

Address By

His All Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew I

9th World Assembly: Religions for Peace

Mobilizing Action for Human Dignity, Citizenship and Shared Well-Being

(Vienna, 22 November 2013)

**“How good and how pleasant it is
for brothers and sisters to dwell together in unity.” (Psalm 133.1)**

Your Excellencies;

Your Eminences;

Distinguished guests;

Ladies and gentlemen;

On the occasion of the 9th World Assembly facilitated by Religions for Peace, we bring you greetings of love and peace from the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the first See of the Orthodox Church. We are honored to be with you in Vienna, and we give thanks to God for the opportunity to address this esteemed assembly.

We extend a sincere thanks to the planning committee for inviting us to share our thoughts about working together for human dignity and peace. Before us we have an example of peace in the making: Religions for Peace and the King

Abdullah International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) have already demonstrated the ability to mobilize and collaborate to make this week of meetings a reality.

This inspires us to recall the wisdom of an ancient Psalm: “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers and sisters to dwell together in unity”! The ultimate goal of this assembly is to create a new paradigm to embrace the essence of peace and unity, which exists in all of humanity. Indeed, “how good and pleasant” that day will be when we experience such fellowship, where everyone will be free to worship God in their own way. Let us leave this place today and walk the path toward that peace.

Last November, we took a step along that path when we were gathered in this very city for the inauguration of the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue. Looking back today, there have been many accomplishments on our journey toward peace since that gathering. Furthermore, just a few weeks after our address in Vienna last year, we released an encyclical calling for 2013 to be the “Year of Global Solidarity.” The need to do so was increasingly clear:

We discriminate against one another by means of fanaticism with regard to religious and political convictions, by means of greed in the acquisition of

material goods, and through expansionism in the exercise of political power. These are the reasons why we come into conflict with one another.

We are not the first generation of humanity to face such challenges. In 313 of the Christian Era, emperors Constantine and Licinius met face-to-face for a dialogue on the injustice of persecuting minority religions. Three centuries of murder and discrimination had become detrimental to all peoples living in those societies. As a result, the Edict of Milan was signed into law, granting freedom of religion to all members of their respective communities. The document itself tells us the story behind its creation: “. . . for the sake of peace in our times, that each one may have the free opportunity to worship as one pleases; this regulation is made that we may not seem to detract from the dignity of any religion . . .”

“For the sake of peace in our times,” we too call for the “free opportunity to worship” as one pleases. This fundamental human right is the cornerstone for building solidarity between peoples and nations. It is the most essential element for building peace. We must allow individuals to worship God freely and without reprisals. We cannot pretend that we respect the dignity of another human being, if we do not allow them to worship God peacefully.

Seventeen centuries have come and gone since the Edict of Milan was enacted. Yet, unfortunately, the world remains vulnerable to the same temptation of denying others their basic human right of freedom of worship. In recent months,

the intensity and frequency of persecution against minority faiths has increased in virtually every corner of the planet.

Certainly, demands for tolerance from all religious leaders and peoples are needed; however something more remains: namely, loving our neighbor. Merely tolerating one another only further emphasizes the pervasive goal of dominance. If one must tolerate the other, the one tolerated is viewed as less valuable than the one who tolerates. This is a great deception and danger. We believe that religious leaders must move . . . beyond mere tolerance . . . to love. When we embrace and welcome ‘the other’ with genuine concern and love – as if ‘the other’ is our very own neighbor and our very self! – then we have the foundation for creating lasting peace in the world.

To love another is to welcome them into your life and ‘home.’ To love another is to prevent their harm through discrimination and contempt. It is to end aggression and war. When our ‘enemy’ becomes important and invaluable to us; when our ‘enemy’ is regarded as a reflection of ourselves, we no longer face an enemy, but a neighbor, a friend, an ally. When neighbors join together to seek the benefit of ‘the other,’ we begin to live in solidarity with all humanity.

Daily news reports would lead us to believe we have nothing but ‘enemies.’ However, there are glimmers of hope that have emerged this year, in spite of the great difficulties that have been presented. For example, this year, the King

Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue has begun a process of examining the “Image of the Other” through regional workshops. These workshops have explored shared values and best practices for educating people about dialogue and peace. This flagship program will be continued in the coming years.

Moreover, this past March, an outstanding effort towards protecting vulnerable children in Uganda was undertaken through a strategic partnership between KAICIID and Religions for Peace. This effort is literally saving the lives of Uganda’s children through basic nutrition and health education. We are all sharing in the well-being of Uganda when we care for her children.

In April of this year, Religions for Peace convened a meeting of diverse Syrian religious leaders, who established a Religions for Peace Council in Syria. This was a courageous step initiated in a place where peace is so grievously threatened.

In September, His Holiness Pope Francis called a peace vigil for the nation of Syria to call attention to the strife and bloodshed there. He reminded the nations “War always marks the failure of peace, it is always a defeat for humanity.”

And today, we are gathered here, together again, in this city. We are shoulder-to-shoulder, standing for those things we believe in, and calling for a new