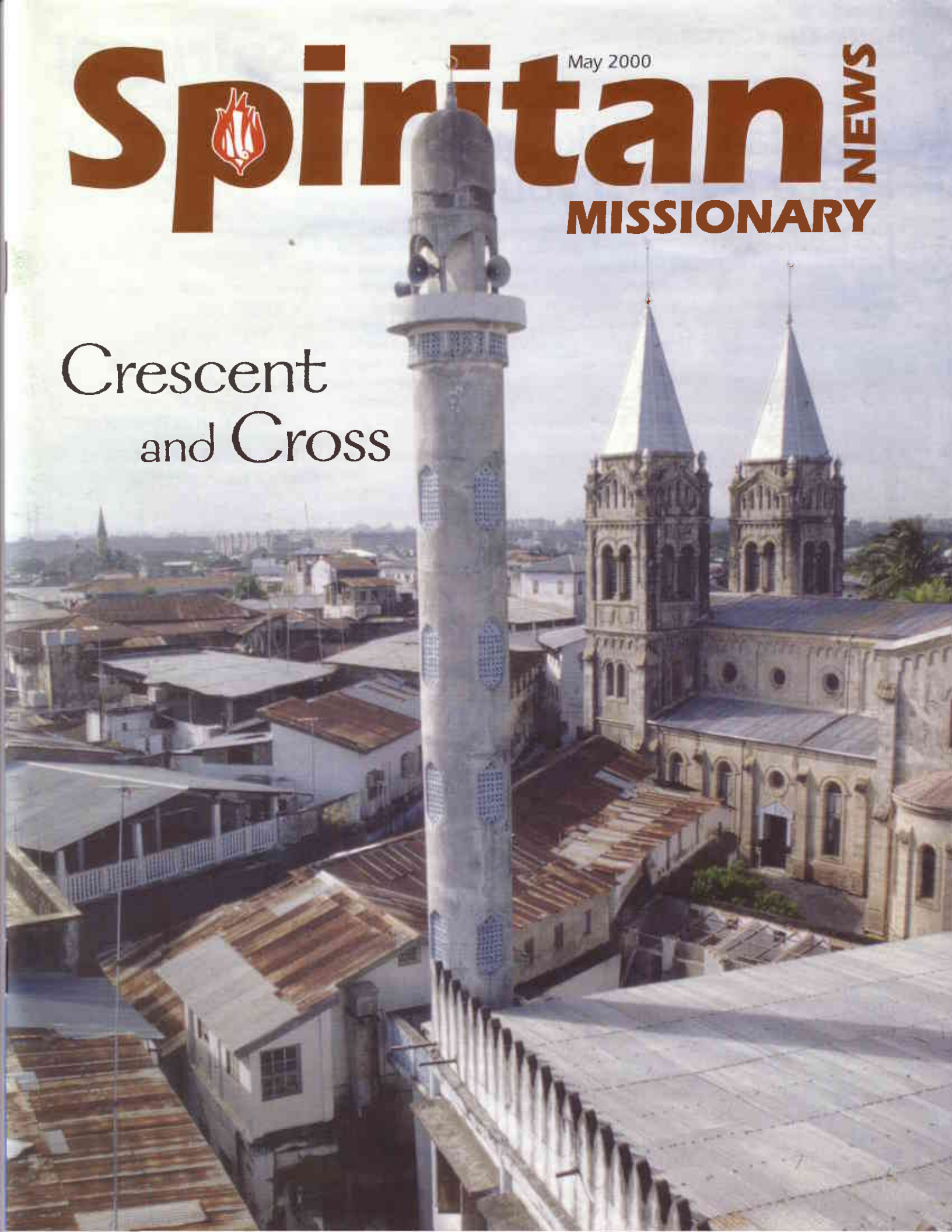


Spiritana NEWS

May 2000

MISSIONARY

Crescent
and Cross



“As-salamu alaikum — Peace be with you”

In February it was Egypt — the white-cassocked holy man, more feeble than before, somewhat stooped, cane in left hand, walks slowly down a receiving line of Muslim clerics in Cairo, right hand stretched out in greeting as he makes his way to a meeting with Grand Sheik Muhammed Sayyid Tantawi, leader of the world’s one billion Sunni Muslims. “The future of the world will depend on the dialogue between different cultures and religions.”

In late March it was Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian territories — seated beside young King Abdullah, walking among the mainly Muslim population of the Palestinian refugee camp at Deheisha, paying a visit to the El-Aqsa mosque on Harem al-Sharif (the Temple Mount), placing a prayer in a crevice of the Western Wall, standing in silent sympathy at Israel’s Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial. “Silence in which to try to make some sense of the memories which come flooding back. Silence because there are no words strong enough to deplore the terrible tragedy of the Shoah (Holocaust).”

In Lent it was Rome: the seven times repeated *mea culpa* — a public act of papal contrition “for the significant ways in which members of the Church have contradicted the gospel of Christ.” Among these sins of Christians he included violations of the rights of ethnic groups and peoples, contempt for other cultures and religious traditions, wars of religion. “Never again offences against any people whatsoever; never again

No peace among the nations without peace among the religions.

No peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions.

— Hans Kung

recourse to violence; never again discrimination, exclusion, oppression.”

The Jubilee Year is less than five months old and John Paul II has already shown us who Christians should be meeting and what they should be doing. He has taken us where we have been reluctant to go — out beyond our inner church, interchurch concerns to the wider world of interreligious meeting and dialogue.

