

Fostering Interfaith Dialogue through Formation: Insights from Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium*

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Abstract: This study investigates the role of formation in interreligious dialogue, particularly between Catholics and Muslims, guided by Pope Francis' perspectives in *Evangelii Gaudium*. The research employs a qualitative approach, conducting a content analysis of the *Evangelii Gaudium* document and supplementary secondary literature to explore the implications of formation in religious interactions. The study identifies formation as a critical tool for enhancing dialogue, underscoring its necessity for fostering a deeper understanding and mutual respect among religious communities. It highlights the integration of daily life interactions and structured faith formation programmes as vital for practising the theological insights in real-world settings. This research contributes a methodological framework for assessing the practical impacts of religious teachings on interfaith dialogue and suggests ways to improve these interactions through targeted educational efforts. The findings advocate for ongoing dialogue initiatives that are informed by robust formation processes to sustain peaceful coexistence in diverse societies.

Keywords: Catholic-Muslim relations; *Evangelii Gaudium*; formation; interfaith dialogue.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi peran formasi dalam dialog antaragama, khususnya antara Katolik dan Muslim, dengan mengacu pada pandangan Paus Fransiskus dalam *Evangelii Gaudium*. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, melakukan analisis isi dari dokumen *Evangelii Gaudium* dan literatur sekunder tambahan untuk mengeksplorasi implikasi formasi dalam interaksi keagamaan. Studi ini mengidentifikasi formasi sebagai alat penting untuk meningkatkan dialog, menekankan kebutuhannya untuk membina pemahaman yang lebih dalam dan saling menghormati di antara komunitas agama. Ini menyoroti integrasi interaksi kehidupan sehari-hari dan program formasi iman yang terstruktur sebagai penting untuk mempraktikkan wawasan teologis dalam pengaturan dunia nyata. Penelitian ini menyumbangkan kerangka metodologis untuk menilai dampak praktis ajaran agama pada dialog antaragama dan menyarankan cara-cara untuk meningkatkan interaksi ini melalui upaya pendidikan yang ditargetkan. Temuan mendukung inisiatif dialog berkelanjutan yang diinformasikan oleh proses formasi yang kuat untuk mempertahankan koeksistensi damai dalam masyarakat yang beragam.

Kata Kunci: Hubungan Katolik-Muslim; *Evangelii Gaudium*; formasi; dialog antar agama..

1. Introduction

Amidst globalisation and rapid urbanisation, interactions between followers of different religions, particularly between Christians and Muslims, are becoming increasingly frequent and complex. Islam and Christianity are the two largest religions in the world, with more than 1.9 billion Muslims and approximately 2.3 billion Christians globally according to data from the Pew Research Centre in 2020 (Pew Research Centre, 2020). These demographic changes, while enriching societies, also pose social challenges and faith-based conflicts, as seen in the increase in interfaith tensions in some regions. Interfaith dialogue is crucial in promoting peaceful coexistence and addressing misunderstandings that can lead to conflict.

It is significant to observe that dialogue with Islam seems to be one of the most important agendas during Pope Francis' leadership and is also part of the uniqueness of his leadership. Months after his election as Pope, several meetings were held with representatives of other faiths, including Islamic religious leaders, and they spent much time in dialogue. Addressing representatives of churches and other religions early in his reign, the Pope emphasized that the Catholic Church is aware of the importance of promoting friendship and respect between different religious traditions (Francesco, 2013a). In fact, dialogue with adherents of other faiths has been part of his pastoral attitude and spirit since he took office as Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Argentina (Dicastero per la Comunicazione, 2013). To anyone who knew him, he was gentle and open, always seeking dialogues full of brotherhood and respect with adherents of other religions (Fillipi, 2013).

His positive attitude toward Islam and appeals regarding the importance of dialogue is contained in a document of the Apostolic Exhortation entitled "*Evangelii Gaudium*" (The Joy of the Gospel) which was issued in 2013 (Francesco, 2013b). The document received significant public appreciation within the Church's internal environment and the wider community. With this document, Pope Francis wants to state emphatically that a Church that lives in the midst of the world must be a Church that is open to the reality of the existence of people of other religions, including Islam (Woźnica & Słomka, 2021). An accurate reading of the document shows that as a formal ecclesiastical magisterial document, this Apostolic Exhortation does not contain dogmatic teachings. Instead, it is pastoral-exhortative document, which urges bishops, clergy, and Catholic faithful worldwide to build bridges through dialogue, with people of other religions, including Islam. Furthermore, this Apostolic Exhortation contains the depth of Pope Francis' theological reflection and the radiance of his open, friendly, positive, and happy soul in dealing with the existence of Islam.

