

Promoting Harmony in Society and Peace in the World

Archbishop Felix A. Machado

The need for a Chair for Inter-cultural and Inter-religious dialogue in Mumbai:

While in Mumbai, we were able to witness personally the vitality of the Church in India, and we were consoled to see the rich contribution which Christians have made to India. All this was possible because India, faithful to its religious heritage and in keeping with its native respect for religion, has granted to the Church freedom of activity and initiative. The educational system of the Catholic Church is indeed widespread, and it has for its purpose to prepare God-fearing, exemplary, and loyal citizens for India; citizens who will make their generous contribution to the general development of their motherland. We are confident that Catholics will do their share in helping India take its rightful place among the family of nations, and we are happy that they have been such devoted sons and daughters of India.

At the beginning of the XXIst century the world is still threatened by forces which generate conflicts and wars, and India is certainly not exempt from these. Among these forces are intolerance and marginalization of all kinds: social, cultural, political, and even religious. Day by day fresh violence is inflicted upon individuals and entire peoples, and the culture of death takes hold in the unjustifiable recourse to violence to resolve tensions. Given the appalling situation of conflict in so many parts of the world, the Church is called to be deeply involved in international and interreligious efforts to bring about peace, justice and reconciliation. She continues to insist on the negotiated and non--military resolution of conflicts, and she looks to the day when nations will abandon war as a way of vindicating claims or a means of resolving differences. She is convinced that war creates more problems than it ever solves, that dialogue is the only just and noble path to agreement and reconciliation, and that the patient and wise art of peacemaking is especially blessed by God.

Dialogue between religions must be put at the service of peace between peoples. The different religious traditions possess the resource needed to overcome divisions and to build reciprocal friendship and respect.

The mission of Christianity is a mission of friendship in the midst of humanity, a mission of understanding, of encouragement, of promotion, of elevation, indeed of salvation. Dialogue is founded in the very plan of God. Religion of its very nature, is a relationship between God and man. Prayer expresses such a relationship in dialogue.

There is no one who is a stranger to the Church's heart, no one in whom her ministry has no interest. She has no enemies, except those who wish to be such. Her name of Catholic is not an idle title. Not in vain has she received the commission to foster in the world unity, love and peace.

Dialogue is demanded by deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where he wills. Through dialogue the Church seeks to uncover the "seeds of the Word", a "ray of that truth which enlightens all men"; these are found in the individuals and in the religious traditions of mankind. Dialogue is based on hope and love, and will bear fruit in the Spirit. Other religions constitute a positive challenge for the Church; they stimulate her both to discover and acknowledge the signs of Christ's presence and the working of the Spirit, as well as to examine more deeply her own identity and to bear witness to the fullness of Revelation which she has received for the good of all.

Because the Church is interested in the problems and the spiritual needs of all people, the decision of the Archdiocese to set up a chair of intercultural and interreligious dialogue is praiseworthy. Hopefully it will become a means by which the Church will arrive at a sincere and respectful dialogue with those who still believe in God and worship him as well as with all those who profess to be agnostics and atheists.

It is a journey of peace and love which longs to unite all peoples in the tightest bonds of mutual understanding and of friendship, rendering them more and more aware of the irremovable obligation of getting to know one another reciprocally, of loving one another sincerely, of aiding one another effectively according to the gifts received from God in various measure, gifts not destined to a few nations but created for the entire human family. In the end ours is a journey of friendship and of fraternity, which offers the Church cherished opportunity to become acquainted at a close range with great people in India whom the Church highly esteems for their intimate religiosity, for their innate nobility, for their artistic and cultural civilization which reaches the peaks of the human spirit and to whom the evangelical truth can offer unexpected and universal fullness and validity.

The human race is undergoing profound changes and is groping for the guiding principles and the new forces which will lead it into the world of the future. India also has entered into a new phase of her history, and in this period of transition we too feel the insecurity of our age, when traditional orders and values are changed, and all efforts must be concentrated on building the future of the nation not only on a stable material basis, but on firm spiritual foundations.

We must come closer together, not only through the modern means of communication, through press and radio, through steamships and jet planes - we must come together with our hearts, in mutual understanding, esteem, and love.

