

True Life in God Pilgrimage in Moscow - 2-10 September 2017

HOW TO BRIDGE OUR DIVISIONS AND BRING PEACE TO THE WORLD?

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Which is the Bridge that unites us and gives Peace to the World?

At the outset, I would like to extend my thanks and appreciation to those who have invited us to this brotherly gathering, which brings together all religions in an atmosphere of love, brotherhood and cooperation under one roof, to find the real common means of bringing about peace and security in a world of war and various conflicts under the pretext of religion, while religion is innocent. Denominational strife, terrorist and takfirist (*declaring one as infidel*) ideas have risen, and a world in which politics, economy, trade and the interests of states are mired at the expense of other countries, victimizing the weak and the poor. A world in which every country uses religion to achieve its goals with weak excuses: democracy, human freedom, freedom of religions, the requirements of societies...

They are like meek lambs but inwardly they are ferocious wolves, and the victim of all that is the human being who is the beautiful creature of God and the central subject of life, of the universe and of religions. Every one of us builds their humanity according to their religion and according to their beliefs and their social, cultural, educational and human customs. They consider that by doing that they are achieving God's purpose and here we see many tragedies generated by religions for lack of understanding, lack of dialogue and for being distant from each other.

Therefore, attention and efforts have to turn towards dialogue to overcome many of the problems of life at all levels. Religion is, in fact, the main component and reformer of human civilization and its identity. That is because religion is considered as the only thing that provides it with the values and ideals that help it achieve its existence, development, strength, legitimacy and permanence in history, and that in its absence, all the rest is disrupted. With this pivotal role of religion in the life of human society, it often finds itself at the center of the accusation because it is one of the causes of conflict, fighting and genocide among human communities and it is responsible for the occurrence of such human tragedies. It is no wonder that we have turned towards interfaith dialogue and have pinned our hopes on reaching a successful solution that puts an end to these tragedies; and the truth is, as the well-known German Catholic theologian Hans Kung said: "There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions."

Is it possible that the problem is with the religions because of the lack of dialogue among them? Is dialogue the peaceful solution to religions? What are the bridges of encounter between them?

The problem, in our opinion, is not the absence of dialogue between religions but the real problem lies in that new phenomenon represented by the blatant conflict of religions. This phenomenon has

become increasingly acute since the dominance of the lethal secular ideology of the need to separate religion from the state and public affairs of society, declaring that religion is the opium of the people and preaching the death of God. This aggressive wave against religion has expressed itself through intense efforts and intensive organized attempts through international political reports and other media, to paint an ugly and isolated image of religion as the source of all evils in the world.

This meeting is a workshop to promote understanding, cooperation and respect for religious and cultural pluralism in order to combat conflict and strife and instill faith in the face of atheism, and peace in the face of wars, and fraternity in the face of racism.

We must defend human dignity in building a peaceful coexistence among peoples and in protecting creation and working on the unity of the human family in the search for truth, goodness and beauty. The bridges of peace are built on:

1. Serving the poor without stopping at religious, ethnic or racial differences.
2. Cooperation in order to create and maintain peace so that religion will always remain innocent of any violence, killing or destruction.
3. Work on radical change by moving everyone to understanding, finding radical solutions to problems and recognizing pluralism as an added value to societies. Out of our Christian faith that calls for peace and love and urges harmony and renunciation of fighting, conspiracy and harming others based on religious or ethnic differences, we are to address God, the God of love and peace, who created man in His image and likeness and breathed life into him to live freely on earth. We have to fulfill His divine will and reconcile with each other and put our theological doctrines aside because we have not chosen where to be born and into which denomination, nationality, ethnicity or country to belong. And if it was not our will, it was then a Divine Will. Let the peace of God rule in your hearts, since you were called to peace (Colossians 3:15), and we pray that peace comes from the Lord upon the face of the earth (Sirach 38:8), for God is not a God of confusion but of peace (1 Corinthians 14:33).

Peace in Christianity is a divine gift given to us by the Lord Jesus before His ascension. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." (John 14:27)

"Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification." (Romans 14:19). "For the Lord gives strength to his people; the Lord blesses his people with peace." (Psalm 29: 11).

Peace is finally, as Saint Augustine said, "serenity of mind, tranquility of soul, simplicity of heart, a bond of love, a companion of charity; it is the one that removes hostilities, stops wars, represses anger and breaks pride. It loves the rivals, reconciles the enemies and it is delightful and accepted by everyone."

"Practice peace with everyone. Be at peace with everyone. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5: 9).

Peace is the bridge that binds us all together. It is our call, our prayer and our wish that love would bond the hearts and that we break the barriers of distance and hatred, and together build a true humanity together in order to achieve the desired purpose of God, which is to love each other, and that greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. (John 15:12-13)

And we in Syria, the cradle of Divine Religions and the land of civilizations, have lived with our Muslim brothers more than one thousand five hundred years in an atmosphere of love, cooperation and a common attention in building our homeland and defending it. During this crisis which is in its seventh year, evil forces have tried to break up the relationship between Muslims and Christians and tried to plant fear in our hearts. There are powerful schemes to displace Christians from the East and this hurts us because it will achieve the goals of some countries and religions who believe that the Christian presence in the East is not desirable and that Christians are a colony, forgetting that the birthplace of Christianity is Bethlehem and that Christianity in Europe started from Damascus and Antioch. And also that Christians, mainly Syriac Christians, were the ones who have transferred (*in the sense of translated*) the Greek civilization to Syriac and then to Arabic. Today, we seek to strengthen our relationship with each other under these difficult circumstances, working to combat the terrorist ideology and calling for an end to the war and for the implementation of peace. Until now, our meetings continue intensively in order to preserve the unity of our homeland, the strength of our relationships and the consolidation of our shared existence. Hence, I appeal to you to cooperate with us in preserving all the components and the national and religious fabric in this beautiful garden, Syria, beautiful for its land and people, for its cultural heritage and religious diversity; in order to preserve for each one his place and status and his right to live in this nation with dignity, bliss and peace.

I hope that our meeting is a start to building bridges of love. We appeal to the world to hear our voice, to stop wars, renounce racism and rebuild humanity on sound foundations.

I warmly thank you for your attention.

Peace to you and Peace be with you.