The critical question that needs to be asked is why has dialogue with Islam received so much attention during the time of Pope Francis and why does he strongly encourage such dialogue? In my view, the answer to this important question must be traced deep into his relationship with Islamic religious figures and his personal beliefs about Islam and about the world as a place where humans live and interact with each other. He has a personal closeness to the prominent Islamic leaders and has a great appreciation for Islamic teachings. He also has a deep awareness of the importance of establishing authentic bonds of brotherhood and cooperation to build peace and justice among nations.

According to the Pope Francis' understanding, dialogue between religions is needed to guarantee peace and justice in the world. It is a necessary condition that must exist and efforts to create peace are a task that must be carried out together (Francesco, 2013c). In other words, in order to create peace and justice, there must be dialogue. Without dialogue, there is no peace and justice. Besides, dialogue is also important in relation to the acceptance of other people who have different ways of life, perspectives and ways of speaking (Francesco, 2013d). It can be seen here that Francis views the fact of this unavoidable difference from a positive point of view. This attitude of accepting differences, therefore, must be the basic attitude of every religious adherent.

While encouraging dialogue between religious adherents, Pope Francis is also aware of various obstacles and difficulties, especially the problem of religious fundamentalism in its various forms, both Christian and Islamic fundamentalism (Francesco, 2013e). Fundamentalists have a strong tendency to reject historical and hermeneutical thinking in understanding the holy scriptures. They also act exclusively by drawing a clear line between their group and other groups (Dahlan, 2012). In the context of dialogue between religions, such attitudes and views, undoubtedly, pose the most serious threat to various efforts to build harmony among religious adherents. Besides, fundamentalists tend to nullify the existence of adherents of other religions and justify acts of violence to defend their beliefs.

It is precisely at this point that Pope Francis' call about the importance of appropriate formation becomes relevant in relation to today's Catholic-Islam dialogue. In the document *Evangelii Gaudium*, it is stated explicitly that to support dialogue with Islam, such as formation for all those involved in it is very important (Francesco, 2013b). The fundamental question here is what exactly is meant by the term

formation? Pope Francis himself does not describe further what is meant by formation regarding dialogue. Nevertheless, observing carefully the main ideas in several parts of the document of *Evangelii Gaudium* (Francesco, 2013b) that talks about dialogue between religions, the author boldly argues that in this context, the formation is understood as the overall pastoral effort carried out in a planned manner by the Church to form good personalities, spirituality and intellectuality of believers which is very useful for supporting genuine dialogue with people of other religions.

This interesting idea about formation in relation to dialogue as mentioned in Pope Francis' document is what the author wants to elaborate further. The reason is that the various problems which are related to dialogical relations with adherents of other religions, in this case, Catholicism and Islam, such as the issue of fundamentalism with violence, cold and suspicious attitude towards each other, and so on, which have a negative impact on the relations between the two, mainly due to the lack of correct understanding and wrong appreciation of religious teachings. With this line of thinking, formation becomes an urgent need that must be given special priority in order to support dialogue between religious believers.

It is worth noting that several previous studies have discussed this document from various perspectives. Felix Körner's article, entitled "*Apertura nell'averità e nell'amore: "Evangelii Gaudium" e il dialogo ecumenico-musulmano,*" emphasized three areas of concern to Pope Francis, including the dialogue of openness, life, and understanding. According to the article, it is important to understand the background of Pope Francis' thinking regarding the current socio-political dynamics and the various initiatives of the Catholic Church in interreligious meetings focusing on the Church's teachings (Körner, 2019). Meanwhile Francesco Celestino emphasized the pastoral aspect in the article entitled "*Il contributo dell' Evangelii Gaudium per la pastorale e il dialogo interreligioso.*" This article sought to capture the decisive and innovative aspects of pastoral action and interfaith dialogue. It shows that the culture of encounter and dialogue requires pastoral care and social action that is mutually supportive and healthy (Celestino, 2019).

The novelty in this study lies in its academic endeavour to elaborate Pope Francis' thoughts on the importance of adequate formation as a determining element for Catholic-Islamic dialogue and its implications for the Catholic-Islam dialogue in Indonesia. Despite my efforts through thick and thin to look for the previous studies, up to now I have not been able to come across any articles that specifically dissect the theme. There are three main issues to be explored in this study, firstly, what is the relationship between formation and dialogue?; secondly, why is formation seen as a determining element in Catholic-Islam dialogue?; thirdly, are there any implications for Catholic-Islamic dialogue in the Indonesian context?

