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HOW TO BRIDGE OUR DIVISIONS AND BRING PEACE IN THE WORLD

One of the finest blessings God has bestowed on the ecumenical movement for the unity of the Church in the last over fifty years is the realization that the unity of the Church is for the unity of the whole of humankind and the integrity of God's creation. In that sense ecumenism cannot be dissociated from the need for the Christian community to dialogue with other faiths and even ideologies in order to bring about God's Kingdom here on earth in the fulfillment of Christ's mandate to preach the Good News to the whole world.

I am so glad that we have brothers and sisters of other faiths in this ecumenical pilgrimage and we are all walking together as co-pilgrims on our common journey towards our eternal homeland.

I would like to share here with all of you in this pilgrimage a recent experience from India –the wonderful news from Mumbai reported in the media in the aftermath of the torrential rains and resulting floods in that city and its suburbs from August 28-30. Hundreds of commuters were stranded due to stoppage of transport facilities – trains, buses, taxis and autorickshaws. There was no way they could reach home. The roads had become rivers overnight. So also hundreds of people had to flee from their homes due to flooding. At this hour of need it was reported that the local Hindu temples, Muslim mosques, Sikh gurudwaras and Christian churches with their institutions opened their doors to welcome and accommodate as many people as they could irrespective of caste or creed; not only that, people of all religions **together** arranged for food and bedding for the marooned people. This was a magnificent gesture of love and unity among religions for the cause of suffering humanity. It was a testimony of true spirituality that should be the hallmark of all religions. Nobody asked for anyone's religious identity but all experienced the joy of being one humanity.

One way in which we can build bridges and work for peace is by joining hands together in service to humanity. Mahatma Gandhi's teaching on non-violence (ahimsa) doesn't merely speak of avoiding violence but of active love which is the constant struggle for truth and justice (satyagraha).

Gandhiji's philosophy is centered on breaking down walls of division and building bridges of love, unity and peace everywhere, especially with the lowest, the least and the lost.

It is so sad that human beings are divided on the basis of caste, class, race, tribe and creed to the point of hating one another, discriminating against one another and even killing one another. There are also wars among nations to protect one's boundaries and "territorial integrity". Human history has witnessed the rise of ideologies that have deified the "nation" at cost of true human values of brotherhood and sisterhood of all as all religions teach us and particularly the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Nationalism misused for political purposes is always destructive, and especially when this nationalism is tied to religion it can interfere with fundamental human rights and human freedom.

It is a travesty of religion when religion becomes a tool to spread hatred and violence in society and worse still when it is politicized to gain votes and win elections in the name of religion. Clearly the society becomes polarized in such cases and hatred and mistrust rule where there should be love, harmony, a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood among peoples.

I would like to refer here to the late Archbishop Angelo Fernandes of Delhi and of happy memory, who was the founding President of the World Council for Religion and Peace and a relentless "crusader" for world peace with justice. In his book "Vatican Two Revisited" (1997) he writes: "The problem of peace is certainly the most important item on today's agenda of world history. Humanity has reached a critical point in its development and is torn between the dilemma of continuing with the mad arms race and the equilibrium of terror, so-called deterrence or journeying beyond towards paths of deeper understanding, interdependence and brotherhood in our 'Only One Earth'. Peace never means just the absence of trouble; rather it means total well-being, everything that makes for a person's highest good. This peace has always got to do with personal relationships: a person's relationships to self, fellow human beings and to the Lord of all. It is the peace that is born of reconciliation of people estranged, whether by commission or by omission, both from God and others. Only when people can live in peace with their Maker can a durable peace exist in human relations. Peace with God, peace with oneself, peace in one's own heart, peace in the family and peace among humankind, all belong together. Peace is thus both a gift of God and a human work. It is not the absence of

war, nor the maintenance of a balance of power. It is an enterprise of justice and the fruit of love. It results from the harmony built into human society by its founder and actualized by people of every succeeding generation as they thirst after ever greater justice. Under the ILO building in Geneva there is an inscription which reads: 'If you want peace work for justice'. Peace must be constructed on the basis of central human values: truth, justice, freedom and love. Essential to the process of building a more genuinely human world is unconditional and effective respect for the human dignity, equality and human rights of each and every person".

It is only when we recognize the God-given human dignity and equality of one and all and accept each other as brother or sister, then and then only will the reign of justice become universal. Justice grows out of love and without love justice cannot subsist. This is possible because love is a decision, an act of the will, that mighty power within us, which in partnership with the Lord, can bring about change.

Archbishop Angelo Fernandes always linked development with justice and peace. Talking of the "Road towards Integral Development" he writes: "Development is the new name for Peace. We must now look more closely at the hurdles on the way, on the obstacles to peace as we enter upon the Third Millenium... If the world were a village of 1000 people, 60 would own half of the wealth, 500 would go hungry, 600 would live in slums and shanties and 700 would be illiterate. That puts it all in a nutshell. Over two billion people are living in poverty and one billion in absolute poverty. Women and children are the principal victims of this distortion. 35,000 children die every day because of neglect, malnutrition and violence and 15 million are refugees. This is thanks to an unjust international economic order based upon greed and profit-making with moral values and sense of justice taking a back place... The net result of the plethora of ills in human society has been discord in the family, mistrust between religious communities, conflict and violence between ethnic groups, frictions and tensions between States. Poverty has therefore been called a form of death, physical and cultural. And yet the world's greatest problem is not poverty but the unconcern of those who could influence the course of events for the better. Real politik must assume a more human face in the next millennium." This he said twenty years ago before we entered the Third Millenium. The statistics have worsened today. Something more the Archbishop had said: "There are three bombs overhanging humankind, the nuclear bomb, the hunger bomb, the debt crisis bomb; and now the

ecological bomb. They all need to be defused as we choose life instead of death for the future". Don't we feel today that these words are true and we as responsible religious people are called to respond to the looming threat?

There is urgent for a need based economy rather than a greed based economy. In the words of Mahatma Gandhiji: "There is enough in the world to meet the needs of all but not enough for the greed of one". Economic growth alone is not the answer but rather a development that is equitable and sustainable and not linked to the political and economic interests of the few, but one that embraces women, minorities, indigenous and marginalized people.

Our Lord Jesus Christ came into this world as the "Prince of Peace". At his birth the angels sang the song of peace, before his death he gave us the gift of peace and at his Resurrection his first words were: "Peace be with you". He has clearly laid down for us his teaching on peace: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons (children) of God" (Mt. 5:9). This teaching which is the path of salvation is inseparably linked with his teaching on love, forgiveness and reconciliation, gratitude, humility and the self-denial of the Cross that leads to Resurrection.

May his Spirit inspire and guide the world to make the right decisions that lead to fullness of life and not to destruction and death.

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