

ISLAMOCRISTIANA

دراسات إسلامية مسيحية

51

2025

MÉLANGES



PONTIFICIO ISTITUTO DI STUDI ARABI E D'ISLAMISTICA

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IN MEMORIAM THOMAS F. MICHEL, S.J. (1941-2025)

Attentive and congenial scholar of Islam, gentle mentor for dialogue, Christian-Muslim relations and Ignatian life, dedicated missionary for the Catholic Church's commitment to dialogue, fraternity and human development, Jesuit priest, beloved brother and uncle, Tom Michel, as all knew him, passed away around midnight on November 24, 2025, at the Xavier Learning Community, in Chiang Rai Province, Thailand. For the past eight years, he had been working with fellow Jesuits and others at this residential institute in the northern tip of Thailand that Jesuits and their associates envisioned as a culturally diverse institution for uplifting and empowering young people from ethnic minorities.

Thomas Francis Michel was born on February 5, 1941, near St. Louis, in Normandy, Missouri, where he grew up the youngest of the four children of Victor and Bernadette Fox Michel. He attended St. Ann Catholic School in Normandy, went on to Jesuit-run St. Louis University High School in 1955, and then entered Cardinal Glennon College, now Kenrick-Glennon Seminary, for the Archdiocese of St. Louis. He was ordained a priest in 1967, and responded to the request of Cardinal Joseph Ritter, Archbishop of St. Louis, for priests to spend a few years assisting missionaries in Indonesia.

By 1969, he was living in Yogyakarta, Indonesia and teaching English to Muslim students in a Catholic school in a country that was 88% Muslim. It was at this point, at age 28, that he took the time to study *Nostra Aetate*, the "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions", promulgated four years earlier at the Second Vatican Council. He was seeking guidance for the life he had chosen far from St. Louis in the most populous Muslim country in the world. His attention focused on the second paragraph of the document's third section, specifically on relations with Muslims:

Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Muslims, this Sacred Synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom. (*Nostra Aetate*, 3).

In an interview for St. Louis University High School in December 2023, while visiting his last remaining sibling, Kathryn "Kay" O'Brien and family in St. Louis,

Tom explained how his encounter with this passage and the entire third section of *Nostra Aetate* on Muslims was revelatory. “I had never really given it much thought”, he said. “I decided then that I would learn about Islam, why the Church regarded its followers [according to *Nostra Aetate*] ‘with esteem’ and how to foster peace and understanding between our faithful.”

In that same year, 1969, two years after Ritter’s death, Cardinal John Carberry had summoned Tom home to St. Louis. As he understood his situation then, he faced two choices: to return to St. Louis to serve the Archdiocese or to join a religious order and stay abroad. He realized that he wanted to remain in Indonesia and to live the renewal of Vatican II promoting dialogue and mutual respect with Muslims. “All the Catholics I knew there were Jesuits”, he admitted, “so, I joined the Jesuits and took vows in Indonesia.”

After Tom’s initial formation and teaching Muslim students again, his resolve to follow his intention to serve Christian-Muslim relations strengthened when his students suggested that he study Islam to build a bridge towards Christianity. He asked his superiors for their permission, and they sent him to Lebanon and Egypt for Arabic and Islamic Studies. Eventually, he earned a Ph.D. in Islamic Thought from the University of Chicago in 1978, studying with the renowned Fazlur Rahman and completing a dissertation that was published as *A Muslim Theologian’s Response to Christianity: Ibn Taymiyya’s al-Jawab al-sahih* (Caravan Books, Delmar, NY 1984).

Those who knew Tom for any length of time and discussed Islam and Christian-Muslim relations with him learned three interesting facts about his remarkable life that were already evident by the time he had completed his doctorate. Firstly, he joined the Jesuits to remain in Indonesia, but he ended up spending most of his Jesuit years elsewhere. Secondly, he had a special gift for learning languages quickly, which helped him enormously while living in various places in Asia and in Rome. Thirdly, Tom truly understood the adverse attitudes of contemporary Muslims towards both Europe and the “the West” in general, and also to Christianity, which, through the work of missionaries, accompanied the colonial dominance of Muslim lands. He owed the depth of his understanding of these developments to his focus, during his doctoral studies, on the roots of the resurgence and revival of Islam that emerged in reaction to that dominance in the latter half of the twentieth century. Tom dedicated himself to improving attitudes among Muslims and non-Muslims.

