



## Press Release

ALF/015/06

Alexandria-Naples, August 19<sup>th</sup>, 2006

### **Syrian Monastery wins the first Euro-Mediterranean Award for the Dialogue between Cultures**

The **Syrian Monastery of Deir Mar Moussa el-Habachi** (St. Moses the Abyssinian), located in the mountains east of the small town of Nebek, 80 Km north of Damascus, is the winner of the first Euro-Mediterranean Award for the Dialogue between Cultures. The theme of the award in 2006 has been **'Mutual respect among people of different religions or any other belief'**. With its roots in the wider 'Mediterranean Award' created in 1997 by the Fondazione Mediterraneo, the Award was jointly established by the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures (ALF), Alexandria, and the Fondazione Mediterraneo (FM), Naples, which is Head of the Italian National Network of the Foundation.

The Jury for the Euro-Med Award for Dialogue between Cultures is composed of the Heads of all 35 National Networks of the Anna Lindh Foundation which represent more than 1000 institutions and organizations committed to concrete and sustainable steps towards dialogue, understanding and respect between cultures. It recognizes annually the achievements of individuals and organizations that have been at the forefront of promoting dialogue in the Euro-Mediterranean region. Each year, a new theme of the Award is chosen, inspired by the values of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, agreed upon with the Barcelona Declaration (1995) by all Member States of the European Union and their ten Mediterranean Partners.

Thanks to the spiritual energy of Jesuit Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, the monastery of Deir Mar Moussa has become a centre devoted to inter-religious dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Through its activities, the monastery is contributing to foster better understanding between Syria's Christian minority and the country's Muslim majority.

The ancient monastery has been in existence since the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Abandoned at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was rediscovered in 1982 by Father Dall'Oglio. Thanks to cooperation between the Italian and Syrian States the monastery was restored between 1984 and 1994. Since 1991 Father Dall'Oglio established there a monastic community composed of Christians and Muslims - monks, nuns, employees and guests - whose priorities are the spiritual life, ethical orientation and hospitality derived from the common values of Christian, Jewish and Islamic traditions. The community's members work together with Muslims and Christians from the region to create a society in which the majority and all the minorities live together, cooperate and interact as citizens on equal footing.

The monastery is active on many fronts to promote dialogue and better understanding between religious communities. It is participating in the preparation of the Abram Path Initiative, a project started by Harvard University, and which centres on a pilgrimage from Turkey, through Syria, across Jordan, to Jerusalem and Hebron - the pilgrims will be of Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions. The monastery also organizes international inter-religious and intercultural seminars; in June 2005 it was transformed into a tribune for the dialogue of civilizations, as the topic of the meeting held was: "Syria and Europeans in search of common denominators" - European Parliament members and Syrian representative of various confessions and cultural groups met together to discuss the following issue: "Are we experiencing a clash of civilizations or inter-religious dialogue?".

The winner was chosen from among the five final candidates selected from a range of nominations from across the Euro-Mediterranean region, by the Presidency of the Jury, which

is itself composed by the Heads of the ALF Networks in Italy, Algeria, Cyprus, Egypt, Malta and Turkey, and the Executive Director of the Foundation. The Award ceremony will take place during the Anna Lindh Foundation Networks Meeting to be held in Tampere (Finland) on 26 and 27 November 2006, followed by another international event on 2 December 2006 in Naples at the Fondazione Mediterraneo (Italy). The winner will receive a trophy and be invited to participate in a number of forthcoming activities to present his work.

Honorary mentions have been awarded to four other candidates who have developed models of good practice in promoting dialogue between cultures; they are:

**Crossing Borders**, a Danish NGO providing space and skills for youth and educators to increase international understanding, and with a strong commitment to bring young Palestinian and Israeli citizens together for exchange, cooperation and to develop their visions of living together.

**Assia Djebar**, an Algerian writer who explores the struggle for social emancipation of women in the Muslim woman's world in all its complexities. She received the Peace Prize of Frankfurt International Book Fair in 2000 in recognition of her commitment for democratic renewal and peace in Algeria and for understanding between cultures. She was freedom fighter during the French colonization.

**Daniel Barenboim**, Israeli pianist and music director, who promotes understanding and cooperation between Jews and Arabs through music. Together with the Palestinian intellectual, late Edward Said, he developed visions of living together and mutual enrichment of Israelis and Arabs in the Middle East and established the West-Eastern Divan orchestra with musicians from Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine. In August 2005, the performance of the orchestra in Ramallah was broadcasted worldwide.

**The Royal Institute for Inter-Faiths Studies** was established in Amman in 1994 to contribute to understanding and respect among world religions. It has gained international reputation as convenor of major conferences on intercultural dialogue such as the World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies in June 2006 and hosts a range of scholars and lecturers from all over the world.

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