

In Marseilles, different faiths keep talking

After the murder in Normandy last July of Fr. Jacques Hamel, Muslims and Christians found time to worship and pay tribute together. Six months later, in the southern Bouches-du-Rhone department, various initiatives are aimed at prolonging such encounters.

By Coralie Bonnefoy, Marseilles, *La Croix International*, 6 January 2017



Mufti Ali Mohamed Kassim welcomes Fr. Vincent Fenech and a group of Marseilles Catholics to the mosque. / Yohanne Lamoulere for La Croix

At the Paul Hava youth center in Marseilles' 3rd district, the morning sun gradually warms the courtyard as the vast space begins to fill up with people. They include regulars, locals with roots in Cape Verde for the most part. As the children kick a football around, the adults gather around Fr Vincent Fenech, the center's director, who pours out plenty of coffee.

Newcomers, who are mostly drawn from the neighborhood's large Comorian Muslim community, shyly join in the games and conversations. On this late December Thursday, Fr. Vincent, who is the vicar of the St. Maurant parish, does something unprecedented: he is organizing an interreligious family day.

"In this district, we have never had institutional relations with Islam. But with the residents, it's quite different," said Fr. Vincent. "After Fr Jacques' murder, there was a spontaneous get-together with the Comorians, which was a first. Then they came in large numbers to the Mass that we held."

Fr. Jacques Hamel, 85, of the parish of Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray in Normandy, died in July last year after being attacked while celebrating Mass in his church. His throat was slit by two Muslim men pledging alliance to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.

Six months after the murder which made headlines around the world, the Marseilles diocese thought about how to extend gestures of solidarity with the Comorians.

"The idea is to take a first step in the process of living together," explained the priest.

On this Thursday morning, about twenty people - young children, veiled teenagers, fathers wearing traditional Comorian headgear - left the youth center and followed Fr. Vincent, wearing his beret, to the church of Saint-Mauront a few hundred meters away. Among them was Ismaël Aboudou, a 37-year-old Comorian who works as the senior education advisor at Fourragère Lycée in the city's 12th district.

“In the playground, children trade insults about their real or imagined faith. It’s horrible. This type of initiative is healthy,” said Aboudou, before entering the church.

During the visit, there are a series of questions and answers, some banal, some profound. Fatou, 18, had never been inside a church. She smiled behind her veil.

“I didn’t know they had the Way of the Cross. But just because I am Muslim doesn’t mean I am not interested or don’t want to understand.”

The group heads to the mosque on Rue Gaillard. Fatou climbs the slope leading to the two prayer rooms set up in an old house. She has been affected by the attacks. She doesn’t like the image Muslims have. “We are people like you. Like you, we pray.”

Mufti Ali Mohamed Kassim shows the visiting Catholics around the mosque. “It’s a happy day for us, to welcome you here. This relationship should continue.”

A month earlier, in the St Jean of Garguier priory in Gemonos, near Aubagne, a little to the east of Marseilles, a similar initiative began to take shape. “When Fr. Jacques died, the Muslims of Aubagne offered signs of friendship which we wanted to reciprocate. From this came the idea of holding a day when Christian and Muslim families could get together, share a meal, visit the priory,” explained Fr Amaury Guillem, who organized the event.

“We thought five or six families would show up. In the end around a hundred adults and twenty children came. Including the head of Aubagne’s mosque. We were very moved and honored,” he said.

In the priory, the gathering was extended with a more spiritual event: Muslims and Christians prayed – not together but at the same time. “It was a way for everyone to show their relationship with God.”

Fatira, who is a member of Aubagne’s interreligious group and who helped organize that day, is pleased with its success. “Some came from northern districts of Marseilles, others from around Aubagne, to learn about each other, to accept each other. Everyone could speak freely. It was a way of letting go amid quite a complicated situation.”

As in Marseilles, the hope is that these meetings will continue. “We shouldn’t lose the momentum,” said Fr. Amaury. “The only thing to do is to press on with such gatherings.”

The 32-year-old priest also believes they should involve different generations. “We ought to pass this desire for dialogue on to our children.”