While pursuing graduate studies, Tom taught at Northwestern University and Columbia University, and after completing the requirements for a doctorate, he returned to Indonesia to teach Islamic history at the Jesuit-run Sanata Dharma University in Yogyakarta and Islamic Philosophy at Pontifical Wedabhakti Faculty of Theology, also in Yogyakarta. He left Indonesia again in 1981, this time for a much longer period, because the pope had appointed him to the Secretariat for Non-Christians, today’s Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue, an office in the Roman Curia where he served until 1994, managing relations with Muslims. These were the early years of the pontificate of John Paul II, when the first non-Italian pope in centuries

made numerous trips abroad and often to Muslim majority countries. Already, on an early visit to Türkiye in 1979, the pope had suggested to the Catholic community of Ankara that it seemed urgent “to recognize the spiritual bonds that unite us” with Muslims “to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom”. Tom Michel was the right person at the right place and time to implement this effort. For example, in 1985, he ably assisted John Paul II when King Hassan II of Morocco had invited him to speak “as a believer and educator to the young people of his country”. Tom described that papal address on August 19, 1985, in Casablanca as “the most spectacular meeting between Pope John Paul II and Muslims”. (Michel 1994, 62). That speech truly represented the clearest articulation to date of the words of praise and openness for Muslims of *Nostra Aetate*. Tom catalogued many of these accomplishments in a volume entitled *Recognize the Spiritual Bonds which Unite Us* (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Vatican City 1994), which he co-edited with Bishop, now Cardinal, Michael L. Fitzgerald, M.Afr., who was the Secretariat’s Secretary, and Tom’s supervisor at that time.

In his position in the Secretariat, Tom functioned as a global ambassador for the Vatican’s effort to build bridges of dialogue and mutual understanding with Muslims and the followers of other religions. For example, soon after he began his work at the Secretariat in 1981, he spoke in New York to participants in the Task Force for Christian-Muslims Relations, an initiative sponsored by the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches of the USA. Briefly outlining the Secretariat’s origin, short history, and principles for dialogue, he pointed out to the surprise of some Protestant and Orthodox Christian participants how Catholic missionary orders were succeeding in forming interreligious relationships. This was especially true for Missionaries of Africa, Dominicans, and Jesuits, whose members had helped draft *Nostra Aetate* and, now with others around the world, twenty years after Vatican II, were preparing reports on the growth in mutual understanding, cooperation, and relations through dialogue. Those reports contributed to the Secretariat’s first major document, *The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission* (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Vatican City 1984), that Tom and others on staff prepared.

Tom spent four of those years at the Secretariat teaching Christian theology at universities in Türkiye and in Rome at the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI) and at the Pontifical Gregorian University. Tom eventually taught at 16 Turkish Universities over those 14 years at the Vatican. This was part of an exchange program set up soon after his arrival in Rome between the Gregorian in Rome and the Divinity Faculties of Türkiye’s public universities.

For another 14 years, after leaving Rome, 1994-2008, Tom served first as Secretary for Interreligious Affairs for the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, based in Bangkok, Thailand, and next as Secretary for Interreligious Dialogue at the Jesuit General Curia in Rome, assisting Superior General Peter Hans Kolvenbach,

S.J. Both positions involved considerable travel. He taught courses and gave lectures over those years whenever there was an opportunity, and several of his books, published in the Philippines, Germany, Türkiye, Kenya, Italy, and the United States, explain Christian faith to Muslims and offer to Christians his insights on Islamic spirituality, teachings, and Christian-Muslim relations.

