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Mazara del Vallo: Between Geopolitics and Geotheology

Dearest All,

My experience in the Church of Mazara del Vallo is primarily linked to its unique geographical location. Saint John Paul II described it on May 8, 1982, when he visited our diocesan church, as a "crossroads of culture and religion between Africa and Europe." This paradigmatic expression chosen by the holy Polish Pope captures the entire vocation of the Church of Mazara del Vallo within the history of humanity's salvation.

Until a few decades ago, Mazara del Vallo was called the most Arab city in Italy. However, back then, the face of our cities was primarily an expression of their territorial history, of its birth and death, and not as it is now, when our cities, due to global migration, have become the local events of the world. The differences in/between cities arise due to the different reasons for human mobility. There are cities determined by flight and mobility due to war, hunger, injustice; Cities determined instead by the presence of colonies shaped by economics and finance; cities shaped instead by the logic of geographical and cultural borders. I'm thinking not only of Mazara del Vallo, for example, but also of Prato, with its strong Chinese presence, or of border and transit cities like Gorizia or Bari, or Taranto, a

maritime city as well as a city in Puglia, or even of global cities like Palermo, Naples, Rome, and Milan.

So what are the concrete reasons for the global human mobility that occurs in the small town of Mazara del Vallo? What makes Mazara del Vallo a world city?

Certainly, the first thing that answers this geopolitical question is not the religious question, which later became the path to cultural and spiritual integration, but work! Especially fishing, the sea, fishing boats, shipyards.

Work means family, school, healthcare, public good. And even religion. Work is the "difficult (common place)" where in Mazara del Vallo the world happens between North Africa and Southern Europe, more precisely between Mazara and Tunis and Tunisia. Here languages, stories, faces, joys, pains, wounds, and hopes intertwine.

The intercultural school thus becomes a true resource, a true investment for the future in a challenging territory. Suffice it to recall that a Tunisian primary school opened in Mazara del Vallo a few years ago, with Tunisian ministerial programs, when the migration project was still about returning home. And Mazara was a city essential for people to feel comfortable elsewhere, in Tunisia. It is one of the few still active experiences, born from a collaboration between the Municipality of Mazara, the Tunisian Consulate, and the Ministry of Education.

Today, we have reached the third generation, that is, the grandchildren of those who were supposed to return home but were instead born in Mazara del Vallo and who consider Mazara their home. The educational challenge is precisely a sort of passport of conscience, the challenge of a plural cultural identity, because the extremely high risk is that these young people will still be Tunisians for the people of Mazara del Vallo, and that their Tunisian grandparents will already be Mazara del Vallo. A perceived already, yet not yet, distant from the liturgies but close to consciences. Therefore, a already, yet not yet, belonging to the Kingdom of God.

Work and the process of evolution of cultural and territorial identities: this is what happens in the world in Mazara del Vallo. This is the place of the Church of Mazara in its relationship with the Kingdom of God. Here we now move from geopolitics to geotheology.

In the context of the city-territories of a few decades ago, Bishop Emanuele Catarinicchia had a great insight: twinning with the sister church of Tunis. The theological foundation of this insight was profoundly shaped by charity. It was Caritas and then the San Vito Foundation that became the first interpreters of this relationship with the ecclesial community of Tunis. Charitable support, an insight later continued by both Monsignor Calogero La Piana and Monsignor Domenico Mogavero, and now relaunched by me with a diocesan dimension, through visits, knowledge, and exchange. My further contribution is to dedicate a diocesan pastoral office to this twinning, so that the dimension of ecclesial sisterhood may become at least as strong as its charitable dimension. A pact of ecclesial sisterhood for a style of witnessing presence in the Mediterranean as peacemakers, navigating with the gentle wisdom of the Gospel the dust of violence and war that daily undermine every certainty, with the hope of a world where everyone feels like a brother or sister, reviving our Mediterranean's vocation to encounter and build peace.

The Mediterranean must be understood as a theological place, that is, a place from which God speaks and from which and in which God reveals himself in a living, powerful, and present way. Interreligious dialogue and minority status are the two prophecies common to the two sister churches.

God is dialogue, and every authentic dialogue allows us to share the experience of God. Didn't Jesus promise that where two or three gather in His beautiful name, He is there among them? His name is perceived in the differences of cultures, contexts, and religions: His name is the criterion by which we experience His presence among us. We people of faith are called together to find those common ground capable of uniting the human race in one family, so that strong bonds of peace can be re-established and the desire to exchange the wealth of values, knowledge, and traditions that we all bring with us, as a mutual enrichment, can grow.

Here too, the Church of Mazara, with a project presented to Pope Francis and sponsored by him, has made its structural and prophetic choice: the intercultural and interreligious center for peacemakers. Established at the end of Monsignor Mogavero's episcopate, completed and inaugurated in June 2023 by Cardinal Grech, it is tasked with keeping Islamic-Christian dialogue alive for a shared culture of peace. Thus, a true experience of dialogue is born,

through listening to the stories, places, faces, wounds, and tragedies that inhabit the history of the Mediterranean context. It is about building a true narrative between us, one that fosters bonds of friendship because it is a profound narrative where listening to one another is the practice of faith, born from sharing perspectives without prejudice or defending rituals, but from the desire to begin to think from the other's perspective, from their context, their situation, and their condition.

The Church of Mazara del Vallo fosters dialogue and peaceful coexistence with the city's large Muslim community, thanks in part to the 48-year presence of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary. These consecrated women live in the city's historic district, in a house among houses, sisters within a context of cultural and religious diversity, working alongside families who struggle most with inclusion. They foster dialogue, listening, home visits, and daily friendships with Muslims.

Mutual trust and respect, a door always open to welcome, and a tangible closeness have allowed us over the years to build simple, lasting, and genuine bonds through which our faiths coexist and are enriched by the special moments and traditions each of us has.

In 2011, the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, together with a group of lay people, decided to offer, within the city's old quarter, a meeting, educational, and recreational space for the new generations of children and young people born to foreign families who have lived in the area for years and who have recently arrived due to the constant influx of migrants.

Casa della Comunità Speranza (Hope Community House) is born, an association that for 15 years has provided beautiful, safe, protected, and educational spaces for dozens of minors, thanks to volunteers and collaborators who care about the development of the new generations. The association offers free academic support services, Italian language teaching, creative, sports, and music workshops, and collaborations and sharing with other local organizations. This project has regenerated degraded and abandoned spaces in the old neighborhood and, above all, helps young people cultivate a sense of belonging to a new culture and preserve their deep ties to their family roots in their countries of origin. Casa della Comunità Speranza is a place dedicated to caring for those who are growing up, helping them do so well, and feeling loved.

The San Vito Onlus Foundation also contributes to interreligious dialogue and cultural exchange through its activities. Within the Casa Santa Solidarity Village, various workshops foster dialogue between different cultures, particularly between Islam and Christianity.

The church of Mazara, therefore, was prophetically structured as a sign and instrument of unity for that part of the human race that occurs between North Africa and Southern Europe, between Tunisia and Mazara del Vallo.