We must meet not merely as tourists, but as pilgrims who set out to find God - not in buildings of stone but in human hearts. Man must meet man, nation must meet nation, as brothers and sisters, as children of God.

Is religion a cause of division among people? The answer is no. It is not in the nature of Christianity, for example, to struggle against the human person. On the contrary, the Church struggles on behalf of the human person and in defense of what is sacred in the human person: his fundamental aspiring to God, and the right to express such aspiration outwardly in the forms required by worship.

A vast field lies open to dialogue, which can assume many forms and expressions: the so-called dialogue of life, through which believers of different religions bear witness before each other in daily life to their own human and spiritual values and helping each other to live according to those values, in order to build a more just and fraternal society; exchange between experts in religious traditions or official representatives of those traditions; cooperation for integral development and safe guarding religious values; a sharing of spiritual experiences. Each member of the faithful and all Christian communities are called to practice dialogue, although not always to the same degree or in the same way. The contribution of the laity is indispensable in this area, for they can favour the relations which ought to be established with the followers of various religions through their example in the situations in which they live and in their activities. Some of them also will be able to make a contribution through research and study.

Prejudice is the result of lack of dialogue. Prejudice breeds suspicion and hatred, which in turn produces violence and finally ends in war which causes destruction and y death. We believers of all religions must unequivocally declare to the world that we will continue to work to build a reconciled world, a world able to look with serenity to its own future. Without being discouraged by the bad news which is often highlighted and even exaggerated by the media we will do everything to multiply our efforts to promote peace and harmony. Because the name of God is peace, religions must always stand for peace.

The Theme of Peace in World Religions

The theme of peace is central to all religions. All humanity must increasingly become God's family, living in harmony and peace. The theme of peace must be seen in the wider context of the problems of our world: the dehumanizing poverty, exploitation of children and women, especially those who are victims of war, of broken families and of abuse, ecological disaster, discrimination on the basis of religious affinity, oppression of minorities, problems of disillusioned youth, unequal distribution of world's resources, etc.

It is important to emphasise, above all from the Christian point of view, that peace is first and foremost the gift of God. Almighty God has entrusted this gift to

man. Peace is not so much a superficial balance between diverse material interests; rather, it is the essential a good man must search for. It is the fruit of morality and virtues. Since God is the primary Fountain, the essential Truth and the supreme Good of all beings, man's search for peace cannot but begin with God. In this sense peace comes from God; God is its foundation. God, not only gives creation to humanity for its use and for its development, but God also writes on the human conscience the laws which oblige man to respect, in various ways, the life of every person which is created, like his own life, in the image of God, and of whom God himself is guarantee of all fundamental human rights.

God himself helps man in his interior being to find peace and to realize it in his life and in the world. In fact, man, limited and subject to errors and to evil during his existence, is always confronted with many difficulties; he is attracted by false goods and deviated by irrational and egoistic instincts. Therefore it is necessary for him to open to the transcendence of God who purifies him of all errors and liberates him from aggressive passions. God is not somewhere far away from the heart of man; rather, He can be found in prayer and in the practice of justice. Peace then, is the fruit of one's communion with God and neighbours.

Search for Truth is the Foundation for Lasting peace

Peace is threatened when believers choose to live in isolation, closed in upon themselves and in self-sufficiency which leads to a lack of openness to others. If one party declares that it has the truth, and that all others are in error and are therefore not worthy of consideration, no relationship can be possible. It is important to make a distinction between error as such and the person who falls into error. Even if we are convinced that truth is on our side, and that others "err regarding the truth or are led astray as a result of their inadequate knowledge, in matters either of religion or of the highest ethical standards", these others never forfeit their personal dignity. All are therefore always to be treated with respect. Interreligious dialogue can help us on the way to Truth which always surpasses our understanding.

One of the urgent tasks of dialogue is to overcome prejudice. An accurate introductory information is a first step for overcoming false ideas and negative views of one another and for breaking down barriers of understanding. Partners in dialogue across religious boundaries need to, first of all, accept one another as endowed with equal dignity. This does not mean that we value all ideas about the ultimate truth identically. There are, of course, fundamental differences between believers of different religions. However, standing honestly before Truth, believers of all religions need to be open to the other, as a form of openness to God, allowing oneself to be challenged and changed.

