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**Evangelisation without Discrimination.
Interview with Fr. Andrew Halemba about an
International Initiative
“Our Way to God”**

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How did you start the evangelization of Arabic speaking environment?

Fr. Andrew (Andrzej) Halemba: Frankly speaking the idea of evangelization is as old as my vocation: first a Christian one, as being baptized I’m disciple of Jesus and called to make him known and loved, furthermore because of my priestly vocation, as being ordained I’m called to bring the Good News and serve the Church, wherever I’m sent and during last ten years I was sent to serve to Arabic speaking

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Christians of the Middle East, this is where the evangelization initiative "Our Way to God" was born and has its roots. First a book under the same title was published in Arabic to help spreading the Good News about Jesus Christ. At that time, there was a great need of emergency aid at the Middle East, I've realized that people suffer greatly not only because of the food shortages etc., they were losing hope. The daily bread sustains life and the Gospel nourish hope. By providing charity aid, we always try to remedy the suffering of the body, but we cannot neglect the needs of the soul: the feeling of injustice, lack of trust and breakdown. So the mission of proclaiming and maintaining the faith is "a must", we must undertake it, especially bishops and priests, but no one can excuse himself from it.

In Europe this approach is not the most popular, in addition, you can be accused of proselytizing...

Fr. Halemba: It is an individualistic and selfish approach. How can I keep something as precious as faith only for myself? Some say it is better for everyone to stick to their religion. It is as if they were saying: read only your own books, be only interested in your own culture and do not accidentally integrate with us. This approach is short-sighted, especially as Europe is flooded by a wave of migrants fascinated by its wealth and seeking asylum in it. These people often ask themselves questions about our religion and values. It's not a secret that many of them would like to know the Christian faith, which was forbidden in their countries. Contact with the living faith of the Church prompts some to embrace Christianity. It is a serious mistake to deprive anyone of the gift of faith for the sake of political correctness. Christ's mandate is clear: go and make disciples of all nations, "all" with no prejudice. These words of our Saviour should ring aloud in our ears.

Hence, the goal of the initiative "Our way to God" is providing all with spiritual care?

Fr. Halemba: Exactly! Arabic origin diaspora in Western societies has grown, preserving its unique character and culture. This growth is due mainly to the families development, as well as to the new waves of migration provoked by the upheavals in the Middle East, lately particularly to COVID-19 pandemic and a security and economic situation slide down in Lebanon. Due to these evolution priests and missionaries both local and those appertaining to the Oriental Churches would like to respond to the current pastoral needs and help people who are in pastoral need. Soon a world hunger crisis resulting from

Russian aggression in Ukraine, a great wheat provider, will incite more people to try chance and see if they could get to Europe.

Church urges not to leave all these people without any spiritual care. People need to know Christ in the Church and to receive sacraments starting with baptism, but to better respond to God's grace they also need to deepen their faith and exercise holiness in daily life, therefore they need to be evangelized. The catechism "Our Way to God" addresses these needs, especially that they can feel at home when they open this book. "Our Way to God" was not merely written in Arabic, but it reflects Middle-Eastern culture and mentality, so dear to us, because of Jesus and apostles, who were from this region.

Why is then "Our Way to God" translated to so many languages, let me enumerate: English, French, German, Italian, Spanish...

Now also Polish is in the pipe-line and currently Iranian Persian language: Farsi is in edition process. The process of exploring the Christian faith cannot be detached from the reality Arabic speaking migrants live in! This is why, they also need to communicate with the world around them in Western societies, with the Church community existing there. Building bridges with their neighbors, mostly Christians, will benefit all and strengthen a truly Catholic unity in diversity, maybe even ecumenical relationships. In the Western World, there is a prejudice, that an Arab-Speaker is a Muslim by default, while Christianity in the Middle East is: widespread and vivid, and - what is to be highlighted - about 6 centuries older than Islam. Next to this simple fact, we need some "ice-breaking" in the Western Church, to break a certain skepticism towards Middle-Eastern Christians, who may express their faith in a bit different way, probably more energetic and emotional, but, even if their liturgy is Oriental, they believe in the same Triune God, they receive the same sacraments, they can be even as catholic as we are, or more. Diversity is a challenge, but may be an enriching experience. For the above mentioned reasons, the catechism "Our Way to God" is published in bilingual version: Arab-French, Arab-German, Arab-English, Arab-Spanish and Arab-Italian etc.

According to what you say, the catechism "Our Way to God" is a reaction to the needs?

Fr. Halemba: Yes, in response to these needs a project was proposed to write a catechism for people interested in Christianity: those who need a new evangelisation, to put down roots in their Christian faith

because maybe they were baptised, but they need to grow in their faith. I know the catechism “Our Way to God” was successfully used in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, but also in France, Belgium, UK, Germany and even in Latin America, where there is an Arabic speaking diaspora. One could be surprised that this book is disappearing from the depot like fresh, crusty croissants in the morning. Bishops and priests ask for more, as they went out of stock as soon as the Corona virus restrictions were alleviated and people could freely attend the Church services and activities. The book serves as a catechetical tool used for parish’s catechesis, especially for school and university level catechesis. I’m always happy to learn, that it serves teenagers and young adults to deepen their relationship with Christ in the Church, they are the Church of tomorrow.

