

A MODEL OF HOPE

By Dorothy C. Buck

In January of 2002 Pope John Paul II called religious leaders from the world's faith traditions to gather in Assisi, Italy to pray for peace in our conflict-ridden world. Interfaith groups of men and women are traveling to Israel on peace missions while world political leaders are struggling to urge the Israeli and Palestinian crisis in the Middle East towards negotiation rather than retaliation and war. Despite many articles and talks encouraging tolerance and understanding, ordinary people of faith, Christians, Muslims, and Jews are being drawn into a new wave of division and even violent reactions around the world. It is hard not to feel helpless and powerless in the face of such overwhelming conflict and pain. Yet, as Christians we are called to hold out hope. As followers of Christ most of us know that in some way we are invited to imitate the life of Jesus by following his example of love and sacrifice. Different theological interpretations of what that means have led people in other times and circumstances to create innovative social and spiritual movements.

In the 19th century an important part of the Apostolate of Prayer emphasized a spirit of sacrifice inspired by a love for Jesus. It unified two forms of giving oneself to God: renunciation and offering. Today we might understand renouncing oneself for God as a way of allowing God's life in us to increase in order that we grow to become more like Christ in our daily interactions and relationships with others. In the early part of the 20th century the idea also included an offering of oneself for the sake of another. This was grounded in the

understanding of the meaning of the mystery of the sacrifice of Jesus who accepted his death on a cross that we might have life. In imitation of Jesus, those who followed this path felt called to offer their lives to God for the spiritual well being of others.

Pope John Paul II chose Assisi to gather world religious leaders together to pray in honor of Saint Francis' mission of peace. In 1934 a renowned French Catholic Islamic scholar and an Egyptian Christian woman also prayed together before the altar of a Franciscan Church in Damietta, Egypt. In a passionate plea to the God of Abraham, father of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, they made a vow to dedicate their lives to pray for the Muslim people, to stand before God for them.

As a young man, Louis Massignon had lost interest in his Christian heritage. After an unusual conversion experience while on an archeological mission in Baghdad he became a devout Roman Catholic believer. Through years of research in the Arab world he came to love his Muslim friends and colleagues. Mary Kahil was a Melkite Christian who grew up in Cairo, Egypt where she became active in the Muslim women's political and social causes. Louis discovered the roots of his spirituality and his faith life in his belief that to be a follower of Christ we must substitute our own lives for the salvation of others as Jesus did. Thus the vow that Louis and Mary made in Damietta on February 9th, 1934 was grounded in a deep conviction of the heart, a call to what Louis named the *Badaliya*, an Arabic word meaning *substitution*.

In 1947 Louis Massignon and Mary

Kahil received official approval from Rome for the statutes of the Badaliya. They attracted many members in Cairo as well as those joining in solidarity with them, like Cardinal Montini, the future Pope Paul VI, and many others in monasteries and church communities around the world. In the statutes they agreed to pray for the Muslims, to treat them with respect, affection and kindness, and to personally live the gospel message of love in their daily lives. Like Mary they devoted themselves to the Muslim community by volunteering in organizations where they could live out the spirit intended by the Badaliya. They met once a week for an hour. Guided by his relationship with Charles de Foucauld, Massignon invited them to begin their gatherings with a prayer in solitude before the altar called *adoration*. Then they read the spiritual writings of Foucauld or others, and ended by praying together.

Louis Massignon's understanding of what he called mystical substitution traced back to earlier church traditions. The many saints who were often martyrs for their faith were said to unite their sufferings and death with the passion and death of Christ. In the medieval church some extraordinary mystics felt called to pray to take onto themselves the physical and emotional afflictions of those who came to them for healing. These examples seem far from our contemporary experience of faith and appear exaggerated and foreign. Yet, Louis Massignon's vision of such immense love of God, even at the expense of one's own life or health, evolved into a profound and intense spirituality of compassion for others.

In a letter written on January 16, 1955 to Mary Kahil he described the spirit of the Badaliya: (All Massignon references are from

L'Hospitalité Sacrée, Ed. Jacques Keryell, 1987. Author's translation.)

"...They say that the Badaliya is an illusion because we cannot put ourselves in the place of another, and that it is a lover's dream. It is necessary to respond that this is not a dream but rather a suffering that one receives without choosing it, and through which we conceive grace. It is the visitation [by the spirit of God], hidden in the depth of the anguish of compassion, which seizes us as an entrance into the reign of God. It certainly appears powerless, yet it requires everything, and the One on the cross who shares it with us transfigures it on the last day. It is suffering the pains of humanity together with those who have no other pitiful companion than us."

From 1947 to the end of his life in 1962, Massignon wrote an annual letter to the members of the Badaliya around the world that expressed the intensity of his spiritual vocation and the deep mystery of mystical substitution. Much of what he addresses in these letters is frightening in their relevance to our current world situation.

In 1958 Massignon was attracted to Gandhi's non-violent approach to political and social change. In response to the issue of the death penalty he wrote: "Gandhi, like our Lord Jesus, affirms that Cain must not be killed for the murder of Abel. The only way to appease the fraternal war between the sons of Abel and the sons of Cain is to intercept, at our own risk and peril, those who wish to avenge a death by killing, by turning their furor towards ourselves. It is not a true Badaliya without that. Voluntary substitution abolishes an eye for an eye."

In May of 1958, in response to refugees seeking asylum in France he wrote:

"Pray that the right of asylum, fundamentally sacred in every civilization, cease to be negated by our beloved homeland, formerly so welcoming of all refugees, immigrants and the poor. At this moment we are distorting the words, 'my brother'."

