

Speech for True Life in God meeting in Moscow

2

September 2017

Bishop Markos Gebremedhin - Ethiopia

Most Rev. Vassula

Your Eminences, Your Graces, Your Excellencies, Rev. Fathers, Sisters and members of True life in God, invited friends, and all protocol observed.

I have been asked to address you in 10 minutes on the Issues of Inter religious dialogue among the religions. As I stand before you, I thank God for bringing us together as His children for this wonderful and important occasion and then my sincere thanks go to Mrs . Vassula and her team for organizing such a beautiful occasion and inviting us to take part in this gathering. We thank them for their great work.

First of all, what is interfaith dialogue? It refers to cooperation, constructive and positive interactions between people of different religious traditions.

Jesus said, “Peace I leave you, my Peace I give you” John 14:27. The Peace we receive from God is the true peace not the one the world gives us. Peace is essential for everybody today, we Christians are called to live with Christ in peace and at the same time as agents of Peace.

The question is how we can promote true peace in this divided world and among the divided religions. We experience divisions, hypocrisy, hatred, pride, defensiveness, judgments, lack of forgiveness, lack of respect, negative criticism and lack of true love among nations, neighbors, families, groups and above all among the Christian denominations.

Why are such disagreement, confusions, contradictions, defensive attitude happening among the children of God /Christians. Wasn't it God's plan for everybody to live peacefully? Didn't Jesus pray for the Peace and Unity of His disciples? Didn't Jesus says “if two or three gather together in my name, I will be in their midst”? Do we think Jesus agrees with our disagreement and disunity? Do our apostolic traditions contradict each other or is it our own interpretation of the Word of God or the understanding and decision of our fore fathers that we worship in different ways and follow our own teachings?

It is clear that over centuries quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims, between Christians and Jews. Are we not brothers in God? Are we not created by Him? Are we not descendants of Abraham and one family of God? Are we not trying to reach in our own ways to Him, through faith, prayer and worship? Can't we forget the past negative experiences and make sincere efforts to achieve mutual understanding for the better future of everybody? Can't we Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and Jews together work

to preserve and promote peace and justice and moral values? Don't our Gospel and Qur'an speak often of pardon and reconciliation? "Those who have placed their faith in God should set their hearts on the practice of what is good." (Paul to Titus 3:8)

Once Pope Paul VI said: "We have high regard for Muslims. They worship God who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and Almighty, the creator of heaven and earth and brings his creation to perfection."

What do we see best now for the current generations and the generations still to come. When we speak of Christianity, the Fathers of the Church thought the church they wanted to be has been that way and should not be blamed for that as they looked that way might be better to walk in true faith. But unfortunately it magnified more darkness, separations, loss of souls, isolations and more confusions among denominations and multiplied its divisions on hundreds. In such a way the children of God experienced at the same time blessings and confusions.

But still we, as the current generation, do we feel responsible to re look at it and open a space for dialogue, peace, unity and reconciliation among Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and Jews, as the right way and make necessary efforts to do what directs to Peace. Can't we do something in common for our own peace and unity?

We are very grateful to those who took the initiative and are now working for interreligious dialogue, for the peace and unity among religions, who help us to reflect more on what we have in common than divide us. We thank them for giving importance for this issue and help us to reflect on our divisions and hatred to one another rather than being united in following the one and true God.

St. John Paul II is often seen as a major figure in opening up dialogue between Catholics and Jewish communities. He was the first pope to make an official visit to a synagogue and made official apologies on behalf of the Catholic Church for wrongs against Jews throughout history. He referred to Judaism as the "Older brothers" of Christianity. We forgive and we ask forgiveness he said. Is that not beautiful?

Though Buddha was born 500 years before Christ, and didn't say anything about one God but believed in gods, we learn many good things from this religion which we have in common like Buddha was so much concerned with human conditions. Still Peace and justice are our common concern and which needs to be encouraged.

We all agree the religion and doctrine we follow and practice in particular is the best one for each and every one of us but that doesn't mean that you don't respect each other, love one another and collaborate with your brothers and sisters who worship the same God in different ways than yours.