We used to think that students have their noses in books, but they are more inclined to use their smartphones, they are even called a “head down” generation, do they really use such an old-fashioned thing as a book?

Fr. Halemba: We thought about it and “Our Way to God” is not only a paperback, but also an application, so we invite those who are proficient with Web and daily smartphone users to befriend the digital version, where they can also find podcasts. Faith comes by hearing, so we produced also audio content available online in Arabic original and all translations. It is available to radio-stations and may be safely spread because it’s the same content, verified and confirmed, in all languages. Consequently a radio-station, for example in Italy, could broadcast “Our Way to God” as series of catechesis in Italian, but also in Arabic, if they target Arabic speaking audience with their programmes, and Arabic is the third language most commonly used in this country, just after Italian and Romanian.

“Our Way to God” guides readers in their journey of faith with 33 biblical catechesis, tracing Jesus’ life from the Nativity to his Resurrection and presence in the midst of the community of believers. It’s wonderful, because the bible extracts combined with the meditation part invite to an individual prayer, be it by reading or listening and meditating. Knowing Jesus is not only intellectual, but it’s a relationship of love, requiring from us a reciprocity, an emotional involvement. Our task is to guide and teach people to be closer to God, to meet Him, to follow Him... The arrival point is to enable them to say: Jesus I trust in you.

And what about Arabic speaking non-Christians?

Fr. Halemba: We need to open new horizons of faith also to those, who do not know Christ yet, but search God wholeheartedly, we believe formation based on the book "Our Way to God" will also bring blessing to these Arab speakers, who ask questions and knock to the Church doors. There are Arabic speaking migrants and asylum seekers who are expressing their desire to know Christ and contrary to their home lands, they don't risk immediately their lives, because of that. We need to focus on present challenges bringing to all the Good News of salvation.

For many reasons it is an experiment on a global scale. In the long history of the Church there has not been a catechism addressing needs of such people. It is not only an exposition of the basic truths of the faith, but a journey of faith for those who wish to be baptized. "Our Way to God" is therefore also a book for catechumens that contains scriptural, dogmatic and liturgical teachings. It explains the content of authentic Christian teaching and guides the reader to discover the depth of the Gospel. Following the formation proposed by "Our way to God, a person can achieve salvation and discover the values of divine grace, the theological virtues: faith, hope and charity, and the effects of mercy and justice. "Our way to God" will help the candidate for baptism in three main aspects: how to believe, how to pray, and how to live as an authentic Christian.

The publications as such is also unique in its kind, because of its Arabic, Oriental background, while at the same time it has a universal dimension through all translations which are made until now and continue. It is also exceptional, because this tool is completely free thanks to benefactors, which means that people can use the application or receive a book free of charge - this is possible thanks to fellow Christians, who want to share their faith with others. Joy multiplies, when it shared with others, "The Joy of the Gospel", as Pope Francis explains: "The joy of the gospel fills the heart and the whole life of those who encounter Jesus; those who allow themselves to be saved by him are freed from sin, sadness, inner emptiness, isolation; with Jesus Christ joy is born and reborn" (EG, 1).

Starting in the Middle East this project has become now an international initiative?

Fr. Halemba: The project was accepted and encouraged by the patriarchs of the Middle East. I hope it will enable Arabic-speaking migrants to better understand the Catholic Church, which must be open to all. Pope Francis teaches us that we cannot forget that evangelization is first and foremost about preaching the Gospel to those who do not know Jesus Christ or who have always rejected him. "Many of them are quietly seeking God, led by a yearning to see his face, even in countries of ancient Christian tradition. All of them have a right to receive the Gospel. Christians have the duty to proclaim the Gospel without excluding anyone. Instead of seeming to impose new obligations, they should appear as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet. It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but "by attraction" (EG, 14). We must follow this direction and evangelise people without discriminating anyone, because all have the right to know Christ. So the answer on how can we know God, "how can we know the way?" is "Our Way to God", Jesus himself, who said: "I am the way and the truth and the life.

Fr. Andrew (Andrzej) Halemba PhD: a Polish Catholic Priest and Missionary, translator of the New Testament and author of Mambwe-English dictionary, former Director of the Missionary Formation Centre in Warsaw; Polish Bishops' Conference Delegate for Missionary Affairs and secretary of the Commission for Missions; founder of the Missionary Museum in Poland. Since 2006, he has been working for the international organization "Aid to the Church in Need International" (ACN Intl.): as responsible for aid projects in English and Portuguese-speaking African countries (2006-2010) and 23 countries in the Middle East (2010-2020). He currently coordinates the International Initiative "Our way to God", which aims at evangelizing Arabic-speakers.