

PARTICIPATION OF H.H.B. THE PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM AT THE VI CONGRESS OF THE LEADERS OF THE WORLD AND TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS IN KAZAKHSTAN

From September 27/ October 10, to September 28/ October 11, 2018, His Beatitude the Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos III participated at the VI Congress of the Leaders of the World and Traditional Religions, which took place in the city of Astana in Kazakhstan, on the topic “Religious Leaders for a safe world”.

At this Congress, His Beatitude addressed the President of Kazakhstan, the members of the Congress and all present as follows;

“Your Excellency, Mr. Nursultan Nazarbayev, President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Your Excellency, Mr. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Head of the Secretariat of this Congress, Beloved Fellow Leaders of World and Traditional Religions,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We bring you greetings from the Holy City of Jerusalem, the City of Peace, and a city that is deeply cherished by the three Abrahamic faiths, and highly respected by people of good will all over the world.

Please allow us to express our deep admiration to Your Excellency, Mr. President, for your wisdom in establishing these Congresses. In doing this, Your Excellency, you have

shown to the world the truth that religion has a fundamental role in the establishment and sustaining of peace and harmony among all peoples. As we strive for peace, we cannot ignore the religious and spiritual sensibility, for this is deep in human nature. Not only is a proper understanding of the power of religious faith essential to the right ordering of the human community; but it is also the case that religious leaders have an undoubted role to play that cannot be ignored or delegated to others. We applaud this initiative and this commitment that you have shown.

We are reminded of the example of His Majesty King Abdullah II of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Along with many other activities and projects, His Majesty has established The World Interfaith Harmony Week, and this effort was adopted unanimously by the UN in 2010. Since that time, every February, the world interfaith movement is able to show to us the fruits of such interfaith co-operation and understanding, and awards are made to outstanding efforts of leadership in interfaith collaboration from around world.

Even as our world experiences terrible incidences of human cruelty, persecution, displacement, and violence, the movement to deeper harmonious co-existence across the divisions of religion gains strength. As religious leaders, it is our mission to support such endeavours with every possible means. And one of the greatest of these means is the subject of this Congress: the fostering of religious and spiritual leadership.

We know the crucial importance of leadership in every aspect of human society, whether it is in the political or civic sphere, or in education, or in business, or in our religious institutions and communities. Where particular endeavours flourish, it is because there is thoughtful, engaged, committed, and wise leadership. Where things are stagnant, where nothing seems to be working, and where there is the absence of hope, there is almost always a concomitant failure

of leadership.

We experience this everywhere, and in the Middle East we know first-hand the role of true leadership, especially as it pertains to the three Abrahamic faiths. As we have grown in our region in mutual respect and co-existence over many generations, we know of the impact that our common heritage and our common destiny have on the hearts and souls of our respective peoples and societies.

Here, we would like to emphasize three essential elements of religious leadership that contribute to a safe world for everyone.

We begin with these famous verses from the Bible:

Jesus said to his disciples, whom he appointed as the leaders of the Church. *"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven"* (Matthew 5:13-16).

There is so much wisdom for religious leadership in these few verses, and it is certain that *"the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom"* (Ps 111:10).

First, let us remind ourselves what we know to be true, but which we sometimes forget, that the most important matter to keep in mind is the most basic. The Almighty God himself is at the heart of all religions, and here is the first element of religious leadership. That is to say, religious leadership must always bear in mind that it is the Divine who is at the heart of our proclamation. God is our "common denominator", which means that God is the embodiment of the divine values of

love, compassion, and philanthropy. God exists in communion, with his creation and with human beings who have been created in his image and likeness. These values find their consummation of that divine peace *"which surpasses all understanding"* (Philippians 4:7).

The second aspect of religious leadership that we wish to emphasize is this. Because of the Divine Nature that is at the heart of the religious quest, it is not possible for religious leaders to speak or act in any way that is contrary to God's pure nature. As we read in the Epistle to Diognetus, *"there is no violence in God"*, and if there is no violence in God, there can be no violence in his servants, that is the religious leaders, and of course, by extension, their followers. Therefore, religious leaders are to be enlightened and guided by the Divine Spirit, and must always radiate these divine values.

Saint John makes this clear by stating, *"those who say, "I love God" and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also"* (1 John 4:20-21).

Thirdly, and finally, religious leaders must be guides of peace, preachers of peace, workers of peace, leading peaceful lives among themselves and among their neighbours. Once again the Holy Scriptures are eloquent on this matter. Let us listen to the Prophet Isaiah, *"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace (Isaiah 52:7)*, for as it has been mentioned, peace is at the heart of all religious traditions, because peace is at the heart of God himself. Peace, not violence nor bigotry, is the message of the Lord to the spiritual shepherds and to their flocks.

These three aspects lie at the heart of religious leadership that has the moral obligation of contributing to building a

world that is safe for all. We do not dismiss the fact that our world is not perfect. The task of religious leadership is extremely difficult at the present time, because by definition we have been called to lead our communities in a world that is subject to the influence of evil powers and wickedness, the evidence of which is all too plain for all to see.

Allow us to commend this Congress for addressing this urgent subject, and we express our gratitude to Your Excellency Mr. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and to the staff of the Secretariat for all your hard work to make this Congress possible.

May the God of peace and mercy give to all of us to whom the leadership of the world's religions has been entrusted, the strength, the wisdom, and the will to do all in our power, with God's grace and help, to enable the whole creation and all our peoples to live as God intended his creation to live – in mutuality, respect, and peace, fully aware of our common humanity, our common destiny, and our common identity as children of our loving Creator.

Thank you.”