To support the arguments in answering the questions mentioned above, the content analysis method was used. According to Bakus, content analysis is a scientific study of the content of a communication (Moleong, 2000). It was selected as an analytical tool because it is appropriate for determining, identifying, processing, and analyzing documents in an integrative way to find their meaning and relevance. The content of the communication analyzed includes the Apostolic Exhortation '*Evangelii Gaudium*' document and the primary data. The secondary data were books, articles, and relevant literature from the internet. The collected data was then analyzed and interpreted to obtain findings, which formed the basis for a scientific and systematic discussion (Creswell, 2016).

For the sake of clarity, it needs to be emphasized that in this study Islam is understood as a religion of peace with its two main teachings, namely the Oneness of God and the unity or brotherhood of humankind (Nata, 2012). It is an open-minded religion, moderate, tolerant and inclusive, giving freedom to its followers to always build good relationships with the followers of other religions, acknowledging the diversity, including establishing dialogue and cooperation in order to create peace and justice (Murfi & Fitriyani, 2018). Catholicism, on the other hand, refers to the religion founded by Jesus Christ, whom God has sent into the world for the salvation of all peoples and who believe that the Pope is the direct successor of Saint Peter and the Supreme Shepherd with the authority to teach, unify and protect God's people (United States Catholic Conference, 1997). It is an open-minded religion, which rejects nothing that is true and holy in other religions, which regards Moslems regards with

esteem (Paul VI, 1965), which teaches its followers to enter into constructive dialogue with them, promoting mutual understanding and fostering respect for diversity (Hrynkow & Power, 2018), as well as making every effort in order to build peace and brotherhood in society.

2. Method

The methodology employed in this study was primarily qualitative, focusing on an extensive review of literature complemented by a systematic content analysis of primary and secondary sources. The primary document under scrutiny was Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium*, an Apostolic Exhortation that serves as a pivotal text for understanding his perspectives on interfaith dialogue, particularly with Islam. This document was analyzed in-depth to extract themes related to the concept of formation and its implications for dialogue initiatives.

In addition to the primary analysis, a broad range of secondary sources was utilized to provide context and support the findings from the primary document. These included books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and credible online publications that address related themes of interreligious dialogue, the role of formation in religious contexts, and the specific challenges and opportunities in Catholic-Islamic relations. The selection of these sources was guided by their relevance to the research questions and objectives, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

The content analysis involved coding the collected data to identify recurring themes and patterns (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). This method allowed for the systematic evaluation of how formation is discussed and implemented in the context of interreligious dialogue, as outlined in **Evangelii Gaudium**. The analysis was conducted in stages, beginning with the identification of relevant passages, categorizing these excerpts according to predefined themes, and interpreting the aggregated data to form coherent insights about the role of formation in enhancing dialogue between Catholics and Muslims.

3. Result and Discussion

Formation and Dialogue with Muslims

In the spirit of openness (Francesco, 2013b) Pope Francis directs his reflections on Islam towards practical advice by stating that adequate formation for all involved is essential in building dialogue (Francesco, 2013b). There is a close correlation between dialogue and formation. Dialogue is basically a discussion about human existence. It is not just "I talk and you listen" and then "you talk and I listen", but rather it refers to talking with followers of other religions or openness to their existence and sharing joys and sorrows, hence learning to accept each other's different ways of life and thinking (Francesco, 2013b). This basic idea is a whole constructive effort in building relationships based on the spirit of brotherhood and mutual understanding and respect that brings reciprocal enrichment for the faithful. To be able to dialogue, an open attitude to remain firm in one's own faith beliefs is very important while at the same time being open to the faith beliefs of the other party. This kind of openness is only possible if religious adherents are provided with appropriate formation.

The fundamental question that needs to be answered is why formation is so important? To this question, Pope Francis gave a straightforward answer, namely that through such formation religious adherents can be firmly and joyfully rooted in their own identity, able to recognize the values lived by others, understand the concerns that underlie their demands and be able to discover their own beliefs and able to find shared beliefs (Francesco, 2013b). With this logic of understanding, it can be seen what is expected of and what are the objectives of the formation in question.

To fulfil the expectations and achieve the objectives mentioned above, formation as a process of assistance in relation to dialogue with Islam must reach the point where believers are aware of the existence of other religious communities, accept and respect the differences and are able to establish good relationships in daily life. A part from that, through this formation, believers are equipped with basic theological knowledge, including the necessary theological understanding regarding teachings of Islamic religion. Concretely, this formation can be carried out through various things, such as

encouraging believe to get involved in daily life activities with followers of other religions, including interfaith meetings; faith formation through catechesis programs; studying Islamic teachings formally at Islamic educational institution.