In 2008, Tom returned to Türkiye for another five years and taught Christian theology at Turkish state universities, as well as caring for the international parish in Ankara. Everywhere he went, he made friends with Muslims, helping them to understand Christians better and always expanding his appreciation of Muslims. In his 2023 interview as a graduate of St. Louis University High School, he spoke memorably of his years in Türkiye:

The people of Turkey cared for me. I lived in community with them, and they called me “The Monk”. For some, I was the first Christian they had ever met, and yet, they recognized that I was a man of God. In Ankara, they furnished my home; they laundered my clothes; and they left hot meals on my table. It was really one of God’s greatest blessings to me to be able to spend so much time with Muslims.

Surah 5 of the Qur’an, often translated “The Table”, refers reverently to those among Christians devoted to learning and asceticism, identified as priests and monks, who are not given to arrogance and whose eyes fill with tears when they hear the truth that has come down to the Messenger (Q 5:82-83). Tom preferred to draw attention to Surah 24, “The Light”, as he did to a group of bishops studying Islam and Christian-Muslim relations with him at a three-day institute in 2003, sponsored by the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Catholic Near East Welfare Association. He invited them to use their imaginations as he read verses 35-38, where the light is identified as God and imaged in an oil lamp in a niche, in a chapel, as in a monastery, where one hears those not distracted by commerce remembering God in vocal prayer, who also provide alms for the needy and look forward to the day of Lord. These are a few examples of how Tom lived as a bridge to Muslims and built spiritual bridges for Christians to understand and respect Islamic piety.

Among his friends in Türkiye were members of the Hizmet Movement, an international Muslim fraternal movement founded by the followers of Fethullah Gülen. Tom had met him, studied his writings, and appreciated him as an educator shaped by moral responsibility, a theologian of service, a spiritual teacher who believed deeply in dialogue, and a voice calling Muslims toward global citizenship rooted in compassion. Hizmet means service. In 2013, Tom published *Peace and Dialogue in a Plural Society: Contributions of the Hizmet Community in a Time of Global Tensions* (Blue Dome, New York 2013).

Tom also had a long history of involvement with Georgetown University, the oldest Catholic and Jesuit university in the United States. From the establishment of its Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding: History and International Affairs (now ACMCU) in 1993, he served on its Academic Council for its first two decades. Tom

had met John Esposito, the founding director of the ACMCU, during those early years learning Arabic in Lebanon. During the Spring Term 2008, before returning to Türkiye, Tom lived on the main campus of Georgetown University, as a member of the Jesuit community. He had become a Senior Fellow at the Woodstock Theological Center, then based on Georgetown's main campus, and a Senior Fellow of the newly named Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding (ACMCU). On March 13-14, 2008, the President's Office, the ACMCU, and the Advisory Board on Interreligious Dialogue and Relations for the U. S. Jesuit Conference convened an academic meeting honoring Tom for his contributions to Islamic Studies and to Christian-Muslim Relations under the title, "The Future of Christian-Muslim Relations: Where Do We Go from Here?" The speakers focused on "A Common Word Between Us and You", a remarkable document issued six months earlier in October 2007, prefaced by a letter of invitation to dialogue to Christian leaders worldwide, and signed by a long list of senior Muslim scholars and religious leaders. This global Muslim effort was partially occasioned by reactions by Muslims worldwide to a speech in 2006 by Pope Benedict XVI, in which he quoted derogatory and inaccurate comments about the teachings of Islam. Because "A Common Word Between Us and You" represented a single effort by the widest collection of Muslim leaders yet to offer a positive response to the 1965 declaration *Nostra Aetate* and subsequent initiatives by Catholics in the field of relations with Muslims, its release as a public statement provided an appropriate occasion for those at the conference to reflect with Tom. The ACMCU published scholarly papers from that meeting in a collection entitled *A Common Word and the Future of Christian-Muslim Relations* (Editors, Publisher, Place 2009) as one of its Occasional Papers.

In 2013, Tom moved to Doha and began providing a Jesuit presence at Georgetown University in Qatar, a campus of the University's School of Foreign Service. This role continued for three years, with Tom teaching religious studies and providing pastoral care. Writing about his experience as the only Jesuit on the campus in Qatar for the October 9, 2014 issue of *The Hoya*, Georgetown's oldest student newspaper, he commented:

I can honestly say that in the almost 50 years since I went to Indonesia in the 1960s to teach English, I've never encountered any serious prejudice or rejection when people learn that I am a Catholic priest and a Jesuit. In fact, the opposite is true; I find the people I've known to be easy to love and easy to live with.

