

The Magnetism of Holy Places

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Born in 1932, Cardinal Martino was the Holy See's Ambassador to the UN for an unprecedented 16 years, after which he was recalled to Rome by Pope St John Paul II to serve as President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. He retired in 2009, and accepted the nomination as Honorary President of the Dignitatis Humanae Institute the following year.

Catholics and Muslims have much in common. Perhaps the greatest commonality is the passion and reverence we both share for the respective cities – Rome and Mecca (Makkah) – at the heart of our two faiths.

At the very centre of Rome – known as the Eternal City – is a separate sovereign country, the Vatican City State. The Vatican (also referred to as the Holy See, because Rome was the diocese of St Peter, upon whom Our Lord build His church) is an UNESCO world heritage site, due to its standing as a unique moral, artistic and cultural treasure that belongs to the whole of humanity.

Those who have been privileged to serve at the Vatican know well the spiritual aura that radiates throughout the city of Rome. Like Mecca, we too see how crowds from around the world – regardless of colour, class or gender – can be attracted to the magnetic allure of the sacred.

Christians and Muslims do, of course, have holy cities common to both

religions. Indeed, our mutual passion for the Holy City of Jerusalem has at times led to conflict. Yet even during those historical challenges, there were examples of mutual respect. We know, for example, that Saladin famously showed great magnanimity, clemency and chivalry towards his Christian adversaries when taking Jerusalem, and that Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II – who is credited with retaking Jerusalem – trusted Muslims as his personal bodyguards and chefs.

Over one millennium on, Jerusalem remains a politically contested city; but its sanctity will always remain uncontested. Pilgrims from the three great monolithic religions that trace themselves back to Abraham continue to flock to Jerusalem in pursuit of religious resonance and spiritual enlightenment. Peaceful coexistence in the Holy Land would be an impressive sign throughout the world that if peace is possible there, it is possible anywhere.

My earlier role as President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (*Justitia et Pax*) was to promote the common good in society and solidarity among peoples. In our troubled times, interfaith harmony and cooperation couldn't be more important, which is why Professor Nasser D. Khalili, the famous Jewish collector, scholar and preserver of Islamic art and culture, was honoured with papal knighthoods from Popes St John Paul II and Benedict XVI for his work in the pursuit of peace, education and culture amongst nations.

Pope Francis constantly encourages us to build bridges, so I take especial pleasure in applauding this publication for serving exactly that purpose towards Mecca, so that we all might learn a little more about the city of rich cultural and spiritual heritage that perennially captures the hearts and imagination of Muslims worldwide. **F**

Vatican City is a city-state surrounded by Rome, Italy. It is the headquarters of the Roman Catholic Church

