

## **Creating Oasis of Peace and Harmony**

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Pope Benedict XVI in his address at an meeting of Interreligious leaders at the Notre Dame Centre in Jerusalem on 11 May 2009 declared it was God who said to Abraham: “Go from your country, your kindred and your father’s house for a land I shall show you” And so Abram went ... and took his wife Sarah with him” (Gen 12:1-5). Truly, God’s call, which marks the beginning of the history of our faith traditions, was heard in the midst of man’s ordinary daily existence. And the history that ensued was shaped, not in isolation, but through the encounter with Egyptian, Hittite, Sumerian, Babylonian, Persian, and Greek cultures.

Indeed, faith is always lived within a culture. And the history of religion shows that a community of believers proceeds by degrees of faithfulness to God, drawing from and shaping the culture it meets.

Pope Benedict XVI also pertinently reminds us nearly four thousand years after Abraham that the encounter of religions with culture occurs not only on a geographical plane. Certain aspects of globalization and in particular the world of the internet have created a vast virtual culture, the worth of which is as varied as its countless manifestations. Undoubtedly much has been achieved to create a sense of closeness and unity within the world-wide human family. Yet, at the same time, the boundless array of portals through which people so readily access undifferentiated sources of information can easily become an instrument of increasing fragmentation: the unity of knowledge is shattered and the complex skills of critique, discernment and discrimination learned through academic and ethical traditions are at times bypassed or neglected.

The question naturally arises then as to what contribution do religions make to the cultures of the world against the backdrop of rapid globalization. Religion is the soul of culture. Hence, religions have a bounden duty to share and mould cultures, including and especially, the virtual culture which is so much a part and parcel of life today. Indeed, as members of different religious traditions, we seek to enrich culture and shape it, as well, thus seeking to form a culture not defined by boundaries of time or place but fundamentally shaped by the principles and actions that stem from our faith convictions.

Furthermore, some point out that the differences in religious doctrine and practices can pose a challenge to proclaim with clarity what we share in common. A few even maintain that our different voices should simply be silenced. But we know that our differences, on the contrary, provide a wonderful opportunity for

people of different religions to live together in profound respect, esteem and appreciation, encouraging one another to come closer to God. Indeed, despite our differences, there are so many profound realities we share in common. For instance, the profound sense of awe and respect for the absolute and for truth, which impels religious peoples to converse with one another in the first place, is the driving force to uphold basic human, spiritual and religious values.

Religious belief presupposes truth. In an interview conducted two years after the beginning of the Pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI, in the year 2007, and which appeared as an article in the April issue of *Inside the Vatican* April, 2007, I had pointed out that religion is not about politics. It is about the truth revealed. Thus the one who believes is the one who seeks truth and lives by it. Although the medium by which we understand the discovery and communication of truth differs in part from religion to religion, we should not be deterred in our efforts to bear witness to truth's power. Together we can proclaim that God exists and can be known, that the earth is his creation, that we are his creatures, and that he calls every man and woman to a way of life that respects his design for the world.

At this juncture, after having highlighted the Church's fundamental perspectives relating to Interreligious Dialogue in the context of the world today, I would like to relate our reflections to 'Water' the source of life, which is the focus of our reflection this morning. Without water the earth would be an arid desert, where life would be impossible because of famine and drought. Even though we know that it can be the cause of death (through floods, drowning and water-borne diseases), water is generally seen and appreciated for the advantages and benefits that it brings to the life of living beings.

Biblical and theological reflection, as well as examining actual struggles and conflicts over water, reveals to us how water plays a crucial role in: Peace in the community, Peace among peoples, Peace in the marketplace, Peace with the earth.

With the situation and struggles of vulnerable and marginalized communities at the centre of our reflections, we seek to find out what we as Church can do to advocate for a just peace in the context of water-related struggles<sup>1</sup>.

#### **A. Water, a basic necessity of life:**

Since primordial times, people have struggled for basic natural resources, including water which is such a crucial element of life. We find examples of this struggle throughout the Bible.<sup>2</sup> For instance, the biblical story in Exodus 15:22-

27 tells how the Israelites searched for clean water to be able to survive after crossing the Red Sea into the wilderness. They arrive at a place called Marah – Hebrew for “bitterness” – where they find water but discover that it is not fit for drinking.

The name of the place “Marah” can be interpreted simply as a literal reference to the “bitter” water. But we can also read it as a figurative description of the situation and of the mood of the people. Fleeing from the Egyptians and crossing the desert without water, the Israelites find themselves in a difficult moment. Their grumbling against Moses is also an expression of an inner bitterness, one that may be borne of feelings of fear, frustration, hopelessness, and, it seems, a lack or temporary loss of faith.