Dialogue with Muslims can take various forms, adapted to the situation and conditions. According to the Catholic Church (Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, 1991) it can be a dialogue of 1) life in which every religious believer strives to live in an open and neighborly spirit, share joys, sorrows, human problems, and hopes, 2) action, where Catholics and Muslims collaborate in the integral development and liberation of human beings, 3) theological, where Catholic and Islamic scholars seek to deepen their understanding of each other's religious heritage and obey the respective spiritual values, and 4) religious experience, where Catholics and Muslims, rooted in their religious traditions, share spiritual riches about prayer and contemplation and faith and ways of seeking God, among others. Concerning the dialogue of life, Pope Francis gave special accentuation to the act of sharing experiences of daily life, approaching believers from other religions to share joys and sorrows, including their difficulties and concerns, paving the way for communal responsibility in cooperation and mutual enrichment (Francesco, 2013b). From what Pope Francis emphasized regarding dialogue of life, it can be said in other words that dialogue of life operates at the level of ordinary relational of daily life activities. It is within the reach of everyone who lives side by side with other believers from a different religion. This kind of dialogue implies care, respect and friendliness towards the other party. When neighbors of different religions open up to each other and share common projects and hopes, they are engaging in the dialogue of life. This also applies to other forms of dialogue, namely to be able to enter into a mutually enriching dialogue of life, each religious follower, be they Catholic or Muslim, must be firmly grounded and well informed in their own faith. This is important in order to avoid being trapped in the wrong way of thinking by viewing one's own religious teachings as the most correct and closing off oneself from interacting with followers of other religions.

These forms of dialogue which are mentioned above unfold in a network of relations that together describe the reality of interreligious dialogue amid a complex social context. For the Church, dialogue is a way of life that confirms its existence in the world (Polak, 2020).

Formation as a Determinant Element of Dialogue

Relying on the concept of formation the overall pastoral effort carried to form good personalities, spirituality and intellectuality of believers and referring to the importance of formation in relation to dialogue as stated above, it can be unequivocally said that formation is a decisive element in creating a constructive dialogue with Muslims. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis outlines several basic reasons closely related to each other, specifically to strengthen and root themselves in their respective religious identities, able to recognize the values embraced by people of other faiths, understand the concerns underlying the demands of other religious communities, and find common beliefs (Francesco, 2013b). These basic reasons should be deeply described for a complete and comprehensive understanding.

The first reason is to strengthen and root themselves in their respective religious identities. The Catholic identity closely relates to the confession of faith in the mystery of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, a communion in which a close relationship is established. Jesus is God who became human, and it is the Word of God that enlightens everyone. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and all humans are redeemed by Him and united with Him even when not aware. He is present in every human encounter to free people from sin and make them brothers and sisters, loving each other. The Holy Spirit, which is none other than God's own Spirit, works in the depths of each person's consciousness and silently leads to the truth. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit is also present and working outside the visible boundaries of the Mystical Body of Christ, specifically the Church. Under the guidance of the Spirit, the Church is compelled to discern the signs of the times, follow them wherever the Spirit leads, and humbly serve and cooperate with them. Manifestations of the Spirit's actions include inspiring people to engage in dialogue to seek the truth (Lobo, 2010).

Catholicism is characterized by an understanding of salvation that includes all people. This universality of salvation is motivated by the theological idea that God wants salvation regardless of the

religion embraced, including Muslims who hold on to the faith of Abraham. Together with the Church, they prostrate themselves to worship the one and only God (Konsili Vatikan II, 2013a). With an enlightened consciousness, the Church recognizes that outside it, there is salvation (*extra Ecclesiam Salus est*) because God's Spirit "breathes wherever He wants," and it does not have any right to limit His scope of movement.

Catholic identity is also characterized by brotherhood and love. For instance, a catholic cannot invoke the name of God the Father of all people if, towards certain people created in God's image, he does not show the attitude of brothers. There is a close relationship between the relationship with God and fellow brothers. Good relations with God should also be shown in loving relationships between brothers (Konsili Vatikan II, 2013b). Moreover, the Catholic faithful should live the Divine joy and radiate it out to everyone encountered (Konsili Vatikan II, 2013b). This is also part of the Christian identity. Christian joy opens itself up and is not egoistic that closes itself off from others. Christian identity can only be understood in the context of accepting the existence of others with their differentness or uniqueness and not by ignoring or eliminating them (Catalano, 2022). A correct understanding of Catholic identity is urgently needed as a basis for building dialogue with others (Arasa, 2018).

