



Contribution of His Excellency Archbishop Ivan Jurkovič Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva at the 6th Annual Interfaith Dialogue on
The Role of Faith during the Coronavirus Pandemic
Geneva, 24 February 2021

Dear friends,

At the outset, allow me to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to His Excellency Walid Khalid Obeidat, Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Jordan to the United Nations in Geneva; to Mr. Nikhil Seth, UN Assistant Secretary General and Executive Director of UNITAR; to His Excellency Luis Gallegos Chiriboga, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Ecuador; and to all the participants at this Annual Interfaith Dialogue.

It is an honor and a privilege for me to join you as we gather for the 6th time as people of diverse faith traditions with a common interest and conviction: that through sincere dialogue, the richness of our beliefs might have a positive impact on the world in which we live. Each of us knows, from personal experience, the value and importance of our own religion in our lives. This annual conference allows us to share that which is most important to us, in a spirit of trust and fraternity, so that we might learn from one another, help one another and grow together in mutual respect.

In a particular way, I would also like to thank Mr. Alex Mejia for organizing this event and for the theme that was chosen, “*the role of faith during the Coronavirus pandemic*”. We all know how devastating the coronavirus pandemic has been. It is shocking to reflect that just over a year ago, this new and practically unknown disease would overturn the world as we know it. Every aspect of our lives has been upended: hundreds of thousands of people have lost their lives; countless others are suffering severe health crises; businesses have been closed around the world, many of which will never be able to reopen their doors; national economies have been devastated; production has been brought to a standstill; in many places, education has been reduced to virtual learning or has ceased altogether; and situations of poverty have been pushed to the breaking point. I would like to draw particular attention to those in the most vulnerable situations, such as migrants, refugees, indigenous peoples, children, mothers and the impoverished. If the pandemic has had a negative impact on the world as a whole, it is these persons that have paid the dearest price. Innumerable persons who were in a state of dire poverty before the outbreak of the pandemic have since died

from starvation. These, just as much as those who have contracted the virus, must be counted among the victims of this bitter scourge.

Yet, in addition to all of these external consequences of Covid-19, perhaps the most unsettling effects of the virus are those more subtle interior crises. The health restrictions that have been implemented around the world are indeed necessary to ensure a safe environment for all. Nevertheless, isolation in homes, the wearing of a mask, the loss of a job, the impossibility to physically interact with family and friends; all of these things have had a profound psychological, emotional and spiritual impact on each one of us. Aristotle referred to human beings as *social animals*. That which distinguishes us from the rest of the creatures in the world, as much as our rationality and our will, is our fundamental need to live in harmony with other human beings.

From the Christian perspective, this ancient principle takes on an even deeper meaning. God desires *communion*. The Almighty created human beings so that we might enter into a deep and meaningful relationship with our Creator and with one another. Only through this mutual and open sharing of ourselves will we find true contentment and peace.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated so many already existing tensions and threats to unity between individuals, peoples, cultures and nations. While unintended, the wearing of a mask and the interaction with colleagues and friends through computer screens places one additional barrier between that human interaction that is so essential to who we are and who we are called to be. Moreover, the threat of physical suffering and death; the possibility of losing a job and the uncertainty of the future have nestled within many people a sense of distrust of the other. When resources and medical treatments are limited, it is understandable that each person and nation would seek to secure and stockpile what they can for their loved ones. However, this self-interested myopic approach stands in direct contradiction to the unity and communion that truly bring fulfillment to the human heart.

The stockpiling of vaccines, the jealous insistence on patent rights, the closing of borders and the general turning in on oneself are understandable reactions to the universal crisis we are facing. These responses, however, far from helping us survive the storm of the pandemic, will inflict upon us a much deeper plague than the Coronavirus itself; if left unchecked, it could separate us from that which makes us truly human our capacity and desire to live in fraternal *communion*. In this context, it is no surprise that there has been a drastic spike in cases of depression and suicide in many places around the world, over the course of this past year.

This, my dear friends, brings me to the role of faith amidst the coronavirus pandemic. Our faith traditions *ground* us in a reality that is deeper than ourselves. They offer us a *community of fellow believers* with whom we can connect on the deepest

level, sharing our sorrows and joys, our hopes and our fears, our losses and our love. Faith provides us *perspective* to understand that – as much as physical health is an utmost good – it is not, and must not be considered, our highest priority, causing us to lose sight of the entire *common good* of which it forms an integral part but does not represent the whole. Our religious traditions assure us that *God exists* and *cares for us*. Despite all of the challenges we are facing, this blessed assurance, this certainty grounded in faith, gives us the capacity to hope and to trust, even when the world around us seems to be crumbling apart. Faith teaches us to look beyond ourselves and our own immediate needs. It is not a coincidence that most major faith traditions place a strong emphasis on *selfless love*, placing an incumbent responsibility on each of us to *care* for our brothers and sisters.

Pope Francis is greatly interested in ensuring that the effects of the coronavirus pandemic do not lead to the even more tragic consequence of the deterioration of authentic human interaction. This is one of the reasons why he instituted an *ad hoc* Commission, under the auspices of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, with the goal of promoting authentic and holistic care for all people affected by the current pandemic.

Another important initiative of the Holy See, which actually predates the onset of the coronavirus, is the *Document on Human Fraternity for Peace and Living Together*, signed by Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, on 4 February 2019. This important declaration underlines the importance of inter-faith and intercultural dialogue in the pursuit of peace. This historic event is a prime example of how persons of different faith traditions, inspired by their convictions, can work together to encourage peaceful dialogue, that helps to bridge divisions and further authentic human relationships. Indeed, the importance of human fraternity, and the role of religious traditions in its promotion, is the focus of the Pope's most recent Encyclical Letter, *Fratelli tutti*. In this document, the Pope highlights that "*The different religions, based on their respect for each human person as a creature called to be a child of God, contribute significantly to building fraternity and defending justice in society. Dialogue between the followers of different religions does not take place simply for the sake of diplomacy, consideration or tolerance. In the words of the Bishops of India, 'the goal of dialogue is to establish friendship, peace and harmony, and to share spiritual and moral values and experiences in a spirit of truth and love.'*"¹ I had the personal opportunity to experience the truth of this affirmation when, at the invitation of His Excellency Dr. Mohammad Abdulkarim A. al-Issa, Secretary General of the Muslim World League, I traveled to Jeddah on 22 November 2020, on the occasion of the presentation of the publication *Promotion of*

¹ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*, n° 271.

Intercultural and Interreligious dialogue as an instrument for peace and fraternity. Such initiatives demonstrate the efficacy of faith traditions in overcoming divisions.

Dear friends,

Allow me to finish by echoing the words that His Holiness Pope Francis addressed to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See earlier this year. He said: *“The pandemic, which forced us to endure long months of isolation and often loneliness, has brought out the need of every individual for human relationships [...] Even as we seek ways to protect human lives from the spread of the virus, we cannot view the spiritual and moral dimension of the human person as less important than physical health. [...] Dante Alighieri states that the purpose of his Comedy is ‘to remove those living in this life from the state of misery and to lead them to the state of bliss’. This is also the work of both religious and civil authorities, in their various sectors and responsibilities. The crisis in human relationships [...] cannot be overcome, unless we safeguard the transcendent dignity of each human person, created in the image and likeness of God.”*²

Strengthened by our religious traditions and beliefs, may we all witness to the value and importance of nurturing *spiritual health*, rooted in fraternity and hope, as the most efficacious way of healing the world around us.

Thank you.

² Pope Francis, Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, 8 February 2021.