

Faith and Reconciliation **What is the Future of Interfaith dialogue?**

Bishop Andrej of Remesiana, Serbian Orthodox Church:
Lessons Learned
Peć, 26 May 2013

I would like to welcome this joint reflection stimulated by the British-based charity *Soul of Europe*, here in the century-long famous town of Peć, about the topic of the future of interfaith relations, particularly the Christian, Muslim and Jewish relationships, because it expresses a hope that we can entrust to. In this name the Serbian Orthodox Church gladly accepted the invitation to this Conference and Consultation. Allow me to transmit to all of You the cordial greetings and prayerful wishes of His Holiness the Serbian Orthodox Patriarch Sir Irinej and also the compliments of the Holy Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church meeting just these days in Belgrade, preparing, inter alia, the festive celebrations for the important anniversary of the Edict of Milan, which will take place in the town of Niš in October.

Currently, the interfaith dialogue is happening under new conditions and perspectives. The correct knowledge about Judaism or Islam, based on scientific research results of the last 150 years, has removed serious misunderstandings, thus facilitating a more accurate definition of issues and a correct evaluation. However, even if the inter-religious dialogue certainly contributes to bridging long-standing misunderstandings, it remains quite natural to reach those boundaries where the three religious experiences radically differ. There our dialog can do nothing more than to calm and mainly to correct caricatures.

Among Christians, the attitude and willingness to interfaith initiatives have changed. Even if the dialogue sometimes seems difficult, we should not necessarily stop before problematic obstacles, because often the hard part is really important, the hard part is necessary for life. For God, nothing is impossible. Christians of today show in addition understanding and appreciation for the spiritual treasures that have been preserved by the Jews and Muslims. While in former times we may have raised mainly their negative elements and differences, today we emphasize what is positive, for instance, the common spiritual ground, the common spiritual experience. Christians can even discover again some points of forgotten religious highlights: a strong experience of God's transcendence, the obedience to God's will, a shuddering when we pray to God, a full psychosomatic mobilization during prayer etc.

On the other side, among the wide range of positions regarding the dialogue of religions there exists also a fear that interfaith encounters open gate and door to syncretism and relativism, or highlight the creation of a world religion, with the aim to build up the economic, social and cultural globalization, for the sake of those who regard the interfaith initiatives as obsolete or outdated, seeking to establish a worldwide union of religious communities. But if dialogue is understood as a response to the commandment of love by God, then between the inter-religious dialogue and the various religious or confessional witnesses can be no contradiction at all.

The divine blessing and the promise of God included all families of the earth, including the entire creation of God, and, consequently, including people of other religions and faiths. When God says to Abraham (in Genesis 12) *to go forth into the land that God will show him*, we see how God sends Abraham on his way to an unknown destination, detached and apart from all that served as the basis of his life, from his family and familiar social environment. Abraham's obedience, the Bible describes with the word *faith* (Gen 15,6). The way of Abraham is a prototype of the true kind of faith in God and His promises.

On this base it should be possible for the Churches and religious communities, by interfaith conversations, to agree on the structure of a human community. Regardless of the differences of the different existing “truths”, the inter-religious encounter in the future, should particularly focus on the question of a community that will be constantly characterized by religious pluralism. The different religious groups play here an irreplaceable role. This is a special call particularly for the ecumenical movement and for the interfaith initiatives in general, to promote the interests of the whole human community.

The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ exposes an understanding of freedom, for which the relatedness of mutual responsibility and accountability is practically constitutive. The inter-religious initiatives of today should contribute to social models of communicative and cooperative freedom. Freedom is a relational concept, whose key feature is the reciprocity. For the public discussion, the experience of interfaith dialogue is of highest importance, as it appears particularly that religious differences and contrasts can become factors of intensifying social conflicts. Churches and religious communities can be drawn into ethnic and national conflicts, and thus become, often even unwillingly, a problem factor rather than a tool of peace. In the context of inter-religious encounter and dialogue, particularly religious leaders are called to be committed to withdraw any moral and ethical legitimation of the use of force as responses to conflicts for the sake of political, national, economical, cultural or even religious objectives. In addition to the appeal for peace and interfaith understanding, it is necessary in this sense to clarify the problem of the relationship between religion and violence. From the theological perspective, violence is a manifestation of evil. Animals for example, even the worst ones, have an instinctive resistance not to kill members of their own species. In every human, violent behaviour is an ability, which can be activated at any time. The religions are invited to understand the origin of this potential for violence in human nature and to formulate rules that restrain the use of force.

For the inter-religious initiatives, the central obligation remains to accept the plurality of religions. A dialogue is not only an exchange of thoughts and ideas, but a giving and a taking in the broad sense. The dialogue, as a symbol of life in community, is both a gift and a calling. In our common search for the truth, our self-examination can lead us to a dialogue of conscience and from there to a dialogue of mutual forgiveness and tolerance. The experience of an increasing awareness of religious pluralism with its importance for public life is an urgent challenge, to open a greater mutual understanding and intensive cooperation among people of different faiths.

Today we shall face the challenges of our modern era, no longer in confrontation, but having on mind the new points of our times, opening ourselves to the thorny problems which the future world deposits before us, such as in matters of secularism, or the depersonalization of society, the destruction of the natural environment, callings for universal justice and peace, callings for a common philanthropic commitment with joint initiatives to protect the life and dignity of the people, to protest against hunger and oppression, to shape better our social order and safeguard international coexistence, especially today in this troubled region of Kosovo and Metochia.

The common faith of Jews, Christians and Muslims in the merciful and gracious God is the heart of our shared responsibility in a humanity that seems increasingly threatened by the danger of forgetting God and turn away from Him towards Whom humanity is created. We should feel united in the disempowerment of all claims for absolute powers in the world and for the liberation of the people from their systems and slavery into the freedom that God reveals to us by His creation and revelation. This service believing people owe to mankind. The power of truth will create unexpected hopes in the blind alley.

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