

Paolo Dall'Oglio SJ
A Tribute to a Self-Professed Lover of Islam, Believer in Jesus

by

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July 2023 was the 10th anniversary year of the disappearance in Syria of the Italian Jesuit Priest, Paolo Dall'Oglio. This happened at the beginning of the uprising against the Syrian regime by extremist Islamists identified as *ISIS*, or *Daesh*. Memorials were offered by the community Paolo founded along with others in solidarity around the world. Paolo gave his life out of his great love for both Islam and Christianity. His personal faith experience, fluency in Arabic, and years of dedication to bringing believers of both traditions together for prayer and faith sharing led him to a prophetic vision of the potential for a spiritual unity founded in diversity leading to future communities of peace and reconciliation.

The kidnapping of Syrian Bishops by the extremist Islamic group led him to risk his life, and ultimately disappear, in an effort to release the prisoners and attempt to put an end to the violence in Northeastern Syria at the end of July, 2013.

Eleven years later, the monks, nuns and priests continue to live Paolo's vision in the ancient 6th century monastery of *Deir Mar Moussa al-Habashi*, (Saint Moses the Abyssinian), that Paolo discovered in ruins in 1982. Located 80 kilometers north of Damascus, built into the rocky heights of a desert mountain

overlooking the nearest village of Nebek, Syria, the ancient frescoes have been refurbished and the community established to serve the neighboring Muslim and Christian villages, a witness to the power of Divine Love and Unity.

Paolo was an imposing figure of a man whose intense personality bears some resemblance to Louis Massignon and the newly canonized saint, Charles de Foucauld both of whom inspired his journey into the heart of Islam and his Christian vocation. Spiritual giants, these men sought to bridge the centuries of divisions in all three Abrahamic faith traditions and discover the common threads that bind them to one another, sons and daughters of Abraham, "siblings" in the apt description of Massignon. Paolo was inspired by the spirit of the *Badaliya* prayer movement founded by Louis Massignon and the Egyptian Melkite, (Greek Catholic), Mary Kahil in Cairo, Egypt in 1934 dedicated to "crossing over" to the Muslim community in an offering of oneself for the well being of the "other". This "prayer of substitution" formed the ground of encounter by entering into the lived experience of believers in another tradition thereby allowing appreciation and love for them to flourish as it did for Paolo.

Paolo discovered that Damascus was the center of the mystical tradition of Islam, called Sufism. Many of the greatest Sufi teachers and masters, such as the well-known 13th century Ibn Arabi, whose tomb is in Damascus, had been influenced by the earlier 10th century Sufi saint known as al-Hallâj. According to

Massignon's research, al-Hallâj was one of the "Love mystics" that were known in the Sufi tradition as *Abdâl*. Paolo said:

"The *abdâl* are good Muslims; for me they can also be good Christians; they are part of the same mystical school, the school of selfless love.... We do not declare ourselves *abdâl*. The *abdâl* are chosen by God in order to heal the wounds of the world by the gift of themselves, through patience, humility, silence and the smallness assumed in love..." (de Montjou. p. 95-96)

Massignon was first introduced to the *abdâl* as a very young man of 17 during a visit to the well-known French writer, J-K Huysmans who was writing the biography of a 14th century Dutch saint that he would describe as an example of an *abdâl*. Huysman's understanding of an *abdâl* may have been the spark that became the ground for Massignon's *Badaliya*, (substitutionary prayer). Huysmans envisioned a law of equilibrium, a mysterious balance of good and evil. He wrote:

"All through the ages there have been saints willing to pay by their sufferings the ransom for the sins and faults of others, and even now this generosity is hard to understand. Like the needle of a compass, when the world inclines too much to the side of evil....God allows epidemics to be unchained, earthquakes, famines and wars.... but God's Mercy is such that He then excites the devotion of his saints.... that an equilibrium be reestablished." (Buck. Dialogues p.38-39)

Paolo explained, "*Abdâl* is the plural of *Badal*. From this word Louis Massignon took his *Badaliya*, the invisible monastery, this community of persons self-offered, substituted for Islam and for the world. I believe that there are some members of the Church who are called to a mysterious intercession. ". (de Montjou. p.96)