I see the following text as the binding rule for all of us. In Matt 7: 12 we are given the "Golden Rule": "Therefore whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them," for this is

the law and prophets. It was during his sermon on the mount that Jesus stressed the importance of both sides understanding and collaborating for peaceful co-existence of his followers.

In such a way, He is telling us that everyone who is created by the image and likeness of God should not be avoided but instead be treated with dignity, gentleness, humility and respect. At the same time, we shouldn't be self-centered but should open our eyes to see their strength, value their opinions and ideas rather than judge their weakness. We should not criticize negatively other confessions because of the way they worship and their doctrine of faith during our public ministry. It is wise to be patient, and forgive and love whenever you find yourself wounded or hurt and accept graciously when asked for forgiveness. We should not stress on extreme differences of the Churches whenever we are invited for ecumenical dialogue and collaborations as it can be an obstacle for the peace initiative. It is always a blessing to encourage one another and secure peace and develop what we have in common. What makes us united is much more visible than what divides us.

It is a good thing to come to understand each other by learning to accept differences, by overcoming prejudices in mutual respect and by working together for reconciliation and service and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found in religions.

Both the Bible and Qur'an teach that Mercy and Justice are two characteristics of God. God is merciful and compassionate and he wants us to be merciful to each other. God's will for us is to live in peace and mutual respect.

We Christians, Muslims, Jews and Buddhists have many things in common, as believers and human beings, we live in the same world and same realities. Yes we can work together bearing witness before modern civilization and no matter how long it will take before peace is secured fully in our planet. Together we can proclaim that Peace is a must in our planet and start working without taking too much time.

Without peace, there can be no authentic development, for this reason, no better life for its people, and no bright future for its children. We need to pray together for those countries who are suffering due to lack of peace. They need our prayers and joint actions.

Pope Francis, in His recent visit to Egypt, offered a message of unity, tolerance and non-violence and he said to the people of Egypt and to Sheik Ahmed Al-Tayb, Egyptian grand Imam, " Say clearly "No" to every form of violence, vengeance and hatred carried out in the name of religion or in the name of God." I hope we all agree in his message.

Our God is the source of peace a peaceful God, slow to anger, and full of patience and mercy. For sure we all wish to be at peace with God. What does it mean? I humbly invite you to meditate on the word of God because God created this world with the intention that it should be free of satanic attack and be full of peace but human sin went against God's plan starting from our first parents.

Now we are children of one God because God took the initiative to reconcile with us and seek peace with us. We need to be promoters of peace and unity wherever and whatever situations we are in. Let us begin building peace within ourselves. If we are at peace with our God and if we are people of prayer God can still use us as His instrument of His peace to be reached wherever it is needed.

We have simple and beautiful examples of how both sister Churches - Orthodox Christians and Catholic faithful - in a small village unite and live together peacefully with very good collaboration among themselves. It is in the Apostolic Vicariate of Jimma-Bonga in Ethiopia at the particular village called Shappa where I came from, that we have an ecumenical Church where once or twice a month people of two groups of the faithful come together for the last 30 years, worship together, pray together, celebrate together and hold discussions on various issues and look for common solutions for common problems. They walk and work together. Is it not beautiful?

During the 1st World War, when nations proclaimed enmity among the nations and destroyed each other by the troubled war and, during the midst of trouble and fighting between two countries, that was France and Germany, the great news came to the soldiers that it was December 25, it was the day of Peace, it was the day where the prince of peace Jesus Christ was born. "Christmas." Hearing such a great message, both enemies put their weapon aside, embraced each other, exchanged the sign of peace with each other, sang the Christmas song together "Joy to the world, the Lord has come" and spent the day together celebrating. Isn't this beautiful.

Peace is essential and the base for everything. Without peace we walk on doubts and confusions and even at risk but with Peace we have everything especially the Almighty God on our side.

In Ethiopia, the country where I come from, the leaders of the different denominations in collaboration with the government of Ethiopia established an inter-faith forum office at national and diocesan level where they come together from time to time and discuss peaceful co-existence among the religions and walk and work together for the common matters of the country. We see this as good example to be encouraged. We all need peace and let us work together for peace and harmony. Let Peace be one of our priorities. "Serving God requires convictions and self-sacrifice."

Bishop Markos Gebremedhin

Ethiopia