Every month the call to a gathering of the Badaliya began with a day of fasting and a Mass dedicated to serene peace between Christians and Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa. In June 1958 he wrote: "There are no chosen people, the grace of Christ circulates everywhere. Christ is present in every living soul. There is no danger in seeing the rising up of grace in Islam, it is the fruit of redemption. The greatest obstacles come from ourselves. It is we who need to be purified, our thoughts, our vision. The canonical questions intervene from outside and are not the heart of the question. Rivalry isn't between religions, it also exists between Rites and Sects and is found everywhere as part of being human. The Muslims are inside, not outside. The essence of the Badaliya is to lift the screen by our presence, delivering us from this kind of scandalous rivalry... It is necessary to maintain the presence of Jesus living in us."

Massignon saw the connection of peace in the Holy Land as essential to the resolution of other conflicts in the Middle East at the time, including the independence sought by Algeria from France. In January 1961 he wrote: "Remember that it is not a question of war between Christians and Muslims, but a drama connected to the evolution of the world. ... It is in Jerusalem, at the Dome of the Rock, that reconciliation can and must be carried out, in front of the Wall of Lamentations, between Jews and Arabs, in order to provide peace between Christians and Jews in North Africa

and the Middle East. In fact, while the Jewish psalms rise up towards this Wall, inside the Mosque, which was the ancient Church of the Presentation of Our Lady, on the left nave, covered with Koranic verses about Mary, Muslim women from Jerusalem come humbly to invoke the Mother and Child, whose cradle is shown in a neighboring cove. We think that these two prayers, mutilated and broken by centuries of persecutions, will finish by obtaining the reconciliation between Jews and Arabs in the Holy Land, key to serene peace in Algeria."

On June 1, 1962, five months before his death Massignon wrote: "... We do not tire in repeating that it is necessary to pray together, Christians, Jews, and Muslims, for the advent of this so desired and waited for peace. Every tentative economic and even cultural agreement, if not founded on a sincere movement of hearts, united in faith in the God of Abraham, Father of believers, can only frighten the third world and be rejected..."

Massignon lived to see the beginning of Algerian independence from French colonialism and the beginning of the Vatican II meetings whose documents about Islam and Christianity bore evidence of his influence.

Although the Badaliya was established in Cairo, in the heart of the Muslim world in an effort to bring mutual respect, understanding and peace between Arab Christians and Muslims, I wonder if it can serve as a model of hope for those of us in other parts of the world today. In Cairo, members of the Badaliya gathered in a church appropriately dedicated to Saint Mary of Peace. A series of talks and educational lectures were also offered at the study center in an adjoining building called the Dar es-Salam, the House of Peace. A dialogue

was encouraged in order to increase awareness of cultural, theological, philosophical and social differences as well as achievements in the two communities.

In 1941 Mary Kahil, along with a Priest and some Islamic professors, founded an interfaith prayer group called the Sincere Brothers. Muslims and Christians shared their faith experience and religious beliefs in a welcoming environment of dialogue. They ended each gathering with a prayer encouraging each other to grow in their respective faith traditions. Under Nasser's regime the group was disbanded but revived by Mary and the Egyptian minister of Health in 1975. They met every three weeks until Mary's death in 1979.

Through their prayer and intense experience of the spirit of the Badaliya, Louis Massignon and Mary Kahil knew that all social action finds its strength and effectiveness by being grounded in a sincere, compassionate and purposeful prayer community. Perhaps it is time to heal our hopeless and powerless feelings by turning to the Badaliya to guide us in re-creating it for our time, as a model of hope and a way towards peace in our still conflict-ridden world.

On December 8, 2002, a small prayer group gathered in Boston, Massachusetts in the spirit of the Badaliya, created in Cairo in 1934 by Louis Massignon. We gathered on the Marian feast of the Immaculate Conception which seemed in keeping with Massignon's spirituality as well as that of his friend and mentor, Charles de Foucauld. We came together out of a shared concern for the mounting religious conflicts in the Middle East, especially in Palestine/Israel. By renewing the spirit of the Badaliya for our time

we are hoping to encourage mutual respect, understanding and dialogue between Massignon's three Abrahamic traditions here in the United States and wherever others join us in spirit around the world. In the spirit of our friend and guide, Louis Massignon we believe, as he did, that any efforts at reconciliation and social action must begin in prayer.

The Cairo Badaliya always included spiritual readings by Charles de Foucauld and others which we will include in our prayer as well. The Union-Sodalité de Charles de Foucauld is an outgrowth of his vision of an organization of Christian lay and religious people loosely bound to one another throughout the world through their prayer. In solidarity with l'Union-Sodalité de Charles de Foucauld (the Brothers and Sisters of Jesus) the Boston Badaliya has agreed to join with them in praying for peace in the world, especially in the Holy Land, every First Friday of the month. Today there are members of the sodality in 52 countries.

Grounded in the weekly prayer gatherings of the original Badaliya, Massignon grew to more and more involvement in the Muslim community and its well being. Beyond the Christian/Muslim dialogue and sharing a pilgrimage that survives to this day, he volunteered for thirty years to teach French and Mathematics to Algerian political prisoners and, finally, in his late seventies, marched in the streets of Paris for an independent Algeria in the 50's and early 60's. Today we are challenged to allow the Badaliya to open our hearts to welcome our Muslim and Jewish neighbors and move us towards reconciliation through mutual trust and understanding. We must begin with our own conversion of hearts.

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