



Statement by H.E. Archbishop Fortunatus Nwachukwu, Apostolic Nuncio, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva at the **expert meeting on the “Plan of Action on intercultural and interfaith engagement as a catalyst to prevent conflict and promote peace”**

Málaga, 9 May 2022

Estimado señor alcalde de Málaga,

Excelencias,

Hermanas y hermanos,

Es un placer poder participar en este evento en Málaga, una de las ciudades más antiguas del mundo y como tal rica en su historia y arquitectura. Al principio, quisiera agradecerle al ayuntamiento de la ciudad de Málaga por su hospitalidad.

Al mismo tiempo, quisiera expresar mis felicitaciones a la Universidad para la Paz y a UNITAR por esta reunión de expertos que precede otra conferencia importante de las Naciones Unidas sobre el tema “*Human Rights, Civil Society and Counter-Terrorism*”, a la cual tendré el honor de representar la Santa Sede. I am also thankful to the Muslim World League and the World Jewish Congress for coming together in this important discussion.

In this brief intervention, I would like to share some reflections on how interreligious dialogue can contribute to advancing integral human development and peace. Having listened to the other remarks before me, I would also like to outline a few elements that I deem important in view of the preparation for a “Plan of Action on intercultural and interfaith engagement as a catalyst to prevent conflicts and promote peace.”

1. Interreligious dialogue

My brothers and sisters,

In the last few decades, humanity has made extraordinary discoveries. We have reached outer space and technological progress has advanced at warp speed – including in the fields of artificial intelligence and cyberspace. In spite of such notable progress, it is legitimate to ask: how is it possible that there is still so much suffering in the world? Why are we not able to take care of each other properly, in particular of the poor and those in marginalized situations, as well as of our Common Home?

These days in particular, at a time when the sense of belonging to a single human family is fading and the world appears fragmented and torn by divisions, this meeting offers a chance for reflection upon how intercultural and interreligious dialogue can contribute to overcoming the common challenges that humanity is facing. Through sincere interreligious dialogue, it is possible to rediscover a fraternal sense of living together, to understand the diversity that exists among us, to defuse situations of violence and to live as brothers and sisters.

In his Encyclical Letter entitled “*Fratelli tutti*”, Pope Francis outlined his hope that by “acknowledging the dignity of each human person, created in the image of God, we can contribute to a rebirth of a universal aspiration to fraternity”¹.

¹ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*, n. 8

The Pope suggests setting aside every kind of self-centredness or competition. As believers, “we are convinced that, without an openness to the Father of all, there will be no solid and stable reasons for an appeal to fraternity. We are certain that only with this awareness that we are not orphans, but children, can we live in peace with one another”².

As you may know, I come from Nigeria. There is a proverb in my mother tongue Igbo that says, “it takes a village to raise a child”. In other words, this means that in the face of an important task, such as that of child upbringing, a communal effort of all is required. By way of comparison, we could say that the village here is our religions, and our child is humanity. Indeed, religions have a duty to indicate the way forward in a world where confrontation and domination still prevail over considerations of the Common Good.

2. Combating extremism

Distinguished participants,

In his apostolic journey in Iraq last year, during the interreligious meeting held in the Plain of Ur, the birthplace of Abraham, Pope Francis suggested to go back to our common roots, to the sources of God’s work, to the origin of our religions. The Holy Father affirmed that “the greatest blasphemy is to profane the name of God by hating our brothers and sisters. Hostility, extremism, and violence are not born of a religious heart: they are betrayals of religion. We believers cannot be silent when terrorism abuses religion”³

It is then legitimate to ask ourselves the following question: how do we counter extremism and prevent incitement to violence? A natural answer is to focus on education, – and this cannot be stressed enough; but I would also say that it is equally important that religious leaders condemn violence, and especially the use, – or rather “misuse” of religion, to carry out or to support, actively or passively, violent attacks.

In fact, if we fail to condemn heinous attacks, we give the impression of being permissive or, even worse, of expressing tacit consent. On the contrary, if religious leaders condemn every instance of violent attacks – then and only then will a real change take place. As Pope Francis affirmed on various occasions, extremism is a betrayal of religion. Religion, by its very nature, must be at the service of peace and fraternity. The name of God cannot be used “to justify acts of murder, exile, terrorism and oppression”⁴.

There will be no peace without sharing and acceptance, without a justice that ensures equity and advancement for all, beginning with those most in need. There will be no peace unless peoples extend a hand to other peoples. There will be no peace as long as we see others as *them* and not *us*.⁵

In this regard, I am strongly encouraged by the words and actions of the World Jewish Congress and of the Muslim World League.

This is the trajectory that Pope Francis has been tracing through his more than symbolic apostolic journeys and actions. He stressed the inextricable role between interfaith dialogue and the promotion of peace. He defined this as journeying together (in Spanish “*caminar juntos*”), in an effort to go back to our roots and recognizing how much humanity our brothers and sisters of different religions and cultures have in common. For such dialogue to bear fruits, it involves first of all a firm sense of one’s own identity, but also the courage to open up towards others with the eagerness to listen, to appreciate and defend the other’s fundamental humanity, rights and freedoms, including religious freedom.

² Ibid. n. 272.

³ Pope Francis, Interreligious Meeting, Plain of Ur, 6 March 2021.

⁴ Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together, Abu Dhabi, 4 February 2019.

⁵ Cf. Pope Francis, Interreligious Meeting, Plain of Ur, 6 March 2021.

3. Towards a Plan of Action

My brothers and sisters,

With a view to the proposed Plan of Action, interreligious collaboration can and must promote the fundamental human rights of all persons, in every time and place in the world. We are all members of the one human family and, as such, we have equal rights and responsibilities as citizens of our common home. Let us always remember that the common roots of humanity are the basis of our collaboration and dialogue.⁶

Distinguished participants, in light of the many global challenges that affect humanity – I am thinking of climate change, conflicts, the arms race, the pandemic, forced migration, poverty etc. - a journey of dialogue and peace between religions is not only possible, but it becomes all the more necessary.

We are all called, in our respective roles, to cultivate and promote respect for the intrinsic dignity of every human person and to foster a culture of encounter and openness to others, in mutual respect. In particular, faced with the spread of new forms of xenophobia and racism, leaders of all religions have an important mission. It falls on them to spread, among their members, the ethical principles and values inscribed by God in the heart of every human being⁷ and to tackle those ideologies that would exploit social unrest in order to foment contempt and hatred by presenting the others as enemies and not as brothers.

Lastly, I would be remiss if I did not speak at least a word of remembrance for the victims of extremism and for those who are victims of severe and systematic human rights violations, including based on their religious identity. In the face of such adversities, what religions can also teach is that forgiveness and reconciliation are always possible. At a time of heightened international tensions, let us turn places of hatred and conflict into places of healing and reconciliation, places of destruction into places of renewed life, leading to a society where a culture of peace and harmonious co-existence becomes the norm rather than an exception.

Thank you for your attention.

⁶ Cf. Intervention of H.Em. Card. Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot at the High-Level Event on the Encyclical Letter “Fratelli tutti”, Geneva, 15 April 2021).

⁷ Cf. Address of Pope Francis to participants at the World conference on “Xenophobia, Racism and Populist Nationalism in the context of global migration”, 20 September 2018.