

It is my great pleasure and honor to be here with you and to address this meeting. Therefore, my first words are of thanks for the generous invitation. I take this opportunity to say a special thank you to the organizers of this meeting (in special to Alexandra Viana Lopes) for this invitation.

I am sure that I was not invited because I am an expert on this issue. My only credentials to be here are my experience as the anchorman of a unique radio program in Portugal and probably in the world: a weekly radio show that gathers representatives from three different religions: a Jewish, a Catholic and a Muslim.

It is a unique experience of dialogue based on the idea that ignorance and prejudice are the basis of misunderstandings, disputes, fights, injustices and even savageries. "I know, brothers, that you acted out of ignorance, just as your leaders did", [I quoted what] Peter said to the people (Acts of Apostles 3, 17, in the translation of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops – another possible translation is the following by the Catholic Online: "Now I know, brothers, that neither you nor your leaders had any idea of what you were really doing",). We want to believe (and we do firmly believe) that our program is a relevant contribution to prevent artificial divisions, future conflicts and intolerance, a contribution to peace and to mutual respect and understanding, a platform of dialogue to prevent racism and forms of xenophobia in our Portuguese society, having in mind that Portugal is foster home for many immigrants coming from Muslim countries (in special from Africa), in addition, in some cases, to some influential Jewish communities.

We don't want to erase the differences or to blind people with the idea that all religions are the same and, since we all should be friends in a virtuous brotherhood, that we [than] should ignore every differences and pretend

that everything is the same. On the contrary, the aim of the program is to highlight and explain the differences and identify the conflict points, recognizing that, in spite of all that, we still may live in a virtuous brotherhood, sharing values and common aims in a multi-religious and integrated society. In our debates we don't avoid difficult topics (like terrorism by Muslims, abuses by Catholic clergies or intolerance and autism by Jewish leaders; or the role of women in societies and religions, sin and conversion, justice and mercy, hope and suffering, destiny and free choice, temptation and virtue, and many others – you name them).

Nevertheless, that is not an obstacle to a friendly personal relation. My guests don't come with bullet-proof jackets and military helmets to the studio. Actually, every special guests we have had in the program and the audience we had in Rome (at University of Holy Cross where we were invited to publicize the idea, contents and methodology of this program to a large audience of public relations people and journalist of many World dioceses)... [they all] were absolutely surprised by the friendly and open mind attitude of everybody in the program.

[We probably have more difficulties in agreeing on football discussions than in religious sophisticated debates]

I must say that we have a very good personal relationship; and therefore we experience the possibility of having a friendly relation and we have many occasions to socialize and meet outside the program.

I must have to recognize that probably this program is possible just because we are living in Portugal, a country with a long experience of multiculturalism and of respect for diversities and differences (and in many cases and occasions, of religious tolerance), including during our colonial experience. It is also possible in Portugal because Catholics tend to be open-mind people and the Muslim and the Jewish communities are well integrated and not numerous.

In fact, this program in France or in Belgium would probably not have an easy going life, to begin with the casting of the participants, as in those countries you probably don't have French Muslims or Belgian Muslims but Muslims that happen to have a French or a Belgian passport. Even though and probably even more in conflicting societies as many European are, such a form of dialogue is even more urgent and important, in fact an original possibility of approaching the communities and foster better solutions.

In this regard, I would like to comment on three methodological aspects, that Carlos Quevedo (the lighted minded person that has had the brilliant idea of this program, author and producer of the program) and I discussed in our first meeting (we had never met before):

- this program should be a debate on religion, a debate as many others in the radio (on politics, economy, sports, social life, etc...), not an item in the list of religious programs...
- ... the debate should be organized, produced and conducted according to journalistic rules (the reason I presumed for their invitation to me to be the anchor, because I have been a journalist in one of my previous professional lives)...
- ... the guests should be laypeople, although devout believers, of the three religions, reasonably representative of the communities though without any official connection to the leaderships

All these conditions were aimed at providing an ambience and a capacity to have a free debate, with free people and with free and unrestricted speeches. I think that is the case and the reason of the success of our program, together with the unexpected interest of a large audience on this topic.

In fact – and this is (hopefully) my last word – the audiences of this program are well above our own expectations and the best expectations of the radio

director, Rui Pêgo (by the way, to whom we all need to be most grateful because, in spite of many voices against, it was his wisdom and broad views that recognized the importance and opportunity of such a program). Portugal is a country with 10 million inhabitants, of whom 200,000 listening to Antena 1 (the national broadcaster). In spite of having a very bad slot (11pm), we have over 20,000 who every Tuesday turned in on E Deus Criou o Mundo (And God Made the World). This is 10% of the total audience at one of the poorest slots of the day. In addition, we have more than 11,000 downloads in podcast, being in the top three or five of the radio.

Since I still have some time, allow me a final question

Why do people turn in on our program? I never asked them, I must say.

Nevertheless, I guess it is because

[i] religion is still important for people (although many politically speeches and many opinion leaders say that religion is outdated, dangerous, kind of darkness coming from the middle ages, a private and irrelevant matter of old and uneducated people)

[ii] because people want to learn and understand more about religion and about the reasons of their faiths and others' faiths

[iii] and because people recognize that dialogue, acceptance and recognition of differences, mutual understanding and respect, real tolerance are the key paths for a better world and for peace and harmony in societies.

That is also what we think every week when we walk in the studio... and we thank God for giving us that opportunity and for such a responsibility.

Thank you