



MEETING WITH THE LEADERS OF OTHER RELIGIONS AND OTHER CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS

ADDRESS OF POPE FRANCIS

Catholic University of "Our Lady of Good Counsel" (Tirana)
Sunday, 21 September 2014

Dear Friends,

It is a great pleasure to be here at this meeting which brings together leaders of the main religious confessions present in Albania. With deep respect I greet each one of you and the communities that you represent; and I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to Archbishop Massafra for his words of introduction. It is important that you are here together: it is a sign of the dialogue which you experience daily, seeking to build among yourselves bonds of fraternity and cooperation for the good of the whole of society. Thank you for all that you are doing.

Albania sadly witnessed the violence and tragedy that can be caused by a forced exclusion of God from personal and communal life. When, in the name of an ideology, there is an attempt to remove God from society, it ends up adoring idols, and very soon men and women lose their way, their dignity is trampled and their rights violated. You know well how much pain comes from the denial of freedom of conscience and of religious freedom, and how from such a wound comes a humanity that is impoverished because it lacks hope and ideals to guide it.

The changes that have come since the 1990's have had the positive effect, among other things, of creating the conditions for an exercise of authentic religious freedom. This has made it possible for each community to renew traditions which were never really extinguished, despite ferocious persecution. With this religious freedom has come also the possibility for every person to offer, according to their own religious convictions, a positive contribution; firstly, to the moral reconstruction of the country and then, subsequently, to the economic reconstruction.

In reality, as John Paul II stated during his historic visit to Albania in 1993, "Religious freedom [...] is not only a precious gift from the Lord for those who have faith: it is a gift for each person, because it is the basic guarantee of every other expression of freedom [...]. Only faith reminds us that, if we have one Creator, we are therefore all brothers and sisters. Religious freedom is a safeguard against all forms of totalitarianism and contributes decisively to human fraternity" (Message to the Albanian People, 25 April 1993).

He immediately then added, "True religious freedom shuns the temptation to intolerance and sectarianism, and promotes attitudes of respect and constructive dialogue" (ibid.). We cannot deny that intolerance towards those with different religious convictions is a particularly insidious enemy, one which today is being witnessed in various areas around the world. All believers must be

particularly vigilant so that, in living out with conviction our religious and ethical code, we may always express the mystery we intend to honour. This means that all those forms which present a distorted use of religion, must be firmly refuted as false since they are unworthy of God or humanity. Authentic religion is a source of peace and not of violence! No one must use the name of God to commit violence! To kill in the name of God is a grave sacrilege. To discriminate in the name of God is inhuman.

Seen in this light, religious freedom is not a right which can be guaranteed solely by existing legislation, although laws are necessary. Rather religious freedom is a shared space – like this one – an atmosphere of respect and cooperation that must be built with everyone’s participation, even those who have no religious convictions. Allow me to outline two attitudes which can be especially helpful in the advancement of this fundamental freedom.

The first attitude is that of regarding every man and woman, even those of different religious traditions, not as rivals, less still enemies, but rather as brothers and sisters. When a person is secure of his or her own beliefs, there is no need to impose or put pressure on others: there is a conviction that truth has its own power of attraction. Deep down, we are all pilgrims on this earth, and on this pilgrim journey, as we yearn for truth and eternity, we do not live autonomous and self-sufficient individual lives; the same applies to religious, cultural and national communities. We need each other, and are entrusted to each other’s care. Each religious tradition, from within, must be able to take account of others.

The second attitude which fosters the promotion of religious freedom is the work done in service of the common good. Whenever adherence to a specific religious tradition gives birth to service that shows conviction, generosity and concern for the whole of society without making distinctions, then there too exists an authentic and mature living out of religious freedom. This presents itself not only as a space in which to legitimately defend one’s autonomy, but also as a potential that enriches the human family as it advances. The more men and women are at the service of others, the greater their freedom!

Let us look around us: there are so many poor and needy people, so many societies that try to find a more inclusive way of social justice and path of economic development! How great is the need for the human heart to be firmly fixed on the deepest meaning of experiences in life and rooted in a rediscovery of hope! Men and women, inspired in these areas by the values of their respective religious traditions, can offer an important, and even unique, contribution. This is truly a fertile land offering much fruit, also in the field of interreligious dialogue.

I also wish to mention something which is always an illusion: relativism, “everything is relative”. In this regard, we must keep in mind a clear principle: we cannot enter into dialogue if we do not approach it from the perspective of our own identity. Without identity, there can be no dialogue. It would be an illusory dialogue, a dialogue without substance: it would serve no purpose. All of us have our own religious identity to which we are faithful. But the Lord knows how to guide history. May each one of us begin with our own identity, not pretending to have another, because it serves no end and does not help; it is relativism. What unites us is the path of life, is starting from our own identity for the good of our brothers and sisters. To do good! And so, we walk together as brothers and sisters. Every one of us offers the witness of our identity to others and engages in dialogue with others. Then dialogue can move onto theological questions. But even more important and beautiful is to walk together without betraying our own identity, without disguising it, without hypocrisy. This is what I like to think.

Dear friends, I encourage you to maintain and develop the tradition of good relations among the various religious communities in Albania, and to be united in serving your beloved homeland. With

a sense of humour, one could say that this seems like a football match: Catholics against everyone else. But it is everyone together, for the good of the country and of humanity. Continue to be a sign for your country, and beyond, that good relations and fruitful cooperation are truly possible among men and women of different religions. And I ask a favour: pray for me. I have great need of your prayers. Thank you.