

ADDRESS OF H. B. THE ARCHBISHOP OF CYPRUS CHRYSOSTOMOS II TO THE OPENING OF THE MIDDLE EAST INTER-ORTHODOX COUNCIL

Al-Salaamu 'Aleikum, "Εἰρήνη ὑμῖν!" I greet you all in Peace.

Peace is not just a word for greeting or a word signifying the absence of war. It is something more than a simple word. The notion of Peace is signifying the presence of God among people regardless their religious beliefs and consists a core value in all religions and reaches out all those people, who seek peace according to their own religious traditions and commitments.

Unfortunately, in the area of the Middle East Peace is not present. We often witness, terrible acts of violence that spread death, terror and pain upon people. We are able to observe, also, acts of religious intolerance and discrimination. Recognizing the fact that working for peace constitutes a primary expression of our responsibility which is grounded on the essential goodness of all human beings by virtue of being in God's image, we gathered, today, the Primates and the Representatives of the Orthodox Churches in the Middle East ready to face the challenges and to move forward, beyond mere rhetorical expressions. We are here to incarnate our ethical values into actions that will contribute to a culture of peace in the area.

Alternative ways that reject violence and war must constantly pursued and persistently proclaimed. For this reason we arrived here, in the Holy Land of Jordan Valley, to found an

Inter-Orthodox Institution where the Orthodox Churches will be able to meet and discuss, searching for the answers to the many issues related to the Christian presence in the Middle East. However, our commitment must not be limited within the Christians. It is also our responsibility to develop harmonious relations and better understanding between Christians, Muslims and Jewish. Thus, we have to reaffirm our common values of love, mutual respect and understanding and we have to foster interfaith dialogue within the spirit of the Holy Scripture: *"Let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves, is born of God and knows God. He, who doesn't love, doesn't know God, for God is love"* (1 John: 4, 7). For this reason we would like to extend our greetings to the whole Muslim world, this very special day that signifies the beginning of the Holy month of Ramadan which is a time of reflecting, believing and worshiping God, a time of self-reformation, spiritual cleansing and enlightenment.

TheChurchofCyprus, remains true to the beliefs and ideas of love, peace and of mutual understanding. It is our commitment to promote dialogue between different religions globally, regionally and locally, not only in theory but also in practice. For theChurchofCyprusdialogue with Turkish Cypriots, in our own country is of existential importance, because of the fact that the northern part of our island is enslaved and under Turkish military occupation since 1974. Since then, basic Human Rights are violated daily and religious freedom is not respected. We have no right to worship in or protect and preserve our centuries old churches and monasteries. TheChurchofCyprusknows that only through sincere and open dialogue with Turkish Cypriot Muslims, we will be able to overcome our differences and build trust with one another. BesidesCyprusproblem has never been a religious problem, as Muslims Turkish Cypriots and Christians Greek Cypriots, used to live together in peace and harmony.

In this respect, the Church of Cyprus, promoting dialogue with

the Turkish Cypriot religious leadership, organized last week a Faith Based Interfaith Youth Encounter with the participation of Greek and Turkish Cypriots together with Israeli and Palestinian youth. The main purpose of this initiative was for young people from different faiths (Christians, Moslems, Jewish) and different nationalities to come together and understand the aspirations, worries, and beliefs of each other. In addition, the Programme gave the opportunity to the youth to discuss the teachings of each religion regarding Human Rights -including the Rights of Religious Freedom and worship- justice, peace, forgiveness, reconciliation and how these could be applied in their daily lives. For this reason the youth were able to visit respective religious sites and follow Friday prayers in a Mosque, Shabbat in a Synagogue on Saturday and the Holy Mass in a Church on Sunday.

With these thoughts, we would like to express our gratitude to His Beatitude Patriarch Theophilos III for this initiative. That proves His real and sincere interest for peace in the area. His efforts consists an inspiration and encouragement for our people to reserve the right for the future generations, to live in a better, and more secure and peaceful world.

We would like also to take this opportunity to extend our appreciation and our warm wishes to His Majesty King Abdullah II King of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. His Majesty's continuous efforts for peace and understanding have turn Jordan into an outstanding example of freedom of worshipping. You can observe this through its people and its surroundings. What is more, His Majesty's initiatives starting from "Amman Message", to "The Common World" and to the recent "World Interfaith Harmony Week" have created channels for open dialogue between Christians and Muslims based on two common fundamental religious Commandments; Love of God, and Love of the Neighbour.

In conclusion we would like to emphasize that peacemaking is a matter of individual and institutional choice. The power either to increase the hurt inflicted on our world or to contribute toward its healing is in our hand. Once again, it is a matter of choice. Today, following the instructions of the Bible: *"My children, let's not love in words only, neither with the tongue only, but in deed and truth"* (1 John: 3, 18), we came here because we have made a choice: We have chosen peace over war, hope over despair, and love over hate.

†Chrysostomos II Archbishop of Cyprus

Holy Archbishopric of Cyprus,

August 1st, 2011.