When the young Jesuit, Paolo, who was not yet ordained a priest, discovered the abandoned Christian monastery in the heart of Islam his dream to be close to Muslims began to be realized. He recognized that Christians knew very little of the Qur'an or Islam and strongly felt the need for dialogue, "I was predisposed to consecrate my life to the encounter of Muslims and Christians. I wished to make Islam my companion, my brother, my ally." (ibid.p.99) The journey of finding the resources to refurbish this ancient edifice and to convince his Jesuit community of his vocational call was one of overcoming many personal and logistical obstacles. Ultimately the Italian ambassador to Syria visited the ruins and recognized the historic value of the ancient deteriorating frescoes, the work began, and Paolo was ordained a priest in the Syrian Catholic Church in Damascus.

Paolo's vocational call was a vision of uniting his Christian destiny to that of the Muslims. In his explanations he refers often to the vocational experience of both Louis Massignon and Charles de Foucauld. From them he understood that the

Spirit bears fruit in the timeless light of eternity. He declared," Like [Foucauld] I am trying to live near the Muslims, to welcome them in depth, in order to experience the universality of the message of Christ. I am pushing this logic to its farthest without knowing where it will lead me. I think that the results will astonish Muslims as much as Christians, at the end of time." (ibid. p.127-128)

The journey for Paolo in identifying his vocation was not an easy one. Like Massignon, he was drawn to the Eastern Christian Rites where Christians and Muslims alike pray in Arabic. Paolo was a member of the Jesuit religious community and an Italian by birth just as Massignon was French. Being welcomed by the Arab Christian community in Nebek, Syria who clearly saw him as an intruder, became clear early on when he came face to face with his ability to conquer the need for retaliation or hatred when the monastery was invaded, documents destroyed and the aggressors accused him of being a spy. His experience gave birth to a vision of Christian and Muslim encounter grounded in the love of Christ that has inspired many followers and stretched the boundaries of our limited experience of the magnanimity and mercy of Divine Love.

Paolo's spiritual reflections on his experience reveal a master teacher, a contemplative spiritual seeker whose words of wisdom are much needed in today's complex world. The call to monastic life in our very secular, fast-paced, scientifically sophisticated world is diminishing, or perhaps changing, making the

remote community of Mar Musa in the midst of the on-going civil war in Syria an even more difficult choice.

"A monastery must be a refuge of consolation for sick and tired souls...We have been healed by the tenderness of God and by the love in community. It is our turn to freely give to them....our monastery takes care of wounded souls..... The best remedy to despair, fatigue or pride is to throw ourselves madly into the river of Love,." (ibid. p. 186-187)

"God takes care of every person, believer or non-believer. He feels, caresses and touches each one; no matter his choice, he remains God's child...Some are called to believe in God from infancy, others in old age, and finally others in death: the mystery of freedom, time, situations and contexts! I do not judge..."(ibid. 188-189)

Paolo came to believe in a universal sense of religion but not in any form of syncretism. "It is necessary that each one, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Jew or Christian stay loyal to the absolute sense of his own tradition and develop the requirements to transmit it.." (ibid.p.190-191)

Louis Massignon experienced his engagement with Islam as a necessary and mysterious design of God in the journey toward fullness of Life in Christ. Paolo explained that: "Islam, in presenting us with immense devotion for God, the Great and Merciful, obliges us to go further, deeper into the science of Love."

.(ibid. p.192-193.)

