



Intervention by H.E. Archbishop Ivan Jurkovič, Apostolic Nuncio, Permanent Observer  
of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva  
at the side event during the **Geneva Peace Week**  
**“The role of religions in settling conflicts”**  
Geneva, 7 November 2019

Excellencies, distinguished guests,

I wish to express my gratitude to the Sovereign Order of Malta for organizing this important event on an issue which is very close to the heart and mission of the Church and of the Holy See: the resolution of conflicts, reconciliation and peace.

When analyzing the situations of tension and conflict that have emerged during recent years, a dangerous temptation arises to place them in the narrative of a “clash of civilizations”, thus depicting the latter as an inevitable self-fulfilling prophecy. Such interpretation also entails a negative take on the role of religions. On the contrary, at the heart of these dramatic situations of violence there is a limited vision of the human person which paves the way to injustice and inequality.

True peace is the necessary condition for the construction of fraternal societies, just and respectful of the human dignity shared by all. As Pope Francis said “the desire for peace can never be satisfied by military means alone [...] Peace must be built on justice, socio-economic development, freedom, respect for fundamental human rights, the participation of all in public affairs and the building of trust between peoples”.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, free to choose peace over violence and fear, humans throughout history have often succumbed to the temptation of power and the search for a world order imposed by the force of arms. In such a spurious quest, religions have often been exploited as an instrument and as a justification for war. Tragically, this has undermined the possibility of lasting peace in the past and continues to be the tragedy of our current world, a situation that Pope Francis described as a “third world war fought piecemeal”.<sup>2</sup>

In today’s globalized world, it seems more important than ever to stress the value of dialogue at all levels: diplomatic, intercultural but also among religious traditions. Indeed, religion and diplomacy can complement and reinforce one another, with faith-based “informal diplomacy” and the formal diplomacy of States and multilateral bodies working toward the same ends but through different means. Strengthening this relationship makes a strong positive contribution to the overall effort to achieve meaningful peace.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, Message to the President of the Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons, 7 December, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, General Audience, 18 January 2018.

Dialogue among religious traditions can greatly contribute to shape the *conscience publique*, that is, a moral patrimony which expresses a universal ethical message. For instance, the “Golden Rule”, which is the essential basis for the peaceful resolution of disputes (“do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you” or “do unto others as you would have them do unto you”) is found, in one form or another, in all religions, as is the imperative to respect the dignity of the human person.

Excellencies, distinguished guests,

After this brief introduction, please allow me to make three points:

1) Pope Francis, through many symbolic actions towards interreligious dialogue and his numerous apostolic journeys, has proven that “meeting one another in fraternal friendship is a powerful sign, one that shows the harmony which religions can build together, based on personal relations and on the good will of those responsible.”<sup>3</sup> In his speech at the Global Conference of Human Fraternity held in Abu Dhabi last February Pope Francis made it crystal-clear that: “There is no alternative: either we will build the future together or there will be no future. Religions in particular cannot renounce the urgent task of building bridges between peoples and cultures. The time has come when religions should more actively exert themselves, with courage and audacity, and without pretense, to help the human family deepen the capacity for reconciliation, the vision of hope and the concrete paths of peace.”<sup>4</sup>

Religions have an important part in building a culture of encounter and peace based on mutual understanding in the search for the common good. For the Catholic Church, peacebuilding through active nonviolence is the natural and necessary complement to the Church’s its continuing efforts to limit the use of force by invoking moral norms.<sup>5</sup> In many parts of the world, beginning with the Middle East, such an approach is much needed now to foster fully reconciled societies and to renew peaceful civil coexistence.

2) In the pursuit of the goal to inspire and support every initiative on a path to peace, education has a central role to play.<sup>6</sup> In an attempt to encourage this goal, Pope Francis recently instituted at the Pontifical Lateran University an academic program in Peace Studies, as a curriculum which coincides with the theological, philosophical, juridical, economic and social spheres. The curricular structure is a bachelor’s degree course as well as a Master’s degree in the “Science of Peace and International Cooperation”.