For the academic year 2016-2017, Tom served as the Special Representative of President John J. DeGioia of Georgetown University, assigned to Rome and mostly assisting at PISAI, where he had taught years earlier. Tom played a foundational role as the President's Office was beginning to establish ongoing relationships with pontifical offices and institutes in Rome. He also delivered the first Georgetown Public Lecture on Contemporary Islam, a series of annual lectures at PISAI that continues to the present. His topic on February 23, 2017, was "A Christian Encounter with Said Nursi's *Risale*

i Nur”. He returned to PISAI in March 2018 and again in February 2020 to teach short, two-week courses on Islam in Asia as part of Georgetown’s contribution to PISAI.

In the summer of 2017, Tom finally returned to the Indonesian Province of the Jesuits to live out the remainder of his days, this time at a new apostolic work in the northern tip of Thailand, where Thailand meets Laos and Myanmar. He joined with other Jesuits from the province to help to staff the Xavier Learning Community (XLC) in Chiang-Rai. In his 2023 interview, he spoke about that part of Thailand, often called the tribal area. He said that the native population of this region are not Thai but ethnic minorities – including the Karen, Akha, Lahu, and Lanna – and tend to be neglected by the Thai government. They are often subjected to prejudice and discrimination in jobs and schools. The Jesuits decided to tend to their needs and to provide education for the population to advance in development and their quality of living. There, Tom accompanied students from Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos and taught them English, World Religions, and Regional Studies. He was a non-native Jesuit in the community and was deeply loved by students as a grandfatherly presence.

As academic director, he developed the Xavier Immersion Program, a 10-month English-medium formation course for Thai seminarians and religious. Growing from seven students in 2018 to 25 more recently, the program included courses in English Language Mastery, Thai and Southeast Asian Studies, World Religions and Scripture, Liturgical Formation in English, and Cross-cultural Immersion. Through it, Tom helped raise a new generation of pastoral leaders capable of serving a global Church. As the XLC grew, so did Tom’s responsibilities. He gave retreats for visiting groups and various communities around Thailand.

Probably no comprehensive bibliography exists of Tom’s writings, which would probably include between 10 and 20 books, 60 and 90 scholarly articles, and numerous other short pieces. His modestly-written curriculum vitae mentions the following achievements and recognitions:

- In 2000, he delivered the D’Arcy Lectures at Oxford University on themes of Muslim-Christian relations;
- In 2008, he received the International Tschelebi Peace Prize from the Central Islamic Institute of Germany;
- In 2009, he received the Ali Shir Navai Award from the International Turkish Olympiad in Ankara, Türkiye;
- In 2010, he was awarded the degree of Doctor of Theology by the Catholic Theological Union of Chicago, Illinois;
- In 2011, he held the Tuohy Chair at John Carroll University in Cleveland, Ohio;
- In 2012, he held the Wade Chair at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin;
- In 2013, he received the Building Bridges of Understanding Award from Alwaleed Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding of Georgetown University;
- He served on the International Advisory Board of the Khalidi Library, Jerusalem;
- He served on the Editorial Board of the journal *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* in Birmingham, UK;

He served on the International Advisory Panel of the International Movement for a Just World in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia;

He served on the Advisory Board of the Centre for Civilisational Dialogue at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

On hearing of his death, friends, colleagues, fellow Jesuits and others shared their thoughts and appreciation:

Cardinal Michael Fitzgerald, M.Afr., Tom's supervisor at the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians/Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue: "Brilliant; he was always pushing me; I would say we have to go slowly; he bore with me; we were sorry to see him go."

Archbishop Felix Machado, a former colleague of Tom's on the staff of the Secretariat: "Being with Tom always had been real joy: simple yet deep, honest in conversation without pretense, serious with purpose yet never judgmental or arrogant, understanding of all yet having his convictions and above all, always busy yet making time for everyone."