"I have confidence in the fact that through dialogue the Church will discover the activity of the Spirit in other traditions, that she will understand the act accomplished by this polemic revelation that Islam represents in the history of humanity., God is generous. He created humans within different nations, tribes and religious memberships; certainly, in all that, there is a wisdom...If only we admired the enormous work of God in every soul, in every tradition, in the whole human family, then our souls would expand, our hearts would open, our eyes would cry and our intelligence would be taken up in a dizziness of truth." (ibid.p 197)

"A Muslim, outside of the visible church is irreplaceable. He has a function. The Spirit of God passes through each person, through the group to which he belongs, through his history...Facing him I try to listen for the mysterious intelligence of the Creator." (ibid. p. 220)

Much like Charles de Foucauld, who chose to live among the Muslim Berber people and the Little Brothers and Sisters whose later religious foundations continue in his spiritual footsteps, Paolo desired to consecrate himself to his mission to establish " a community that would gather the disciples of Jesus living in a Muslim context in which they wish to root themselves, and with whom they wish to interact in order to establish the Kingdom of God."

A key to Paolo's spiritual vision and mission insisted on what he called, the sacrament of "good neighbors". For many years before the Syrian civil war, Mar Musa became a popular pilgrimage, and even tourist, destination, stretching the community's capacity to welcome visitors from all over the world. This was a manifestation of his "sacrament of good neighbors". Syria already had a well-established local Church deeply enculturated into a Muslim milieu and he noted the history of common life shared by oriental Christians and Muslims for 14 centuries throughout the Middle East.

Against the backdrop of the fundamentalism that has arisen, in part due to the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan after September 11, 2001 and the Syrian civil war, Paolo's vision of engagement and unity for the community at Mar Musa, grounded in a profound depth of spiritual insight, is both challenging and necessary. In describing his mission he wrote, "It is also important that the Church be able to see how the Muslim desire to unify the human race in adoration of God, joins and participates, in germ, in the universality of the Church, to its catholicity. (universality). There is an Abrahamic dimension, father to Jews, Christians and Muslims that is always good to underline." (Dall'Oglio p. 115)

Paolo turns once again to "his spiritual master", Louis Massignon's *Three Prayers of Abraham* that describes those who claim Abraham, the Friend of God, as patriarch of their faith tradition. They are "[those] who interiorize the History

through which the souls of the Friends of God form the chains that lead History to its goal";...."Abraham, Isaac, Hagar, Ishmael cannot be known through the chronologies of today's historians. They can only, and how effectively, be met through humble and confident human souls who do not wish to know any more than that which God reveals to them" (ibid. p 76)

"The relationship with the Patriarch, knowledge of his truth, happens in the sharing of a drama of soul to soul, in the communion of saints, in the relational human adventure, in the divine and human poverty of this *being there*. ---The relationship of Abraham with God inspires our own relationship to God because the witness of Abraham is always effective and living in the spiritual experience of the believing community before God. There is a unity between the two witnesses, the human and the divine, through an alternation of witnesses for the other, in the other, that provokes mystical union in the gift of self that does what God speaks of himself, in myself, in confessing: 'I am the truth' *Ana el-Haq.*" (ibid.p.76)

Thus, Paolo takes us back to the beginning; to the 10th century Sufi saint and martyr, al-Hallaj whose profound mystical experience of being loved and loving the Divine caused him to say aloud, *Ana el-Haq!* This led to his years of imprisonment by the threatened authorities in Baghdad and to his death which in turn led to his enduring legend spread throughout the world as the quintessential

Love Mystic; a true *abdal*, who gave his life on behalf of the whole Muslim community.

The legacy that Paolo leaves us in describing his own vocation is an invitation for all of us, Muslims and Christians alike: " We have forgotten the taste of the completely new touches of the Lord. It is these that it is necessary to look for! Let us have the desire to re-listen to that which we have forgotten, the lost story, the story that gives sense to life, the story that gives hope, the story that is able to nourish our desire for salvation." (de Montjou.127-128)

The community at Deir Mar Musa continues today in the spirit of their founder, Father Paolo Dall'Oglio SJ. May this tribute to his universal vision of the work of Divine Love in the world inspire them to persevere in their calling to be good neighbors in the midst of the conflict raging around them in Syria. Their annual Christmas letter reveals their continuing outreach to the surrounding communities and growth of Paolo's spiritual vision, expanding it into a renewed sense of the monastic call for our time. May they, and all who join them, be blessed by the Divine lover of humanity and enriched by the spiritual legacy of their founder.

References:

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