To Muslims, adequate formation in theology is vital in strengthening and rooting themselves in their Islamic identity. In general, Islam is closely related to peace. Specifically, Islam means peace, salvation, surrender, submission, and obedience. It is a religion of *rahmatanlilalamin* that promotes peace, compassion, and solidarity for humanity (Iqbal & Khan, 2018). Through formation, they are always made aware that - to borrow what Ali Shari'ati said - return to Islam which is its "self". This kind of formation helps them build human awareness and authenticity by returning to Islam with the spirit of monotheism as the axis of liberation to create a peaceful, just, and dignified society (Ridwan, 2009). It also helps them to realize that their existence is always in the context of relationships with others. In that relationship they are helped to find the meaning of life, a sense of comfort and mutual assistance (Siddiqui, 2018).

It must be acknowledged that some of the fundamental dogmas of the Catholic Church cannot be accepted for Islam, such as the teaching about the Trinity of God which is contradict to the teaching of Islam on the oneness of God. In the Koran, as quoted by Samir Khalil Samir, it is said explicitly to Christians: "O People of the Scripture! Do not exaggerate in your religion nor utter aught concerning Allah save the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah, and His word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in Allah and His messenger, and say not "Three" - Cease! (it is) better for you! - Allah is only One God. Far is it removed from His Transcendent Majesty that" (Koran 4:171). Apart from that, the teaching about Jesus as the son of God is also not accepted because He was only a prophet who was famous for his miracles and he was not the last prophet and not on the same level as the prophet Muhammad (Samir, 2013).

The differences in fundamental teachings can be a barrier to fostering dialogue, but this should not be the case. I think that differences in teachings should be accepted as an undeniable reality and should be respected. God is always greater than all religious teachings. Differences in teachings should never be a barrier to dialogue but instead be a golden opportunity to strengthen brotherhood among religious adherents in various forms of dialogue, especially dialogue of life.

The second factor is the ability to recognize the values embraced by other religious people. Being rooted in the religious identity embraced is not a static knowledge but an experience of living with people of other religions and various values. Radicality demands openness to acknowledge the values held by adherents of other religions, expelling all forms of closure (Daniel & Marius, 2021). These values include various traits or things embedded in a certain religious belief system and form the basis for its adherents to act and relate with others.

Regarding dialogue with Muslims, formation guides and directs Catholics to gain the ability to recognize Islamic values. Recognition at this level is not a diplomatic nature that says 'yes' to everything to avoid confrontation. According to Pope Francis, this is a form of deception and a denial of the goodness of other religions (Francesco, 2013b). Conversely, acknowledgment is a positive affirmation

that values are very valuable for Muslims, and as Catholics, it is necessary to draw on the richness of their meaning in a certain sense. Catholics need to be humble and always want to learn from others (Francesco, 2013b). The movement out of self is a way of spiritual appreciation to meet adherents of other religions. In such an encounter, the minds and hearts of the faithful are enriched by Islamic values while simultaneously bringing them out of their limited spiritual schemes.

Pope Francis mentions the values of piety and solidarity displayed by Muslims. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, this includes how the daily prayer of the faithfulness of the Muslim generation and ethical commitment builds in response to God's love through various humanitarian efforts and helping people in need (Francesco, 2013b). The wealth of values in the teachings of Islam is not only limited to this aspect. Brotherhood is also highly emphasized in Islamic teachings. It is an aspect embraced internally and externally by adherents of other religions and was precisely demonstrated by the Prophet Muhammad. His letters to Christians beautifully described the value of brotherhood that should be lived in building a common life and how he guaranteed protection and security for Christians as an Islamic leader (Amini Golestani, 2019).

Recognition of the values possessed by Muslims frees Catholics from the trap of ways of thinking and acting that deny their existence. Without acknowledging the values embraced by Muslims, Catholics fall into a hole of closure and claim to truth, which in turn leads to an unhealthy negative-dichotomous perspective: "our group", "our *ummah*", "other groups", "other people."

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis mentions the challenge of religious fundamentalism, which closed and anti-dialogue (Francesco, 2013b). This document has a novelty concerning fundamentalism because it explicitly mentions fundamentalism in a plural form, not only to other religions but also to the Catholic religion itself for the first time. This implies that there is a fairly bold magisterial affirmation also in Catholicism, a phenomenon of fundamentalism.

The third factor is understanding the concerns that underlie the demands of other religious communities. Positive acknowledgment of the values upheld by adherents of other religions requires believers to consider the concerns of other religious people. They are supposed not to see them as strangers but as brothers who need proper attention. Among Catholics, concern for the suffering of others is a moral-ethical vocation and demands and radiates a bright identity as a disciple of Jesus who shares life with everyone, listens to their concerns, and weeps with those who weep (Francesco, 2013b). During his visit to the Muslim community, Pope Francis showed his sense of brotherhood. For Pope Francis, Muslims are also his brothers and with them Catholics can live together in peace (Catalano, 2022).