Another aspect of truth is sincerity, something essential for mutual confidence and fruitful dialogue. Where there is no real trust, because of a suspicion of lack

of sincerity, dialogue becomes impossible. A climate of trust has to be created, not only among the partners but also among the people they represent, so that solutions, which nearly always entail compromises, may become acceptable.

Cultivation of Inner Peace: Indispensable to Building Peace in the World

One can hardly hope to bring peace in the world if there is no peace within oneself. The religious traditions of Asia, in particular, emphasise the cultivation of inner peace; various religious traditions of Asia, such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, but also the Christian tradition, in the course of their long history, have given importance, through the institution of monastic life, to the cultivation of inner peace. Peace is born in the heart of a person and then, as a fruit of it, planted in the world. The cultivation of inner peace is indispensable to building peace in the world. By their quiet and discreet but effective witnesses of life the monks promote peace which our world today needs so urgently. To achieve this goal they use the means of prayer, meditation and contemplation and search for interior peace. St. Benedict says to his monks in the Prologue to his rule: "Seek peace – pursue it". If prayer and meditation is neglected, the whole edifice of peace is liable to crumble. Prayer and silent contemplation on the divine mysteries give birth and bring growth and maturity to peace, which then, becomes an influential, enduring and limitless source of peace in the world.

The late Pope John Paul II explained the importance of prayer and meditation in the life of a believer, especially for building peace. In his address to the participants on the occasion of the world day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi in 1986, he said: "Prayer gives courage and support to all who love this good and desire to promote it in accordance with their own possibilities and in the various situations in which they live. Prayer not only opens us up to a meeting with the Most High but also disposes us to a meeting with our neighbour, helping us to establish with everyone, without discrimination, relationships of respect, understanding, esteem and love. He further continues, "Religious sentiment and a prayerful spirit not only help us to grow inwardly; they also enlighten us about the true meaning of our presence in the world. It can also be said that the religious dimension encourages us to make an event more committed contribution to the building of a well-ordered society in which peace reigns. Prayer is the bond which most effectively unites us: it is through prayer that believers meet one another at a level where inequalities, misunderstandings, bitterness and hostility are overcome, namely before God, the Lord and Father of all. Prayer, as the authentic expression of a right relationship with God and with others, is already a positive contribution to peace."

Peace and Development Are Matters of Religion

Believers must explore the theme of peace in the context of integral development of each person and all peoples. Unless you seek the good of one and all peace is placed in jeopardy. Respect for rights of every human person is the foundation of peace. Of course, there are always rights and duties, flowing directly and

simultaneously from human person's very nature. It is upon correct anthropological foundation of these rights and duties, and upon their intrinsic correlation, that the true bulwark of peace rests.

The phenomenon of globalization which is being imposed without respect to solidarity among all peoples must become a serious concern for all believers. Every believer must ask, "What will be the effect of the changes taking place? Will everyone be able to take advantage of a global market? Will everyone at least have a chance to enjoy peace? Will relations between States become more equitable, or will economic competition and rivalries between peoples and nations lead humanity towards a situation of even greater instability? The late Pope John Paul II suggests that "for a more equitable society and a more stable peace in a world on the way to globalization, it is an urgent task of International Organization to help promote a sense of responsibility for the common good. But to achieve this we must never lose sight of the human person, who must be the centre of every social project... This is the path of building a world community based on 'mutual trust, mutual support and sincere respect'. The challenge is to ensure a globalization in solidarity, a globalization without marginalization. This is a clear duty in justice, with serious moral implications in the organizations of the economic, social, cultural and political life of nations"

Believers across religious boundaries, need to identify, through interreligious dialogue, obstacles of peace, such as xenophobia that closes nations in on themselves or, which leads governments to enact discriminatory laws against people in their own countries, closing of borders in an arbitrary and unjustifiable way so that people are effectively deprived of the ability to move and to better their lot, ideologies that preach hatred or distrust, systems that set up artificial barriers like race, religion, class divisions, etc. Are not all people subject of true development and are they not also the aim of true development? The integral development of people is the goal and measure of all development projects. All together need to promote values that truly benefit individuals and society. It is not enough to reach out and help those in need. We must help them to discover the values which enable them to build a new life and to take their rightful place in society with dignity and justice. "Development is no longer a question merely of improving certain situations or economic conditions. Development ultimately becomes a question of Peace, because it helps to achieve what is good for others and for the human community as a whole."

