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*(1586-1617) Virgin, mystic, ascetic,  
and first canonized saint born in  
the Americas. Canonized 1671.  
Memorial August 23.  
(Gifts up to \$249)*

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Combined Federal Campaign: \$8,870

*We especially acknowledge those honored or  
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keep these individuals in your prayers.*

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# Pontifications: Why Study Islam?



**Fr. Joseph Alobaidi, OP**  
**Professor of Sacred Scripture**

You may question the necessity of teaching Islam to Catholic seminarians. If you do so, chances are that you belong to another planet, dropped on earth by mistake. If you fit such a description you may join those who deem Islam foreign to our culture and consequently, think that studying the Quran or the life of Muhammad is a waste of time. Others may differ with you and find merit to such study. But they temper the ardent desire of an old professor like me by thinking that a class about Islam should at the most be optional, offered to students looking to fill a hole in their curriculum or to impress a dean or a bishop. Yet, the truth is of another nature: it is imperative that those destined to guide their Christian community learn about a religion present in their field of pastoral ministry.

The religion of Muhammad, the second largest after Christianity, is expanding. No one thinks of it any longer as a belief born in the Arabian Peninsula that, with the exception of few countries (Turkey, Bosnia and Albania), remains external to the European and North American mentality. This belies the social fact you and I are experiencing daily. Islam, for many reasons, is more and more local. In many cases it is the religion of our next door neighbor. If a seminarian's age ranges from 20-35, it is possible that at his grammar school, high school, or college, he has met and befriended a Muslim boy or girl. You may take any layer of our society: childhood, youth and adulthood, professional life or leisure time: Islam is there.

These different stages are at the same time fields of ministry where priests, religious, and engaged lay Christians are active in caring for their brothers and sis-

ters. Interactions with representatives of other religions and cultures are common facts of our life and the misunderstanding of our particularities is an occasion for all kinds of problems at any moment.

The most difficult of these problems undoubtedly are the ones pertaining to interfaith marriages and the religious future of the resulting families. Often, moments like these are full of anxiety, and the faithful who address their priests are entitled to knowledgeable and appeasing answers. Questions should be treated competently when Christian ministers are asked, for example, about a woman's status in the Islamic family (as well as the status of the husband, the children, the relationship with non-Muslims, etc.). To widen the perspective, they must also answer questions about Islam in our society and Islam and politics. These are a few of the many issues requiring learned disposition as well as avoidance of clichés and simplistic impressions.

There is another factor that supports the urgency to study Islam: the Quran and Muhammad in his sayings have abundantly mentioned Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Mary and many other biblical figures. In fact, Islam has a precise idea of Christianity and Judaism; an idea in total opposition to what we think of our religion and what the Jews think of their religion.

Let us take an example: Jesus Christ. For the Quran, Jesus is the son of the Virgin Mary (Q 3:45-47), who started preaching from the moment he left his mother's womb (Q 19:30-34), who was taught the Torah and the Gospel by God himself (Q

3:48), and who has refuted the belief in the Holy Trinity (Q 5:116-117). By the way, the Holy Trinity, according to the Quran is God, Mary and Jesus, (Q 5:116) whose mission is to prepare the coming of Muhammad (Q 61:6). Jesus did not die on the cross (Q 4:157). His disciples (the Apostles) had already confessed that they are Muslims (Q 5:111), but their successors (Christian and Jews alike) have deformed the

Scripture in order to erase the testimony to Muhammad (Q 5:15,18).

The above example is a sample of how the same name, Jesus Christ, mentioned by the Quran and the New Testament, covers two different personalities. When Muslims express veneration to Jesus, it is surely not to the historical Jesus that we Christians venerate, but the heterodox "Jesus" of sectarian groups in southern Arabia, the only groups Muhammad knew.

In short, if you are a Christian adult looking to assist other Christians in their quest for holiness in one of the capacities the Church offers you, hasten to study Islam. In so doing, you will both help them efficiently and spare yourself the embarrassment

of being someone who is destined to serve, but who is ignorant when it comes to one of the most acute issues of his time.

Fr. Joseph Alobaidi is a professor of Sacred Scripture at the PFIC. Educated at the University of Baghdad, the University of Fribourgh, and the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, he is also the editor of the "Bible in History" books from Peter Lang.

"Pontifications" is the faculty column of The 487 Correspondent. Each issue of our newsletter will feature an insight from one of our professors.

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