With this new program of studies, Pope Francis wishes to encourage professors, students and all staff members to feel involved in sowing the seeds of the culture of peace. I am also pleased to share with you that on 31 October 2019, His Eminence Card. Pietro Parolin, Secretary of State of His Holiness Pope Francis, signed a memorandum of understanding with the Rector of the UN University for Peace in Costa Rica to foster cooperation between the Lateran University and the University for Peace. Indeed, the promotion of a culture of harmony and goodwill among the youth is crucial for a future of

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<sup>3</sup> Address of Pope Francis at the interreligious meeting with the Sheikh and with the representatives of the different religious communities of Azerbaijan, September 2016

<sup>4</sup> Address of Pope Francis at the Global Conference of Human Fraternity, Founder’s Memorial Abu Dhabi, 4.2.2019.

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, Message for the 2017 World Day of Peace: “Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace”, 1 January 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Letter of Pope Francis for the Inauguration of the Academic Year of the Pontifical Lateran

peace. Key to instilling this value in children is to educate them in a “culture of encounter”, including with other religions. And this brings me to my third point:

3) Today, in spite of the presence of many conflicts in the world, we have grown accustomed, especially in the Western world, to taking peace for granted. In a sense, we seem to have lost a sense of “fear of war”. On the contrary, we have developed the thinking that war *per se* is not such a dramatic and terrible event. A dramatic example of this reality is given by the pervasive violence represented in war videogames: many children play these violent wargames, where killing and destroying is depicted as a hobby and as a leisure activity. Sadly, in these games, the more you kill and the more havoc you wreak, the more you are rewarded.

I believe it is important to insist that such behavior is unacceptable and I believe that religions can play their part in overcoming it. We need to insist on changing this mentality because it trivializes the suffering of others and does not contribute to the spread of foundational values such as compassion, dialogue, and cooperation. As a positive development, but certainly as a minimum first step only, I was pleased to learn that the International Committee of the Red Cross has started to collaborate with programmers and developers of war videogames so that respect for international humanitarian law can be “built” in the codes of war videogames, so that young players may learn, for instance, to protect civilian population and civilian objects.

In conclusion, just like the old saying that “Rome was not built in a day”, building peace is an ongoing and dynamic process: even once it seems to have been achieved, we cannot take it for granted. Indeed, peace is the only true direction of human progress.<sup>7</sup> As Pope Francis recalled: “peace is a gift, a challenge and a commitment.”<sup>8</sup> It is a gift, because it flows from the very heart of God. It is a challenge, because it should never be taken for granted and must constantly be sought. It is a commitment, because it demands passionate effort on the part of all people of goodwill to seek and strive for peace.<sup>9</sup>

In this regard, religions and the faithful, in particular, must prove themselves steadfast. With this in mind, I would like to conclude by stressing the responsibility of religious leaders - especially in an ever more interconnected world and in the era of social media – to help counter the spread of hatred and violence in the name of religion and to promote more inclusive and peaceful societies.<sup>10</sup> The more religion is manipulated to justify acts of terror and violence, the more religious leaders must be engaged in the overall effort to uphold and live, in word and in action, the true face of religion, which is one of authentic peace and harmony among all peoples. In this way, religion can also be instrumental in “preventing” conflicts! As we know well, in order for religious leaders to fulfill this mission, national authorities must continue to recognize and ensure religious freedom as an inalienable fundamental human right, indispensable for all other human rights.

Thank you for your attention.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Pope Paul VI, Message for the First World Day of Peace, 1 January 1968.

<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis, Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, 9 January 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Message of Pope Francis to the 2017 World Day of Peace

<sup>10</sup> Speech of H.Em. Card. Pietro Parolin, High-level meeting on the Role Of Religious Leaders In Preventing Atrocities, 20 September 2016.