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Non-Muslims generally harbor a pejorative view of Islam. This presentation offers a different perspective, a Marian outlook espoused by the late Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen in his book, *The World's First Love*, and shared by other devotees of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

### **ISLAM'S CREED**

Islam is the only great post-Christian religion of the world. Since it originated in the seventh century under the leadership of Muhammad, it was possible to include some elements of Christianity and Judaism along with some customs of Arabia.

Islam seems to use the doctrine of the unity of God, his majesty and his creative power, to reject Christ as the Son of God. Not understanding the notion of the Trinity, Muhammad recognizes Christ as a prophet announcing himself, that is, Muhammad.

Christian Europe, the West, barely escaped eradication at the hands of the early Muslim jihadists. At various times the Muslims were repulsed near Tours, Vienna, Lepanto and other areas. The Church across North Africa was destroyed by Muslim invasions. Presently Islam is again on the rise and flexing its power.

If Islam is a heresy, which Hilaire Belloc declared it to be, it is the only heresy that has never declined. Rather, it has rebounded. Other heresies experienced a period of vigor and influence, but later declined and lapsed into doctrinal decay at the death of the leader, and eventually faded away as a social movement. Islam, on the contrary, endured and has not declined in numbers or in the loyalty of its followers.

On the surface of things, the missionary efforts of the Church with Muslims have failed. They seem almost unconvertible. Muslims believe they have the final and definitive revelation of God and that Jesus Christ was only a prophet announcing Muhammad, the last of God's real prophets.

Currently, the hatred of Muslim countries toward the West is becoming hatred against Christianity itself. There is still grave danger that the temporal power of Islam may return and bring with it the menace that will overcome the West that has ceased to be Christian, and affirm itself as the great anti-Christian world power. Muslim literature says, "When the locust swarms darken countries, they bear on

their wings these words in Arabic: We are God's host, each of us has 99 eggs, and if we had 100, we should lay waste the world, with all that is in it."

The problem is how to prevent the hatching of the hundredth egg. Some believe firmly these fears concerning the Muslims will not be realized. They believe that Islam will eventually turn to Christianity, and in a way that missionaries do not expect. These Christians believe that this will happen not through the teachings of Christianity, but through inviting the Muslims to veneration of the Mother of God. This is their line of reasoning.

### **ROLE OF MARY**

The *Qur'an*, the Muslim bible, contains many passages about the Blessed Virgin Mary. It speaks of her Immaculate Conception and the Virgin Birth. The third chapter details the history of Mary's family in a genealogy that goes back through Abraham, Noah and to Adam. Comparing the *Qur'an's* description of Mary's birth with the apocryphal gospel version reveals a similarity that indicates Muhammad probably depended on the latter. Both books describe the old age and sterility of Mary's Mother, Ann. When Ann conceives Mary, she says in the *Qur'an*, "O Lord, I vow and consecrate to you what is already within me. Accept it from me." When Mary is born, her mother says, "I consecrate her with all her posterity under your protection, O Lord, against Satan."

The *Qur'an* makes little mention of Joseph, but the Muslim tradition appreciates him. Joseph asks Mary, who is a virgin, how she conceived Jesus without a father. Mary responds: "Do you not know that God, when he created the wheat had no need of seed, and that God by his power made the trees to grow without the help of rain? All that God had to do was to say, 'So be it,' and it was done."

The Annunciation, Visitation, and Nativity are also included in the *Qur'an*. Angels are depicted accompanying our Blessed Mother and saying, "Oh, Mary, God has chosen you and purified you, and elected you above all the women of the earth." In the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter alone are 41 verses about Jesus and Mary. The defense of the virginity of Mary is so strong and clear in the fourth book of the *Qur'an* that it attributes the condemnation of the Jews to their monstrous calumny against the Virgin Mary.

### **FATIMA**

For Muslims, Mary is the true *Sayyida* (Lady). In their creed only Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad, would rival her. After the death of Fatima, Muhammad wrote, "Thou shall be the most blessed of all women in Paradise, after Mary." In a variation of this text, Fatima says, "I surpass all the women, except Mary."

This highlights another point; namely, why our Blessed Mother in the 20<sup>th</sup> century should have revealed herself in the insignificant village of Fatima, Portugal, so that all future generations will know her as Our Lady of Fatima. Because nothing happens without divine reason, some believe the Virgin Mary chose to be known as Our Lady of Fatima as a pledge and sign of hope to the Muslim people,

and as an assurance, that they who show her great respect will one day accept her divine Son too.

Evidence to support these views is found in the history of Muslim occupation of Portugal for centuries. When they were finally driven out of Portugal, the last Muslim ruler had a beautiful daughter named Fatima. She fell in love with a Catholic young man. For him she not only stayed behind when the Muslims left, but she also embraced Catholicism. Her young husband loved her so much that he changed the name of the town where he lived to Fatima. Consequently the very place where Our Lady appeared in 1917 bears a historical connection to Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad.

The relationship of Our Lady of Fatima to Muslims is evident in the enthusiastic reception Muslim people in Africa, India, and elsewhere offered to the pilgrim statue of Our Lady of Fatima. They attended prayer services in honor of her and allowed religious processions and prayers in front of their mosques. In Mozambique some Muslims became Christians soon after the statue of Our Lady of Fatima was erected.

In a number of countries Muslims frequent Marian shrines to pray and to honor *Sayyida*.

### **MISSIONARY CHALLENGE**

Increasingly we will see that the Christian missionary apostolate among the Muslims will be successful in the measure that it preaches Our Lady of Fatima. Mary signals the advent of Christ, bringing Christ to the people before Christ himself is born. It is sound apologetics, then, for our missionary effort to begin with something the people already accept. Because Muslims are devoted to Mary, our missionaries wisely endeavor to enlarge that devotion with the realization that Our Lady will bring Muslims along the rest of the journey to her divine Son. She never accepts any devotion for herself, but always brings the devotee to her Son. As those who lose devotion to her lose belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ, so those who intensify devotion to her gradually acquire that belief.

Many missionaries, in Africa especially, have already broken down the bitter hatred and prejudice of Muslims against Christians by their works of charity, their schools and hospitals, and other social services.

It remains now to employ this Marian approach: to interpret chapter 41 of the *Qur'an* to show them it was taken from the Gospel of St. Luke and that Mary cannot be seen as the most blessed of women if she had not borne the Savior of the world. If Judith and Esther were prefigures of Mary in the Old Testament, we may assume that Fatima herself was a post-figure of Mary.

Let us pray that Muslims acknowledge that, if Fatima gives place in honor of Mary, the reason is that Mary is different from all other mothers of the world and that without Jesus she would be nothing. May they find refuge in the Blessed Virgin Mary, who was given to us by God himself.

Mary is clearly a bridge between Islam and Christianity.