

ADDRESS OF HIS BEATITUDE THE PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM AT THE UNITED NATIONS ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS IN NEW YORK

On Tuesday, 5th/18th July 2017, a conference with the title “The Role of Religious Leaders in Peace-building in the Middle East” took place at the Headquarters of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) in New York, with representatives of the United Nations, Islam, Judaism and Christians, as sited on the schedule of this event: UNAOC

His Beatitude our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos , having being invited as the representative of the Christians of the Holy Land and the Middle East, gave the address below:

His Beatitude Theophilos III

Patriarch of Jerusalem

18 July 2017

Mr Secretary General,

Mr. Al-Nasser,

Your Excellency Mr. Dastis,

Rabbi Melchior,

Distinguished Fellow Participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and a privilege for us to participate in this important gathering on peace-building in the Middle East. As the oldest continuous religious institution in the Holy Land, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem has long been committed to this mission, and we bring the experience of what we call the Greek *symbiosis* – live together in respectful co-existence – to the urgent task of finding new ways to establish and deepen a lasting peace in our region. There has never been a more crucial time for this work, and we applaud both the United Nations and the Alliance of Civilizations for your focus on this.

From our perspective, we would like to take this opportunity to articulate what we believe to be several foundational aspects to enduring peace-building in the Middle East.

The first point we wish to emphasize is in the title of this colloquium. The building of a lasting peace in the Middle East is not simply a matter of political will or expediency. Without a proper understanding of the role of religion and of the responsibility of religious leaders in this process, we shall continue to stumble in our efforts for peace. We cannot pretend that religion is not a factor in the complexity of our life, nor can we ignore the significant role that religious leaders across the board in the Middle East must play if peace is to be given a real chance of emerging from our present extreme difficulties.

To pretend that religion is not important, or to think of the religious aspects of our common life in the Middle East as an inconvenient distraction from what others see as purely a political or diplomatic exercise is naive, and undermining of genuine peace-building at worst. Our region cannot be separated from its religious character. It is a place of prophets and saints, a meeting place of the human with the divine, and a source of spiritual refreshment for the entire world. All of this transcends states and man-made authorities. We must articulate, and soon, a proper understanding of the

central role of religion and religious leaders in helping to create a new future for our region. The title of our meeting today, therefore, captures a truth of which we must not lose sight.

For generations in the Middle East, we have striven to find common ground on which all may stand – or perhaps better put – on which all may live in the full appreciation of our uniqueness as well as our shared heritage.

Once we accept the central importance of religion in the creation of a just and lasting peace in the Middle East, so much more falls into place.

We acknowledge our common faith that the Creator is One. However, we articulate our respective theologies, we are together the children of a great monotheistic tradition that is formative of the Abrahamic faiths, and unites different religious groups as this does, and while we have long recognized this phenomenon, we have never lived its fullness with respect to creating a society that completely appreciates its force for good.

From this common belief in the One God flow many other uniting factors. We understand each other's reverence for our Holy Books. We understand each other's commitment to our ancient and living sacred Tradition. We understand each other's formation in a liturgical life. We understand the strands of our life that are shaped by mysticism. We understand the instinct for personal and corporate prayer and piety. We understand the emphasis that we all have on the life of the community as a whole. And we understand the commitment that is deep in our respective traditions for the uniqueness and infinite value of the human person and the duty of service to our fellow human beings. While the details of our practise may vary, even within our respective groups, we recognise in each other these familiar aspects of our lives. This is of no small importance, and nor is this list complete.

Our understanding of our common humanity is derived from our faith in the One God. Our traditions witness. Our tradition witness the belief that we are created in the image and likeness of God, and the God has invested in each human being infinite worth and inalienable dignity. In our respective traditions, after our faith that God is One, next in importance is our doctrine of the human person. Our traditions share the conviction that each person is capable of an intimate and eternal relationship with God, and that God has created human beings for fruitful, intimate, mutual community, even across our God-given diversity.