Our leader wants us to get to know our religious relatives — the extended family of believers, especially those who believe in One God — Jews, Muslims and fellow Christians. We are related on our Father’s side, but our relations are strained. Muslims in particular have become the other side of the family, whom we haven’t met for years, whom we really don’t know. Our leader is calling us to be on speaking terms despite all the accumulated inheritance of past wrongs, ancient battles, still festering wounds and unhealed memories. He wants us to turn our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh, to dialogue among each other rather than diatribe against each other, to find the presence of God in each other.

Islam is prominent in many places where Spiritans are working e.g. Algeria, Mauritius, Gambia, Zanzibar, Nigeria, Pakistan, Canada. In each place ongoing tensions exist between Christians and Muslims coupled with mutual fear that the other is out to impose its way, if not overtly then slyly. There is suspicion among some Muslims that even dialogue may be a modern stealth bomber to achieve what the Crusades or the Inquisition once sought to do by force. The hand of friendship may be rejected, but John Paul dares us to chance our arm, to join hands in mutual respect. “The wind that blows across the Sinai today carries with it an insistent invitation to dialogue between followers of the great monotheistic religions.”

Patrick Fitzpatrick cssp

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Front Cover: Mosque and Cathedral in Zanzibar. Courtesy *Pentecôte sur le Monde*.
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The God of Friendship

Kathy Murtha

In the late fifth century, the story goes, St. Brigid advised a young foster son to "Go forth and eat nothing until you get a soul friend, for anyone without a soul friend is like a body without a head; is like the water of a polluted lake, neither good for drinking nor for washing". When asked what is the most important thing that happens in high school young people unanimously reply the friends they made there. During these most precious and formative years God is embodied primarily in the face of a friend. Like St. Brigid, young people play a special role in reminding us of the sacredness of friendship.

Jesus was profoundly aware that friendship leads us into the very heart of the Divine. As I read the gospel stories I get a picture of a person whose eyes reflected the divine worth and beauty of other people. On the night before he was killed he gathered with his friends. He had a sense that the end was near and he wanted them to never forget what was most important. Here is what he said: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. This is my commandment: love one another, as I have loved you. A person can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends." (John 15:9, 12-14) It's hard to imagine that anyone would want to kill someone who spoke so highly of love and friendship. But, perhaps, the reason for Jesus' death lies in his particular vision and commitment to friendship. The society that surrounded him had strong rules restricting the association of religious people to those deemed "clean" and "righteous". Jesus' friendships broke through all boundaries, and found ultimate expression in the breaking of bread with all. It is this radical act of love that the followers of Jesus have come to intimately associate with him. In entering into the sacrament of communion we are essentially committing ourselves to transcending the boundaries that divide people and widening our circle of friends.

In listening to young people's stories of friendship I am struck by the difference between the friends they have in Grade 9 and the type and quality of friendships they have established by the time they complete high school. Grade 9 students can be seen walking down the halls in survival packs consisting of people who look, act and think the same. By Grade 12 most young people have a wide assortment of friends that may not even look remotely similar to themselves. Their true friends are those who allow them to flourish as themselves. Throughout these years the God of Friendship calls the young person to widen their circle of friends. Into the



Illustration by David Wysocki

life of each young person comes at least one surprising friend whose memory brings an instant smile. This may be someone they have previously disliked, misjudged or failed to notice. And then when they are going through a tough time it is that very person who often will be there for them.

In the young we clearly witness the beginnings of a lifetime call to keep widening our heart and our circle of friends. At the end of our days when we come face to face with our God we will be asked only one thing; "Who were your friends?" Did your friends include the hungry, the sick, the outcasts and the lonely? (Matt. 25) Our ultimate destiny hangs on our response. ☪

A Brief Historical Background

The Middle East is the cradle of monotheism. Judaism, Christianity and Islam all sprung from this diverse region. For the three centuries before Christ it was part of the Greek Empire, founded by Alexander the Great (d. 323 B.C.). After Cleopatra's death (30 B.C.) it became a province of the Roman Empire. And in the time of the prophet Muhammad (d. 632 A.D.) it was part of the Christian Byzantine Empire founded by the Emperor Constantine.

Judaism, as we know it, emerged as a religion when the Jewish people were in captivity and exile in Babylon and in danger of being assimilated into the alien culture which surrounded them. Christianity emerged at a time when the Jewish priestly class had compromised their leadership by cooperating with the pagan Roman rulers. And Islam came into being when the Christians of the Arab world were being treated as second class people by the dominant Greek majority of the Byzantine Church.

Christianity spread rapidly throughout the cities of the Roman Empire, especially among the Greek-speaking people and within three centuries the whole Empire was Christian. Likewise Islam spread rapidly among the disaffected Arab Christians of the Middle East and soon

many non-Christian peoples had also been converted to Muslim beliefs and practices.

Until 1099

Each of these religions owed much to and borrowed freely from its predecessors, and Christian-Muslim relationships were generally very peaceful all through the first millennium. Many Christians lived in Muslim countries and the Christian community in Jerusalem and what is now the state of Israel flourished with thousands making pilgrimages to the Holy Places each year from Christian countries such as Italy, Spain, France and England.

But the excesses of the Crusaders and their slaughter of all Jews and Muslims in the city of Jerusalem in 1099 A.D. was the start of a millennium of Christian-Muslim tension although Muslim scholarship greatly influenced the thinkers of the Christian world, including St. Thomas Aquinas, Dante and the masters of Spanish mysticism.

The Turkish people took over the leadership of the Muslim world from the Arabs with their capture of Constantinople, which they renamed Istanbul in 1453, and their Ottoman Empire survived until the early years of the twentieth cen-

