

PAX CHRISTI INTERNATIONAL
Bethlehem - May 13, 2015
Bethlehem Hotel
17, 00-19, 00

Pilgrims on the path of peace.

**“The Quest for Peace and Justice in the Middle East:
The role of the religious traditions.”**

Jesus said: *“I have told you this so that you may find peace in me. In the world you will find hardship, but be courageous: I have redeemed the world”* (Jn 16,33).

Jesus speaks about the world; it is a special concept in the words of Jesus. The world is always the world of God, created by God and loved by him, it is the world on which *“He causes his sun to rise on the bad as well as on the good and send down rain to fall on the upright and the wicked alike”* (Mt 5: 45).

But, in the words of Jesus, it is rather a reality to fight against in order to transform it in a good reality. Which is difficult. But Jesus told us: *“Be courageous, I have redeemed the world”*.

What is the role of the religious leaders in the quest for peace in the Middle East? In our Middle East, there is a world to fight against, forces of evil, world political planning based upon interests, not upon human values, interests that are ready to make wars, and sacrifice peoples. Indeed, what is going on in the Middle East, in these days, is due to internal factors, distorted religious education, that gave birth to irrational religious extremism. But this irrational extremism is manipulated and exploited by the political powers of this world.

The quest of peace in the Middle East supposes a double fight, one against ourselves, against a genuine narrow or deviated idea of religion, against religious extremism, against a religion that instead of worshiping God and loving all God's creatures, becomes worshiping oneself, or ones' own group or community, and hence killing others who are not viewed as God's creature, but people outside the group, hence considered as enemies. This is the first struggle against ourselves in the region and our deviated narrow human concept of religion.

But the quest of peace in the Middle East is also a fight against the political powers of the world, who are making new plans for a new

Middle East, and are exploiting this religious extremism to be one of their means to achieve their new planning for a new Middle East. So those who kill today in the Middle East are two: religious extremism, or extremist Islam, and the world powers who pretend to fight this extremism, and in reality they use it and give it space to kill.

In both domains, the first, true concept of religion, and the second, the exploitation of religious extremism by the world powers, the fight is very difficult.

The role of religions can be built nevertheless on the words of Jesus: *"Be courageous, I have redeemed the world"*. These two forces, religious extremism and the world political powers are not invincible, because they are not totally evil; they also are "redeemed". We keep fighting, having in mind the redemption of all. Islam also says: God is bigger (Allahu Akbar), greater, more powerful than any world power, So religions, and enlightened religious leaders can have confidence and lead the fight, on the two fronts: against religious extremism and against world political powers based on egoistic national interests.

In Syria and Iraq now, both agents, extremism and hypocritical world powers, are in synchronized action, not seriously and truly fighting each other. Here in Palestine and Israel, religious extremism is also used whether in the concept of the Jewish state or in the same concept of the Islamic state. The role of true religious leaders, Jews, Christians and Moslems, is to liberate religion and religious people and help them see God so that they may be able to see the other as creature of God, to be loved as God loves him. Religious leaders are to be educated and to educate others. Because, according to the religious education they give, religious leaders can educate true believers and peacemakers or wild killers and wars.

Religious people have this power to educate this type or that in our modern society. Both powers, religious leaders and political leaders, need to be enlightened by the spirit of God, in order to see as God sees, so they will be able to educate true and good human beings, instead of educating killers or ambitions sacrificing peoples for self-interests.

Many dialogue groups or structures exist here in Israel/Palestine, Christians Moslems and Jews. I can quote among them, as we are gathered this evening here in Bethlehem, the Kairos Palestine, though seen in contradictory ways: but, whatever may be the contradictions,

it is a true instrument of dialogue and an authentic Christian voice in our troubled and conflict situation. All these dialogues are at work. If they are not efficient, at least they are a symbol of the fundamental goodness put by God in His creatures. They are a sign of hope.

Same structures of dialogue exist all over the world, Pax Christi is one, Various commissions or groups acting for Justice and Peace, as well. They are acting. The world of evil of which Jesus speaks in St John still exists: but in this world exists also the goodness of God. Our hope is based on God's goodness and might. Therefore we go on in our fight. The life of any human being is a fight with oneself to be a true human being as good as God created him, and a fight for the wider universe in which he lives, and to which he is mandated to confirm the good and fight the evil. And as God is patient, sending sun and rain, to all, we too enter in the patience of God, and continue our fight for goodness, justice and peace, here in Palestine/Israel, in Syria and Iraq, in all the Middle East, and in all the world, always encouraged by the words of Jesus: *"I have told you this so that you may find peace in me. In the world you will find hardship, but be courageous: I have redeemed the world"* (Jn 16, 33).

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