Today, in various parts of the world, including India, people are also thirsty, searching for clean water in order to survive, similar to the Israelites in Exodus. Their situation is “bitter” – despite an abundance of water around them, they have no water to drink. Searching for clean and drinkable water is a herculean task particularly for women and children who often walk more than three kilometers to get water for their families.

In the Exodus, the Israelites were guided by Moses, God’s chosen prophet, who leads the Israelites to salvation from the hold of the Pharaoh – a journey which begins with clean water being turned to blood in the first plague (Exodus 7, 20-21): “He raised his staff in the presence of Pharaoh and his officials and struck the water of the Nile, and all the water was changed into blood. The fish in the Nile died, and the river smelled so bad that the Egyptians could not drink its water.”

Moses stood before those in power, the Pharaoh and his officials, challenging them to open their eyes and hearts, to stop the oppression of the Israel people. He led them to freedom. In Marah, he threw a tree into the bitter water and purified it.

People searching for pure water to drink and for their various needs need such leaders, leaders who can liberate them and empower them to strive for and receive justice. Leaders who will, like Moses, not only purify water but heal the people and restore their trust.

With Moses, we are all called to confront the ‘Pharaohs’ in our different global contexts. When we are indifferent to the suffering of others, or in a way participate

in economic or political structures that deny water to those who thirst, we must confront the ‘Pharaoh’ within ourselves.

When the “Marah” is removed from our hearts—the inner bitterness, borne of feelings of fear, frustration, hopelessness, and lack of faith—only then can we, with Moses at Marah, use that part of the tree of life which has been entrusted to us, and make access to drinkable water for all a reality. Then we hear the words of Jesus in a new way: “Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward” (Matthew 10.42)

### **B. Women, water, violence<sup>3</sup>**

Women and girls are particularly affected where clean water and safe sanitation are lacking. They are often responsible for fetching water, an exhausting task which deprives them of time and energy they could use to earn an income or go to school. The lack of clean water and sanitation is sorely felt by women and girls, for example during menstruation. It also puts them at risk of becoming victims of violence. Many women and girls face sexual harassment and rape when fetching water or when they have to go outside for lack of toilets in their homes. The burden of fetching water can aggravate domestic violence when women cannot cope with all the chores their husbands expect them to take on.

The provision of drinking water for all and the removal of the burden of fetching water are challenges for the whole of humankind. The words of our Lord Jesus, who symbolically offered water to the Samaritan woman so that she would no longer have to venture forth alone to the well at all hours, are a challenge to women and men to claim more decent living conditions: “Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:14). Women should have access to, and control of, the resources for production, and have their say on government policies, particularly in the framing of legislation. This would enable them to work for their problems to be heard and to sweep away those cultural attitudes that conspire to reinforce their difficulties. The voice of Christ challenges men, women, and public authorities to focus on one of the most important priorities for life: drinking water for all.

Each one of us here also knows, however, that God’s voice is heard less clearly today as compared to the past due to a variety of factors. Yet that “void” is not one of silence. Indeed, it is the din of selfish demands, empty promises and false hopes that attempt to invade the very space in which God seeks us. Can we then make spaces - oases of peace and profound reflection - where God’s voice can

be heard anew, where his truth can be discovered within the universality of reason, where every individual, regardless of dwelling, or ethnic group, or political hue, or religious belief, can be respected as a person, as a fellow human being? In an age of instant access to information and social tendencies which engender a kind of monoculture, deep reflection against the backdrop of God's presence will strengthen reason, stimulate creative genius, facilitate critical appreciation of cultural practices and uphold the universal values which are part of religious belief.

We recall the prophetic words of Mahatma Gandhi: "the earth is sufficient for everyone's need, but not everyone's greed." May our generation make that significant choice, which is the need of the times, for a brave, new world!

### **End Notes**

- 1 **The EWN, is a network of churches and Christian organizations promoting people's access to water around the world, In** 2011, it focused on "Water, conflict and just peace", while examining the links between access to water, water struggles, and building just peace. The theme was chosen because of its relevance to communities and churches around the world and in view of the international Ecumenical Peace Convocation (IEPC) that took place in Jamaica, Kingston, from 17 - 25 May 2011. One of the objectives was to raise awareness of why and how addressing injustice and struggles related to water can contribute to building and keeping "just peace" in a violent world.
- 2 Cf. Rev. Canon Dr Ezekiel Babatunde, director of the Institute of Church and Society of the Christian Council of Nigeria, looks at the story of the Exodus and reflects on environmental damage and economic injustice.
- 3 Cf. Rev. Dr Priscille Djomhoue, professor at the Protestant University of Central Africa in Cameroon, explores biblical narratives of women's experiences at the well