Pope Francis has shown great concern for the suffering experienced by Muslim immigrants in Italy and urged Christians to welcome them with love and respect (Francesco, 2013b). In his sermon in the port of Lampedusa, where migrants trying to enter Italian territory are rejected and many die, he called for an end to a culture of indifference to others due to political reasons (Hrynkow & Power, 2018). He also asked for humane treatment as well as the provision of space and guarantees of freedom of worship. Furthermore, the same appeal is made to civil authorities in Muslim-majority areas to protect and guarantee the freedom of Christians to worship (Francesco, 2013b).

The fourth factor is being able to find shared beliefs. Rooted in identity, acknowledgment of the value of each religion, and understanding of other religious communities' concerns help discover the common belief between the faithful. Pope Francis's thoughts in *Evangelii Gaudium* show that the common belief is nothing but a basic attitude about interfaith dialogue as a fundamental prerequisite for building peace and pursuing social justice (Francesco, 2013b). Everyone involved in the dialogue will be spiritually enriched (Francesco, 2013b). For Catholics, dialogue with Muslims is very important today (Francesco, 2013b). Catholics are always called to walk with Muslims in dialogue and this is also important because the future depends, among other things, on the intensity and quality of encounters between adherents of religions (Catalano, 2022). In synthesis, even though there are differences in terms of faith beliefs, there are values that are shared in everyday life. Both Catholicism and Islam in principle uphold the same values of humanity and peace. Dialogue in connection with efforts to realize these

two fundamental values in everyday life must always be encouraged because it can enrich both parties and make a positive contribution to society as a whole.

The belief in the importance of dialogue is also emphasized in Islam. The Qur'an calls on Muslims to dialogue with adherents of other religions, especially with "the People of the Book", which includes Christians based on humanity and a common ancestor Abraham (Kurucan & Erol, 2012). As distinct manifestations of God's truth, all religions with the same divine root. According to the Muslim Sufism expert Jal al-Din, as quoted by Mohammad Saeedimehr, all religions are different steps to heaven (Saeedimehr, 2020). For Islam, the purpose of dialogue is to foster goodness that includes cooperation, understanding, respect, and unity among people of different religions and cultures (Khan, et. al., 2020). At the practical level, this noble purpose can be achieved through various forms such as dialogue of life, dialogue of collaboration, dialogue of religious experience and dialogue of theological discourse (Sintang, et. al., 2012).

Internally, the formation is the responsibility of pastors, including bishops and priests. Depending on the circumstances, this formation can take various forms. Formal educational institutions can be used to equip the faithful with theological understanding regarding inter-religious dialogue from the Catholic perspective as well as other religions. The *Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d'Islamistica* (PISAI), a papal Institute for Arabic and Islamic studies based in Rome, Italy, is a visionary step of the Catholic Church in preparing its people with everything useful for the needs of dialogue with Muslims (Francesco, 2015). Similarly, the Center for Interreligious Studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome is part of the Church's efforts to impart adequate skills and knowledge of theology and dialogue to the Catholic faithful (Pontificia Università Gregoriana, n.d.). This allows Catholics to have a strong theological foundation on everything related to their faith and sufficient knowledge about Islam. Formation can also take the form of catechesis or deepening faith with themes related to dialogue with Muslims, periodic meetings with Islamic religious leaders to discuss certain themes, or other forms deemed necessary and relevant to the conditions of the faithful. Undoubtedly, this, in turn, positively impacts dialogue with Muslims in their daily life.

Implications for Catholic-Islamic Dialogue in Indonesia

Indonesia is widely known as a pluralistic country, including in terms of beliefs or religions. On the one hand, the fact of religious plurality is a positive thing because it is a supporting factor in maintaining national unity. On the other hand, however, this can trigger conflict when dialogue channels are blocked due to fundamentalistic attitudes and behavior accompanied by violence. As reported, several negative incidents have greatly disturbed the comfort of life among religious community. Just to mention a few, in 2018, three bombs exploded in at least three churches in Surabaya, including Saint Mary Immaculate Catholic Church, shortly before Sunday services began. Suicide bombers are believed to be a family affiliated with an extremist group (Kharishar Kahfi, et. al., 2018). In 2021, two suicide bombers attacked a cathedral church in Makassar. It happened just after congregants finished celebrating Palm Sunday. One of the suspects left his family a note that said he was ready to die as a martyr (News Desk, 2021). Apart from that, the results of research in 2023 conducted by Belang and Sarang in a parish in the Archdiocese of Merauke, showed that there was an attitude of intolerance among Catholics who strongly rejected the construction of mosques. Of course, this unexpected case has greatly disrupted relations between religious communities in the region (Belang & Sarang, 2023).

