

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

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

**Bishop Antoine Chahda
The Syriac Catholic Bishop of Aleppo**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to start by thanking the organizers of this special meeting for inviting me to participate in this discussion on the following question:

What is the bridge that brings us together, focusing on the richness of all religions and what brings peace to the world?

Yes, it is of great importance to build bridges of human communication between different cultures in order to build together the human civilization, at a time when many seek to demolish bridges and break the bonds of social cohesion, using for their cause all available means - religious and economic separation, intellectual means or weapons. So what peace are we talking about if the destructive war machine doesn't stop, the intellectual one even before the military one?

Historically:

The Levant in general, and the city of Aleppo, in particular have known great demographic changes. From the beginning of Aleppo's history until now, this was due to a succession of peoples bringing changes through wars, colonisation, economic developments or religion. Aleppo, which is considered the oldest city in the world, remains inhabited today. We were not immune to all these resulting changes because, from its foundation, it has known the passage of many peoples. Its name also changed several times until it settled on "Aleppo", but in all that history, daily life continued in the city nonstop and it remains inhabited to this day.

Socially:

As an outcome of these changes, many of which are the result of wars and colonialism, many diverse groups of peoples settled and intermarried with the people of this city creating a diversity of cultures and languages. Aleppo has thus been enriched through the various traditions and customs that the new settlers brought with them.

Politically:

Aleppo remained resilient in the face of many colonizers and opened its gates only to those whom the city wanted and through treaties that guaranteed its people's stability and co-existence.

Despite its unique geographical location, it remained an economic, cultural, commercial and religious city with distinctive features rather than a city or capital of politics, princes or kings.

Economically:

Aleppo's geographic location and its diversity of cultures have long made it a crossroads, a route and a stable place for trade between East and West, with convoys through it reaching India through the so-called "Silk Road". This economic and commercial dimension was distinct, thus encouraging many to choose Aleppo as a center for their commerce and trade to the east and to the west. With their trade, they carried their ideas, cultures and even their families. So the commercial traffic was a reason for the cultural and civil movement and even the religious one in Aleppo, where consuls, writers and missionaries live.

Religiously:

The city of Aleppo has been known since ancient times as a religious center with pagans, Christians, Jews and Muslims. Although located near the well-known city of Antioch, the city of Aleppo has its own position on the religious scene represented by saints, doctors of the Church and intellectuals from the different religions. The cultural diversity and the commercial exchange, as well as the religious ideas that the traders brought with them, were not a cause of confrontation and fighting, but of closeness and openness to the culture and religion of others, with dialogue, understanding and acceptance.

Today:

With all the historical attributes that Aleppo has developed on political, cultural, economic, religious and other levels, in spite of all the wars, natural disasters, earthquakes, famines and infectious diseases, even this last war, Aleppo is still alive. And I do not exaggerate if I say it can still teach lessons on the ability to overcome wars, difficulties and disasters that have struck it, and it can remain, as it has always been, a bridge between the East and the West, between the North and the South; and it can remain the Silk Road not only for goods and trade, but also for the concepts of mutual respect, accepting others and living in peace, despite all the differences carried by the diverse cultures.

Aleppo, in the context of Christian religion, is an ecumenical city par excellence. It has six Catholic and three Orthodox denominations and two evangelical communities. They live together in mutual respect, engage in periodic and monthly meetings, working together for the benefit of Christians regardless of their denomination. The same with Muslims from the different rites, for the work is to agree on what unites both religions not on what separates them. Christian clergy meet Muslim religious scholars never to discuss matters of religion, or to convince one another of their religion, but to work on mutual love and living together in peace, and staying away from all that incites tension or fanaticism, or all that leads to categorizing the followers of other faiths as infidels.

What will bring peace to Aleppo, and may also to the world, is tireless and serious work on two main pillars: human civilization and the cultural dimension. Every human being is a "human

being" no matter how different our religions or denominations are. The cultural factor elevates the human being to meet the other person with peace and love, moving away from every thought that leads to fanaticism, calling others infidels and rejecting them. Love remains the main bond that connects society in a cohesive unity and, together, this society can overcome every threat, war or menace, all those things under the banner of living properly our citizenship in one country and homeland.

Thank you.