To Build Peace in the World needs Cooperation of all Religions

The Catholic Church wants to enter ever more deeply into dialogue with the religions of the world because the Church sees dialogue as an act of love which has its roots in God himself. Despite the fundamental differences believers must make efforts to understand positively the role of religions in promoting peace in the world. Differences certainly need to be respected but instead of becoming

obstacles in the way of peace differences should be overcome by building bridges of friendship. Yes, we need to cultivate mutual relationships of trust and confidence. Our commitment to interreligious dialogue obviously does not diminish the rightful practice of their respective religious tradition.

The meeting in Assisi on 27 October 1986, for example, was a concrete witness to the universal dimension of peace, and confirmed that peace is not only the result of skilful political and diplomatic negotiations or a compromise between economic interests, but depends in a fundamental way upon the One who knows the human heart and guides and directs the steps of all mankind.

Thanks to the increasing number of encounters and exchanges between religious believers around the world. Many of us have been able to attain a clearer awareness of our responsibilities with regard to the true good of humanity as a whole. As a result of interreligious dialogue believers have become an active force in the process of development and thus to offer a sure hope to humanity. In a number of instances, it has become evident that our activity would have proved more effective had it been carried out jointly and in a coordinated manner. There is a long way to go for believers of different religions to reach the goal of active cooperation in the cause of peace. Interreligious contacts is an obligatory path, in order to ensure that the many painful wounds inflicted over the course of centuries will not be repeated, and indeed that any such wounds still remaining will soon be healed.

Religious Freedom: A Condition for Peace in a Pluri-Religious Society

Freedom is essential to peace for it allows people to act responsibly. A solution that is imposed from above, and not accepted willingly, will not last this is why it is important that peace processes not be confined only to select negotiations; the process needs to be shared with the population involved in the conflict.

Freedom is the most noble prerogative of the human person. And demand for freedom regards, in the first place, the free exercise of religion in society. Religious quest is inseparably linked to the quest for truth and "truth is to be sought after in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. The inquiry is to be free, carried with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication, and dialogue."

Freedom of conscience and of religion does not mean relativisation of the objective truth which every human being is morally obliged to seek. It must be clearly stated that no State has any competence, direct or indirect, over a person's religious convictions. It cannot arrogate to itself the right to impose or to impede the profession or public practice of religion by a person or a community.

The religious dimension, rooted in the human conscience, has a specific impact on the subject of peace, and every attempt to impede or to coerce its free expression inevitably has grave negative effects upon the possibility of a peaceful society.

Religious freedom also contributes decisively to producing citizens who are genuinely free; it also makes them to take up their duties with greater responsibility. An essential condition for peace is people's strong moral integrity and religious freedom.

In certain countries legislation has been introduced, or proposed, forbidding "unethical conversions." If what is banned is proselytism, that is the use of undue means to bring about conversion to a particular religion, then such legislation may be considered justified. If, however, any passage from one religion to another is forbidden, then there is a radical contradiction of a fundamental aspect of the principle of religious freedom.

Religious freedom constitutes the very heart of human rights. "Its inviolability is such that individuals must be recognized as having the right even to change their religion, if their conscience so demands. People are obliged to follow their conscience in all circumstances and cannot be forced to act against it (Cf. Article 18 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights)

Conclusion

"The world needs peace, the world ardently desires peace." Believers across religious boundaries have an indispensable role to play in promoting, building, educating and living in peace. Believers in their respective communities, as well as in wider society, must become a concrete example of peaceful and harmonious living. This new initiative for the spread of peace must be taken, so that overcoming problems and obstacles in the way of peace, they may meet challenges. "Given the increased number of conflict situations, it is necessary to develop new energies of peace, for which religions are a valuable resource." I would like to conclude by quoting a part of the appeal which was signed by religious leaders. It declared: "May no hatred, no conflict, no war be kindled by religions! War can never be justified by religion. May the words spoken by religions always be words of peace! May the way of faith lead to dialogue and understanding! May religions guide hearts to bring peace on earth! May religions help all men and women to love the earth and its peoples both great and small."