Negative events as described above could have been triggered by various other factors, however the author argues that all of this occurs as a result of a person's low understanding of the teachings of his own religion and this has a major impact on the narrow and closed perspective of towards adherents of other religions. In his logical thinking, what is true is the teachings of his own religion and adherents of other religions are seen as rivals who must be defeated or enemies who must be eradicated.

It is precisely in this context, according to the author, Francis' call about the importance of formation in relation to dialogue can also be echoed loudly in Indonesia. In other words, the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* has important implications on the Catholic-Islamic dialogue in

Indonesia as a Unitary State based on Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution. This matter requires serious consideration, especially by the leadership of the Catholic Church, *casu quo* bishops, and priests. Amid the existing challenges, the Indonesian Catholic Church has been quite successful in delivering the Church's teachings on the importance of dialogue with Muslims through various forms of dialogue in everyday life (Sihombing, et. al., 2020). However, dialogue with Muslims can be successful only suppose Catholics are provided with planned and continuous formation. It should not just be for practical-pragmatic considerations or spontaneous reactions due to pressure. In this regard, there are several considerations which I think should be taken seriously, including;

First, there is a need to internally form skills and broaden Catholics through deepening faith or catechesis activities. The material studied includes the Church's teachings on the universality of God's salvation that reaches all people regardless of their religion. As a result, Catholics know that the Church is not the 'owner' of salvation. This is because, outside it, there is also salvation for those who innocently do not know Jesus Christ. Since Muslims are also children of God, it is necessary to build a life together not based on fear or suspicion but on brotherhood and love. The living examples of saints who have left a trail of amazing testimonies in the history of the Indonesian Catholic Church, such as Francis Xavier, can also be used as interesting contextual catechesis material (Sihombing & Pinem, 2021). In particular, in a context where Catholics are the quantitative majority, such as in some areas in Eastern Indonesia, catechesis needs to be conducted continuously in to increase the awareness of the faithful about their human vocation to live in peace with Muslims, viewing them as brothers, respecting their existence in their otherness and providing them protection and guarantees of comfort to live and worship.

Second, there is a need to provide opportunities for Catholic religious leaders to form their reasoning with Islamic religious skills and knowledge. This can be achieved with a comparative study of various social organizations and Islamic educational institutions at home and abroad. It allows them to be equipped with adequate skills and knowledge that help balance the power of cognitive and social reasoning, as well as individual and social piety. It also helps build critical alertness while dealing with destructive thoughts stirred up with enthusiasm by certain groups or mass media with lame rationalization (Fikri, 2013) due to mistakes in understanding and implementing very fundamental teachings (Machasin, 2014).

The initiative of some Indonesian Catholic church leaders to send their priests to universities abroad to study Islamic teachings should be appreciated. This is a positive breakthrough in building interfaith dialogue. Such initiatives should continuously emerge and involve both Islamic universities abroad and at home. The reputation of several Islamic universities in the country, which are no less flashy with a conducive and open academic climate that allows dialogue across religious boundaries, is vital. Catholics can enjoy the sweetness of thoughts about Islam, such as its moderate image and anti-violence in the classic text of *Serat Carub Kandha* (Iswanto, et. al., 2021) or about human brotherhood, respect for differences, and tolerance as stated in the book of Sufism *Al-Muntakhabat* by KH. Ahmad Asrori Al-Ishaqi (Muhtar, 2021). Moreover, through intellectual struggle with Islamic literature, Catholics can learn that Islam is a universal religion. The basic principles of Islam include interaction, peace, tolerance, and friendship. For instance, it teaches that life is sacred and that its adherents should uphold truth and justice. However, Islam is often misunderstood as a religion of the sword that justifies violence to spread the faith (Yazdani, 2020).

I think the initiatives taken by some Catholic church leaders as mentioned above can be seen as a strategic pastoral step that needs to always be supported and if deemed necessary, it can become a joint policy of all Catholic Church leaders in Indonesia. There are two main reasons, firstly, it helps understand each other's teachings and values upheld by the Catholic as well as the history of its religion, considering that the Qur'an and the Bible contain potential unlimited meanings, hence open to the possibility of abuse, as the Syafa'atum underlines. The skills and knowledge and all available historical research tools help uncover key elements of the original context of their verses (Almirzanah, 2009). Understanding and accepting this historical aspect tames the harshness of literal and thick interpretation with the stench of self-righteousness. When Catholics or Muslim interpret the teachings

of their religion verbatim, they unconsciously do counterproductive actions. For instance, they think they defend their respective religious teachings when they realistically trample on them. Such actions may lead to the abyss of a narrow and closed life of religious life and encourage wrongful defense actions in the name of religion. According to Gus Dur, a critical attitude towards religion and a correct understanding of the main principles and the history of the development of other religions help avoid narrow ways of thinking and exclusive tendencies and truth claim. Most Indonesian Muslims may not understand the main principles of Catholic theology. Similarly, most Catholics do not know the principles of Islamic theology (Munjid, 2020); secondly, it has a positive effect on inter-religious dialogue. In fact, at least from my own critical observations, priests who have been equipped with the necessary knowledge about the teachings of the Islamic religion are at the forefront in providing enlightenment to the Catholic faithful as well as being the driving force in building good relations with followers of the Islamic faith through continuous dialogue in everyday life.