For this understanding of our common humanity, which is not first and foremost a political or biological reality, but a fundamental theological truth, derives our commitment to the further truth that we share a common home. In the first instance, the earth is our common home, but with respect to our discussion today we must emphasise that the Middle East is the common home to Jews, Christians, and Muslims, as well as to other religious traditions and communities. Needless to say, this means also that we share a common history and a common culture.

This understanding of the Middle East as our common home is of supreme importance. We are all without distinction – Jew, Christian and Muslim – children of this Holy Land, and without, for a example, a robust and vibrant Christian community in the Middle East, the region would lose its authentic identity. We Christians are not merely inhabitants of the Holy Land. In Jerusalem, for example, which is the spiritual heart, the *intima*, or place of belonging as it is called in Arabic, we have had a special place and role for millennia.

As the heirs of sacred history a physical heritage, our unwavering mission has been to ensure that the Holy Places are open to all people regardless their ethnic, cultural, religious, or national identity. We ardently promote

inclusiveness, knowing full well that claims of exclusiveness always produce conflict, and do not do justice to our peace-loving and merciful God.

None of us are guests or intruders; our respective traditions were born in the Middle East, and we are natives of that land. As strange as it may be to have to be clear about this, there are still those who believe otherwise, and who resort to violence to attempt to make the Middle East a mono-cultural or mono-religious group. The Middle East has never been this.

And the last point that we wish to promote flows naturally from these considerations, for we share a common destiny. We share a common destiny with respect to the political, economic, cultural, and religious life of our region. But our Abrahamic traditions also attest that we share a common eternal destiny, a destiny in which Jerusalem, a city that is equally holy to us all, plays a significant spiritual and emotional role. Jerusalem is considered to be the spiritual capital of the whole world; the ceaseless flow of pilgrims who come on a daily basis is ample evidence of this.

As the Holy Land is home to us all, so too is Jerusalem. We many inhabit them, but in a real sense we can never possess them; rather they "possess" us they embrace us in this eternal destiny that demands that we find ways to live in peace, harmony, and mutual respect in this present life. This is what our reality demands of us. *For the Lord makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous* (Mat. 5:45).

When we stop to understand all that we share in common, we grow in respect for each other's symbols, practises, and daily lives. We begin to perceive each other's true humanity. In time, with patience and resolve, we begin to recognise ourselves in each other.

Here are the roots of true dialogue. In the Middle East,

dialogue is a way of life. It is not a theory, but a practise. With such dialogue we know that, especially in times of grave difficulty, enemies can become allies, and hatred can be turned into reconciliation.

In this regard, we call to mind one of the most significant events in our shared history; the famous covenant between the caliph Omar ibn Al-Khattab and Patriarch Sophronios, after Oman entered Jerusalem. The soil was fertile for a transformative and fruitful peace. They envisioned a future in which everyone could share in the sacredness and richness of the Holy Land, recognising a common father in Abraham. They were able to stand firm in the integrity of their respective identities and histories, thereby eschewing fear and embracing truth.

There are two approaches to knowing truth and seeing justice; the divine way, which is the ideal; and the human way, which is circumscribed by our shortcomings. Our approach is a pragmatic one, by which common sense and observable reality show the way. For as the Scriptures say, *Truth shall spring out of the earth; and righteousness shall look down from heaven* (Ps. 85:11).

This is the appropriate climate in which both the activity and the fruits of peace-building will ripen. We know this, because we have seen it before. We are always inspired, first by the prophets and revered personalities of our respective traditions, but also by the great leaders of the world now memorialised by all humanity. From their struggles and sometimes untimely deaths have sprung forth courage, peace, and progress, and they have inspired countless ordinary men and women, who in their local communities, where there has been violence and enmity, have been prepared to take risks for a new future – a new future of reconciliation.

The reconciliation of which we speak does not mean depriving each other of our national, cultural, or religious identities.

We readily admit that reconciliation demands sacrifice, but it does not demand the loss of our uniqueness. This is the path to realistic, mutually respectful co-existence, which is a far more enduring life than mere tolerance.”

From Secretariat-General

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