



III Catholic-Muslim Summit
Rome. Tuesday 2 – Thursday 4 December 2014
“Christians and Muslims: Believers Living in Society”

His Eminence Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran
“What are the strengths in our religious traditions
as we strive to prevent conflict in society by the acceptance of ‘the other’?”

“Christians and Muslims: Believers Living in Society” is the theme that we agreed upon for this meeting. As you are aware, society is the space where all its components live, work and grow. These components can be believers, as it is the case with us, the Jews, Christians and Muslims. But they can also be unbelievers or even atheists. Belief does not give more rights to the believer. On the other hand, unbelief cannot deprive a person of his or her dignity and rights. As believers, we might find ourselves in front of persons or institutions that, while accepting us as citizens, may refuse to recognize and respect an important feature that is very dear to us i.e. to be believers.

The Catholic Church, while acknowledging the distinction between the role of religion and politics, defends, at the same time, the right of believers to be part of the different aspects of human life: social, political, economic and cultural. Being a believer does not diminish one’s contribution to the good of the society. On the contrary, the believer brings to his society a supplementary set of values that contribute to the good of all its components.

The question that I have been asked to reflect upon and share with you is: “What are the strengths in our religious traditions as we strive to prevent conflict in society by the acceptance of “the other”?”

Our focus is then, that of prevention of conflict in the society. The means to reach this goal are obviously numerous. The one indicated here is that of the acceptance of “the other”.

Hence, I wish to share with you some reflections on the “other”.

Obviously, the otherness refers to difference, to divergence. The other is different from me in one or more of the following: ethnicity, religion, culture, vision of life, political preferences, choices that are of little or great importance. The difference, if not properly managed, can be a source of mistrust, suspicion, tensions and even of violence and conflicts. This is unfortunately the case with tensions and conflicts with ethnic and religious ‘ingredients’.

Among the motives for the rejection of the other, there is always the fear of difference along with the kind of security one finds among persons who are similar to him or her. However, we all know that differences of all kinds will always remain and that our efforts are to find ways and means to manage them, to reduce the gap between them and certainly not to eliminate them, because we

know that that would be an impossible goal. This is particularly true about differences among religions, especially between Christianity and Islam.

In fact, we know that there are many similarities between our two religions, but there are profound differences as well. Saint John Paul II summarized these differences in his memorable discourse to young Muslims in Casablanca (19 August 1985): “[...] the most fundamental [difference] is the view that we hold on the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. You know that, for the Christians, this Jesus causes them to enter into an intimate knowledge of the mystery of God and into a filial communion by his gifts, so that they recognize him and proclaim him Lord and Saviour.”

There is an important aspect to be clearly understood with regard to the acceptance of the other. ‘Acceptance’ does not mean to be in complete agreement with what the other thinks or believes in. We, Christians know that there are some fundamental dogmas of ours that are not accepted by Islam and likewise, our Muslim brethren know that some of their beliefs cannot be accepted by us, the Christians.

In this context, I find strange and useless the discussion among some Christians and Muslims about exchanging of good wishes on the occasion of their respective religious feasts. What is shared, in fact, is not the religious or the theological content of the feast celebrated, but the joy of the friend or the neighbor who is celebrating it. We are all aware of the harm done by the satellite TVs, to peaceful coexistence. However, these instruments, if well used, can be powerful medium of promoting positive interreligious relations.

“What are the strengths in our religious traditions as we strive to prevent conflict in society by the acceptance of “the other”?”

Fortunately, there are many resources in our respective religions that encourage us to accept the other and to prevent conflict in the society. We should not have any problem in admitting that some texts which, if not put in their historical context, might be read and understood in a way that is not always respectful of the other, encouraging mistrust and exclusion, nourishing an attitude of superiority. This is true, for example, of some New Testament texts regarding the Jews. This could also be said also of some Qur’anic texts concerning Jews and Christians.

But, there are other texts, more numerous and also with more authority, that call us to the respect of the other, in particular with regard to the dignity and liberty of a person. The instruction of Jesus to his disciples is very clear and meaningful:

“Jesus summoned His twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness [...]. «And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. Freely you received, freely give. Do not acquire gold, or silver, or copper for your money belts, or a bag for your journey, or even two coats, or sandals, or a staff; for the worker is worthy of his support. And whatever city or village you enter, inquire who is worthy in it, and stay at his house until you leave that city. As you enter the house, give it your greeting. If the house is worthy, give it your blessing of peace. But if it is not worthy, take back your blessing of peace. Whoever does not receive you, nor heed your words, as you go out of that house or that city, shake the dust off your feet».” (Mathew 10, 1.7-14) The Gospel of Jesus is to be proposed and never to be

imposed. And therefore, those who are baptized are free to leave the Church and go to another religion or even not to belong to any religion.

This does not mean that we are pleased when a Christian leaves Christ's flock, but that we are in duty of respecting the liberty of the person in matters related to conscience and religion. Excuse me dear Muslim friends for saying that the lack of respect for religious liberty in some Muslim majority countries and even by Muslims living in the West, among others, is a major cause of tension between our two communities, besides being a source of the so-called islamophobia. I assure you that we do not lose anything when we respect our brothers and sisters in what is more dear and sacred to them: their conscience.

What I have just shared leads me to another related reflection. The other should be respected not only when he pleases me or as long as he remains within my parameters. He should be respected and accepted as long as he respects the just laws of the State and the rules of living together, inspired by wisdom and common sense.

One of the important basis for the acceptance of the other and therefore for social peace is to be aware of the unity of the human family. It is one in its origin: God; one in its end: God; one in its fundamental needs: air, water, food, dress, shelter, etc. The human aspects of our life are one: joy, sorrow, hope, despair, fear, etc. Having all this in common, the legitimate differences – ethnicity, religion, culture, political choices – should not be a reason for refusing the other, ignoring him or her, marginalizing, persecuting, or even eliminating him or her, as it is unfortunately, the case in our days, especially in Iraq and in Syria, and in particular towards the Christians and Yezidis.

Our meeting here, I would think, is a sign of hope for our troubled world. It is a message to all humanity, especially to us, the members of the great family of Abraham - the Jews, Christians and the Muslims.

I invoke God's abundant blessings upon each one of us, on our respective communities and upon all of humanity; we are God's family. He loves and cares for us.