Third, external formation can be performed by building cooperation with Islamic groups or religious leaders. This collaboration can be in lectures, sharing experiences, or exchanging opinions held periodically and organized. For instance, actively involved in joint activities held by the Forum for Religious Harmony (FKUB) which was deliberately formed as an important forum for maintaining harmony and strengthening fraternal relations among religious adherents in Indonesia (Faqih, 2021). This forum can be seen as Indonesian wisdom which is very important as an example of inspiring mutually enriching inter-religious dialogue relations. Another thing that can be done is to invite Islamic figures to give lectures on Islamic views regarding interfaith dialogue or other important issues relevant to efforts to build a better life together. Without neglecting other groups, this collaboration can be explored with Indonesia's two largest religious organizations, specifically Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, which moderate and encourage plurality and religious tolerance (Hilmy, 2013). For the Catholic Church, the developing of this kind of cooperation is an attempt to concretely translate Pope Francis' call to move out of the self and meet others. In this case, the Church should make a concerted effort to take the first step and be involved (Francesco, 2013b). This cooperation is also possible in case the Church forget their bitter past experiences and reaches out to forgive each other. There is a need to borrow the words of Pope Benedict XVI, who stated that Catholics should be courageous to overcome past suspicions and correct the often-erroneous image of Muslims who make it difficult to establish a dialogue with them (Benedetto XVII, 2008). In our view, it is of utmost important to remember that the words of the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI are still relevant today not only for Catholics but also for Muslims in Indonesia. There is a pressing need that both Catholics and Muslims must have the courage to overcome past suspicions and the often erroneous course of history that makes dialogue difficult. Of course, this kind of courage must, among other things, be shown in good attitudes and behavior in everyday life.

Fourth, it is hoped that with the provision of training as described above, Catholics and Muslims can foster true brotherhood which is not only limited to outward manners, but a spirit of brotherhood that comes from the heart and goes to the heart, meaning an authentic brotherhood and not just a lip-service, a brotherhood across religious boundaries, which sees adherents of other religions as brothers and not rivals let alone enemies that must be eliminated. This is important because it greatly influences attitudes in term of joint involvement in building public welfare and in fighting for justice and peace in the territory of the beloved Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia. Without awareness of the important value of brotherhood embodied in daily practice, it would be impossible to build the unitary state that the founding fathers of this country aspired to.

4. Conclusion

This research underscores the critical role of formation in facilitating dialogue between Catholics and Muslims, aligning with Pope Francis' vision in *Evangelii Gaudium*. Formation emerges not merely as an educational effort but as a comprehensive pastoral strategy crucial for cultivating well-rounded believers capable of engaging in substantive interreligious dialogues. The principal finding of this study highlights formation as indispensable for ensuring that participants in dialogue are adequately

prepared, both spiritually and intellectually, to respect and understand the faith perspectives and traditions of others. This preparation enables participants to approach interreligious dialogue not only with tolerance but with a spirit of genuine brotherhood and mutual enrichment.

The contribution of this study extends beyond theoretical insights, offering a methodological framework for analysing the impact of religious teachings on practical interfaith interactions. By integrating daily life activities with structured faith formation programmes, the research suggests a model where dialogue is a lived experience, enhancing the practical relevance of religious teachings in fostering peaceful coexistence. The study not only supports the conceptualisation of formation as a dynamic part of interreligious dialogue but also highlights its role in promoting more empathetic and cooperative interactions among believers of different faiths.

Despite its contributions, the study acknowledges limitations, particularly its primary reliance on textual analysis and the need for broader empirical data to enhance the generalisability of the findings. Future research could explore the effects of formation across different cultural and religious contexts and assess the long-term impact of such initiatives on the quality and sustainability of interfaith dialogue. By expanding the scope of research to include more diverse settings and incorporating direct observations and interviews, subsequent studies could offer deeper insights into the transformative potential of formation in various global contexts, thereby furthering the development of effective dialogue strategies in multi-religious societies like Indonesia.

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