

Welcoming the Other – a Multi-religious Vision of Peace

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“Welcoming the other – a multi-religious vision of peace” is an extremely current issue in the world today.

Wars, conflicts, disputes caused by ethnic, political and economic divisions; terrorism.

The increasing number of migrants fleeing from situations of insecurity, oppressions and poverty, searching for a better future, create one of the most currently discussed social phenomena. The recent Lampedusa offshore tragedy in Italy upset the public opinion on the European Union’s contribution to the immigration problem.

However, such situations mustn’t distract our attention from distinguishing signs of hope. There are many initiatives of individuals and institutions that aim at building common foundations for a harmonious coexistence.

The interreligious and intercultural dialogues emerge as important means for this goal. We mustn’t forget that peace is first of all found in people’s hearts, where feelings that may nourish or suffocate it may arise.

In fact, inviting the faithful to a day of fasting and prayer for peace in Syria, in the Middle East and throughout the world, Pope Francis added, *“It is for peace in our hearts too, because peace begins in the heart!”*¹

Yes, it’s necessary to convert our heart. This is where the crucial role of the religions comes in. From deep within, they must offer the spiritual strength to lead humanity towards solidarity and peace. They must carry out initiatives able to renew relationships not only on an individual level but also between people of different races, nationalities and culture. In this way they contribute in building a peaceful coexistence that may be guaranteed if men and women learn to treat one another as brothers and sisters.

This vision of brotherhood is not a new idea. Great spiritual personalities from different corners of the earth, like Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King, affirmed that this brotherhood is written in the heart of every human being.

Mahatma Gandhi said, *“Through realization of freedom of India, I hope to realize and carry on the mission of brotherhood of man.”*²

Martin Luther King, in his famous speech “I have a dream,” cried out his hope that *“one day ... the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.”*³

Chiara Lubich, foundress of the Focolare Movement, whom I represent today and who fully supported *Religions for Peace*, spent her whole life so as to build unity of the human family, in the richness of each person’s diversity. Very many people throughout the world were drawn to commit themselves for this goal.

Chiara took this inspiration from Jesus’ prayer. Before dying he asked God, *“that they may all be one”* (John 17:21).

Since the beginning of the Movement, taking from Chiara’s teachings and example, we see every person, those who are different from us, as travelling companions, brothers or sisters. Without them we cannot present ourselves to God.

Chiara first of all invites us to have a “simple eye”, to look at all of humanity from the point of unity, from One. She wrote: *“We must fix our gaze always on the one Father of so many children, and then consider all creatures as children of that one Father. ... Turning constantly to this universal brotherhood in God who is our Father.”*⁴

Love of neighbour therefore is not rooted in any kind of philanthropy, but in the fact that we are all children of one Father. And, if we are children of the same Father, then we are all brothers and sisters to one another.

We recognize each person as a child of God and – for us Christians – especially as the son of God: Jesus himself, who presents himself to us in our neighbour and asks us to love him in a concrete way, in the little things of our daily life, in the normality of every present moment, as well as in the great or extraordinary things, as has happened now in the disaster that has hit the Philippines.

Here are two experiences:

A family of the Movement with two teenage children transferred to a small town in the south of Vienna where 25% of the population are immigrants. Violent clashes broke out between young people for racial motives. Fear and distrust grew among the people, and the children of this family thought they would have to buy a gun to defend themselves.... But the parents, together with others who share the spirit of brotherhood, carried out various activities to promote a fraternal coexistence, with the participation of the city’s immigration office. Just when Christians and Muslims began to work together, a wing of the cathedral, symbol of the city, was set on fire by a young Muslim. Without losing heart, they organized together a multi-religious prayer event, including an activity to raise funds for the reconstruction of the destroyed part. The profound recollection and praise to God were tangible. Brotherhood touched the people’s hearts and all had contributed.

In Syria, while war rages and hatred grows, many families leave the country in search of work and a better future. Nevertheless, there are signs of peace and hope.

A young fashion designer committed herself to bring ahead projects of teaching women evacuees to sew, so as to help them find a job in order to support their families. In 2012, 45 women enrolled for the course. They belonged to all the different faiths present in the country (Sunnites, Shiites, Christians, Alawites, Druze) and of various political tendencies. There were very evident tensions between them, they even refused to stay in the same place. It was also difficult for her to always truly love, but she read in the Gospel that God *“makes the sun rise on the good and the bad”* and He loves us without any discrimination, so she should also make no distinction between people. As weeks passed, these women started to talk to each other, to accept their differences and to overcome their diversities, which were instead emphasized in their country outside that center. They shared worries and sufferings; they began to help one another also financially so as to meet the needs of each one. On the feast of Ramadan, the Christian women prepared a little party for the Muslims. The Muslims did the same at Christmas.

We would also like to be a tangible sign of God's love in the world, wherever we are or we could be, trying to bring love where it is lacking, to completely absorb every division, every absence of unity which tears the human community apart, in order to build bridges that unite everyone, everywhere.

Chiara wrote: *“Give me all who are lonely. ... My God, let me be in this world the tangible sacrament of your Love, of your being Love: let me be your arms that press to themselves and consume in love all the loneliness of the world”*.⁵

Only with a passion like hers can we hope to make all men and women of the earth become one family.

Thank you!

¹ Pope Francis, General Audience of 4 September 2013.

² Found in: <http://www.thoughtaudio.com/titlelist/TA0031-Gandhi/GANDHI-QUOTES.pdf> “Sayings of Mahatma Gandhi” p.22

³ MARTIN LUTHER KING, “I Have A Dream...”, Speech at the ‘March on Washington’ (Copyright 1963) found in: <http://www.archives.gov/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf> p.4

⁴ C. LUBICH, *When Our Love is Charity, Spiritual Writings, Volume 2*, New City Press, New York 1991, p.13.

⁵ C. LUBICH, *Essential Writings*, Rome 2008, p. 81-82.