Marla Lavilla Arreza, Volunteer, XLC: "Among Fr Michel's many gifts, education became his most lasting legacy [...] His classroom was not merely a place of instruction—it was a place of encounter, solidarity, and peacebuilding [...] Fr Tom Michel spent his life building bridges—and in doing so, became one himself."

Alliance for Shared Values, a network of member organizations founded by individuals who are participants in the Hizmet social initiative: "Father Michel understood that dialogue means not merely talking but listening, studying together, and working jointly for the common good [...] We pray that Father Michel's life example continues to inspire all who believe in the critical role that interreligious dialogue plays in building mutual understanding, respect and friendship among members of the world's diverse faiths."

Bishop Diego Sarrió Cucarella, M.Afr., Diocese of Laghouat-Ghardaïa, Algeria; former Rector, PISAI: "The year I lived with him (2016-2017) in Rome was a truly formative time for me – he taught me so much about faith, compassion, and the importance of genuineness in building relationships between Christians and Muslims [.....] his example will continue to inspire all of us who were fortunate enough to know him."

Daniel Madigan, S.J., Professor Emeritus, Georgetown University; Rector, Newman College, University of Melbourne; Matteo Ricci Chair, Australian Catholic University; one of several Jesuits and others who looked to Tom Michel as a mentor: "Tom has been one of the great figures of Muslim-Christian relations over the last 50 years, and he shaped my life in significant ways, not least by his example of respectful and generous scholarship, patient teaching and warm hospitality, but also because of his leadership role in the Jesuits' interreligious engagement."

John L. Esposito, Founding Director, ACMCU: "He was a very special person, priest and friend [...] we met in the early 1970s studying Arabic together in Lebanon."

Thomas Banchoff, Vice President for Global Engagement and Executive Director, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, Georgetown University, who visited Tom at the XLC in Thailand: "Tom was a generous man and a wonderful priest and mentor. He will be missed!"

Tamara Sonn, Director Emerita, ACMCU: “May he rest in peace and his spirit continue to inspire all of us who were privileged to know him.”

Felix Körner, S.J., Cusa Chair in Theology of Religions, Humboldt University, Berlin, Germany, is among those Jesuits inspired and encouraged by Tom Michel to engage in Islamic Studies and Christian-Muslim Relations: “Why was Tom such a door opener among Muslim theologians? Because they immediately felt that they were meeting a man of God who was at the same time a genuine scholar: a witness who helped people sense God’s love.”

Ibrahim Anlı, Director, Rumi Forum, Metropolitan Washington, DC: “We are all saddened to see such a great soul depart [...] his memory will be treasured and his legacy will inspire.”

Peter C. Phan, Ignacio Ellacuria, S.J. Chair of Catholic Social Thought, Georgetown University: “He was an unassuming and kind scholar; he was very good to me [...] accepting my desperate request to write an essay on Islam in Asia at very short notice.”

Zeki Saritoprak, Bediüzzaman Said Nursi Chair in Islamic Studies, John Carroll University: “He was a great person who did so much good work in dialogue and understanding [...] He came all the way from Thailand to spend a semester as the Tuohy Scholar at John Carroll University.”

John O’Brien, nephew of Tom: “Tom was universally thought to be our favorite uncle [...] He was a man of humble brilliance [...] He took great delight in spending weekends in the country with his nieces and nephews [...] And through all this frivolity, Tom taught us the most important lessons that God loves us and the answer to every difficult question was ‘What would Jesus do?’”

James Redington, S.J., University of Scranton, and former Jesuit missionary to Zimbabwe, “A superb and generous man! [...] He died just where and as he wanted to be.”

At his death, Thomas Francis Michel, S.J., was surrounded by his fellow Jesuits, students, and friends, in a community where he had lived as a Christian missionary engaged in friendship, service, and dialogue as Jesuits had lived and died in Asia from the earliest days of the foundation of the Society of Jesus in the sixteenth century. In the complex of the cinereum of the Xavier Learning Community in Chiang-Rai, on a plank above the garden path, is written one of Fr. Tom’s mottos: “Helping people understand each other is worth spending a lifetime on.” He left behind, besides a legacy of publications and accomplishments, a legion of friends and acquaintances who benefitted from knowing him in countless ways.