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Cardinal: Mercy Is Key to Interreligious Dialogue

Addresses Muslim and Christian Pilgrims at 7 Sleepers Church

VIEUX-MARCHE, France, JULY 28, 2011 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- If mercy can be considered a name of God, its role should not be forgotten in interreligious dialogue, says Cardinal Philippe Barbarin, archbishop of Lyon.

On Sunday, the primate of Gaul suggested this as he presided over a Mass in the Church of the Seven Saints of Ephesus, in the small village of Vieux-Marche. He was speaking in the context of a Muslim-Christian pilgrimage that has been held for almost 60 years in this locality.

"Why has the word mercy deserted the lips of Catholics?" the Morocco-born cardinal wondered in his homily. "Why do we use it so little? Why are we afraid to use it? I'm surprised, because it appears everywhere in the Bible, and it would be a wonderful concept for interreligious dialogue."

The cardinal recalled that the Jewish people received the vocation to "be servants of God's mercy in all nations."

Moreover, he added, "this word appears in each of the Surahs of the Quran, which always begins by invoking the merciful God."

"It's also present everywhere in the Gospel," the 60-year-old prelate reminded. "I don't know why we have neglected it."

"Perhaps for some it seems out of fashion, but it came from the lips of Christ, from the lips of the Virgin Mary when she sang the Magnificat, and it is in the Canticle of Zachariah, which is our prayer every morning. So, why don't we use it?"

He noted that mercy is also the great legacy left by John Paul II.

Recalling Karol Wojtyła's thought, the cardinal said: "Merciful is not only an adjective we can attribute to God. Mercy is not only one of the qualities of God, who is also Creator, Almighty. Mercy -- said the Pope -- is really his name."

"This phrase could be very useful in profound dialogue, following the record of God's love, with our brother believers of other religions," the cardinal affirmed.

History

The Christian-Muslim pilgrimage to the Church of the Seven Saints of Ephesus is due to the tradition surrounding the "seven sleepers" to whom the church is dedicated. Tradition holds that seven Christians who were trying to escape the third-century persecution of Decius hid in a cave at the site where the church was built. When Decius found that they refused to recant their faith, he had the cave sealed as the young Christians slept. Some 150 years later the cave was opened and the young men awoke.

The story of the "sleepers" is more prominent in the Islam tradition because it is recounted in the Quran.

On seeing the correlation between the tradition and the Surah of the Quran, in 1954 Louis Massignon, one of the greatest Islam specialists of the 20th century, decided to invite Muslim representatives to an annual pilgrimage to the chapel, when the war was beginning between France and Algeria.

This year it has beaten all records of participation.

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