

A three-faiths-trio that hits notes of fraternity

A Muslim, a Jew and a Catholic join voices for a recording project aimed at promoting fraternity among people of different religious beliefs



Father Matthieu de Laubier, the Israeli-born singer Philippe Darmon and the Muslim actor Farid Abdelkrim (from left to right) form an accomplice trio. (Photo by MILO LEE)

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It's a unique project: a Muslim, a Jew and a Catholic priest have recorded an album to promote friendship among people of various faiths.

They know it is a hot topic. And they bristle at any suggestion that they are just being "politically correct".

Their project, after all, was launched during a period of rising tensions with religious overtones. A trial had just got underway for the alleged perpetrators of the 2015 terrorist attack at the Paris headquarters of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and a Jewish supermarket.

And it came a few days after the French government announced a plan to clamp down on Islamic separatism within the country. It was against this background that these men of three different faiths decided to send a message of fraternal friendship by recording seven well-known French hits and four new songs of their own.

Their project also comes at a time when Pope Francis has pointed to fraternity as a matter of urgency with his October 4 publication of his encyclical *Fratelli tutti*. "It's an authentic coincidence of the calendar," says François Troller, a music PR man who thought up the project with his associate Fati Amar.

"The casting wasn't easy"

The two friends lost five relatives in the 2015 terrorist attack at the Bataclan theatre in Paris. A year later, they were horrified to learn of the assassination of Father Jacques Hamel in his church in a small town in Normandy.

"We asked ourselves what we in the music world could do to show that religions are something other than war," says Troller, who describes himself as a non-practicing Catholic. So, in 2017 he and Amar thought it would be a great idea to bring together an imam, a priest and a rabbi to sing songs of peace.

But there were many obstacles that tested the press officer's perseverance.

"The casting wasn't easy," Troller admits. "We never managed to convince an imam to join us and we also struggled to find a priest." It was a challenge to find the right candidates -- those who could sing well and were actually willing to be a part of the unique project.

"We don't do comparative theology among ourselves"

A few months later Troller finally found a trio he thought was just right.

He chose Father Matthieu de Laubier, a Catholic priest, for his voice. A former journalist who has long been passionate about music, de Laubier was only recently ordained (in 2017) at the age of 51. "I hesitated a little, because I feared that the project would take us into a form of syncretism, but my doubts were quickly dispelled," says Father de Laubier, who is an associate pastor of the Parish of Notre-Dame-de-Lorette in Paris.

Philippe Darmon, an Israeli-born singer who leads the services at the Buffault synagogue in Paris, jumped at the opportunity to be the Jewish component.

The trio was completed with the addition of actor Farid Abdelkrim. A former member of the Muslim Brotherhood, he describes himself as a "repentant Islamist" who is now committed to fighting fundamentalism. "A few years ago, if I had been asked to sing with a Jew from Israel, I would never have accepted," Abdelkrim confesses, emphasizing that his path may be that of many others.

Watching them tease each other and listen attentively to each other, you can easily believe them when they say they immediately felt a sort of chemistry. "We don't do comparative theology among ourselves; it's very simple," Father de Laubier smiles.

"Friendship" more than "tolerance"

"Living together", "fraternity"... These terms are sometimes deemed to be overused, and the three members of the group accept them completely, without any reservations.

"Our society has a real deficit of naivety," Abdelkrim says. "We claim the simplicity of the project, we know that we are not going to revolutionize the world, but our music can touch people," he insists.

"If these songs can encourage even two believers of different religions to discover each other, then we will have already won," Darmon adds.

But don't mention the word "tolerance" to the trio, what Father de Laubie calls "this way of barely being able to be together, of putting up with one other as best one can". "I prefer the terms 'respect' and 'friendship,' which are more positive," Abdelkrim chimes in.

For this trio of 50-somethings, it is not only a question of exemplarity. It is also a spiritual journey for these men. "It is because I am anchored in Christ that I am called to look at Philip and Farid with friendship," the priest says.

And when health regulations allow it, the three men say they would like to do live concerts -- particularly in churches, mosques and synagogues.