to various positive mutual understanding, interactions and deeper engagements, including with Islam's "rival" Abrahamic religions i.e. Christianity and Judaism.

For the Nahdlatul Ulama, which is the biggest and perhaps most powerful Muslim organization in Indonesia with at least 60 million members, *Human Fraternity* Document is no stranger at all for Muslims. The Nu Chairman of the Executive Board, Said Agil Siradj, said during an inauguration of a National Meeting of Islamic Religious Scholars in Citangkolo, West Java, on 27 February 2019:

The Nu supports the commitment made by the Vatican and al-Azhar, which is embedded in the *Fraternity* Document signed in Abu Dhabi [...]. The support is based on our own conception of brotherhood within Nu i.e. Fraternity in Islam (*ukhuwwah Islamiyah*), Fraternity in nation-state (*ukhuwwah wathaniyah*) and Fraternity in humanity (*ukhuwwah bashariyah*). In 1984, the Nu has thus declared these three conceptions of fraternities. Thus, the *Human Fraternity* Document has been upheld and implemented by Nu since at least 35 years ago⁸.

In addition to maintaining tens of thousands of Islamic traditional boarding schools, locally known as *Pesantrens*, and chapters in numerous countries across the world, the Nu has been working for peace in Afghanistan for many years now. In this context, Siradj argued that the three

conceptions of fraternity would be central to Afghanistan. He further maintained that *Human Fraternity* Document should be made consistent with the measures necessary to be undertaken in Afghanistan: «First, to stop all hostilities among Muslims and against non-Muslims. Second, to accept the nation-state and reject out rightly the conception of the *khilafah* (caliphate). Third, to accept the constitution and not pit it against the *shariah* (Islamic law). And lastly, to forge global peace»⁹.

As for the Indonesian Muslim intellectual community, the *Human Fraternity* Document is perceived to be a long overdue and strategic initiative to improve relations between and among religious adherents around the world and build mutual understanding and meaningful engagement. In response, the Indonesian State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga in Yogyakarta plans to confer to Pope Francis and Grand Imam of al-Azhar, al-Tayyeb, a Honorary Doctorate. In its preparations, the leadership of the State Islamic University has prepared the so-called "Arguments for Conferred His Holiness Pope Francis". The following are the arguments made by the State Islamic University officials:

World Peace Leader: His Holiness Pope Francis is a phenomenal world peace leader who promotes tolerance and harmonious relationship among religious believers. Together with His Excellency Grand Syaikh of al-Azhar, Ahmad al-Tayyeb, His Holiness Pope Francis signed the Document on *Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, known as the Abu Dhabi Declaration on 4 February 2019.

Promoter of Religious Fraternity and Peace: His Holiness Pope Francis is the first Pope ever to visit the Arabian Peninsula, the birthplace of Islam, in a trip to promote religious fraternity and peace. In this trip in February 2019, His Holiness Pope Francis met His Excellency Ahmad al-Tayyeb, head of Cairo's al-Azhar Mosque and one of the highest authorities in Sunni Islam.

Exposer of Love and Global Fraternity: His Holiness Pope Francis made another historic visit to Iraq on 5-8 March 2021. This risky visit reveals his sympathetic gesture to the fate of the Iraqis, as an

implementation of the Document on *Human Fraternity*. His earlier meeting with al-Sistani, of the leading figures of Iraq in combatting Isis (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), has also exposed his love for peace and underlined the importance of global fraternity.

A Gift to Humanity: Various endeavors by His Holiness Pope Francis in enriching faith and restoring humanity constitute a gift to humanity. He has healed the wounds of millions of people in the world, and encouraged leaders and key figures, especially those at the local and regional levels who often be at lower political positions to initiate similar attempts by their local wisdom.

Based on the above reasoning and arguments, it is conceivable to think that Indonesian Muslim intellectuals recognize the importance and strategic value of the *Human Fraternity* Document and perceive it to be an entry point to furthering deeper and more meaningful understanding, at least between the Catholics and the Muslim majority in the country.

However, such positive initiative is not without its risks. Pertaining to the above initiative, State Islamic University's Senior Lecturer Fatimah Hussein, who has been tasked by the Rector to promote Pope Francis to receive his Honorary Doctorate, unapologetically said: «It is going to be controversial, no doubt. There will most likely be protests. Regardless, we will still forge ahead with the plan», she said valiantly¹⁰.

CONCLUSION

The spirit of the *Human Fraternity* Document, which in part has its origins in the *Nostra aetate*, is without a doubt a positive move toward religious coexistence, notably between the Catholics and Muslims around the world. If not because of the Covid-19 pandemic since early 2020 and the subsequent physical distancing, social restriction policies and stay-at-home orders, the *Human Fraternity* Document would have made its way to many more platforms held by Catholics, Muslims and other faith communities alike. There is no doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in

the sluggish approach to the promotion and manifestation of the *Human Fraternity* Document. Fortunately, the *Human Fraternity* Document was reinforced by the *Fratelli Tutti*, which was issued amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

Moreover, the spirit of the *Human Fraternity* Document has not only been felt by Catholics worldwide, but also by other religious communities around the globe, not excluding Muslims in Indonesia. For the majority Indonesian Muslims associated with the Nu, the *Human Fraternity* Document is perceived to be highly consistent with the Islamic Scriptures, theology and their related teachings. Moreover, it is very much in line with the Medina Charter and Nu's own concept and practice of the three forms of fraternities. It is conceivable to think that the spirit of the *Human Fraternity* Document is expected to live on, as it will continue to be disseminated, studied and implemented by Catholics and non-Catholics alike. The *Human Fraternity* Document will hopefully provide a strong foundation for mutual understanding and meaningful engagement, at least between the Catholics and the Muslims in Indonesia, if God willing.

¹ Exclusive interview with Agus on 15 October 2021 via WA video.

² *Ibid.*

³ Exclusive interview with Supodo on 17 October 2021.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI's controversial speech in 2006 in Regensburg, Germany, which made reference to Islam being a "religion of the sword", received heavy criticism and caused hostility among Muslims around the world. Cf. <https://www.dw.com/en/popes-notorious-regensburg-talk-named-speech-of-the-year/a-2283274>.

⁶ Exclusive interview with Lelono on 15 November 2021.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ NU Dukung "Human Fraternity Document" yang Ditandatangani Vatikan dan Al-Azhar [NU supports *Human Fraternity* Document signed by Vatican and Al-Azhar]. Cf. <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2019/02/27/17532931/nu-dukung-human-fraternity-document-yang-ditandatangani-vatikan-dan-ai-azhar>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Conversations held with Husein on 14 November 2021.