

PAX CHRISTI INTERNATIONAL AWARD

Brussels, October 31st, 2012.

Acceptance Speech

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Blessed be the Lord God of heaven and earth, the Father of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords and Prince of Peace. May his holy Name be praised now and for ever. Amen.

1. I thank the Board of Pax Christi for the great honour it has decided to accord me by appointing me its Peace Award Laureate for this year 2012. I am all the more grateful in that I am not too familiar with the organization, even though I have been hearing of the good work that it is doing all over the world. This has been a most pleasant surprise for me. I have received not a few recognitions and honours in my rather fortunate space of life. But a “Pax Christi” award is for me most valuable precisely because of its name which recalls and confirms our faith in Jesus Christ, who is our Peace and Reconciliation. I thank those who have recommended me for the prize. They are unknown to me, but God knows them and will thank them for me. I want them to know that this will encourage me to continue in my efforts to work for peace in line with the spirit of the motivation for the award.
2. My surprise is mainly because I find myself being commended for doing what is most natural to me, what I believe I should be doing. And I want to confess here that in all I have been doing to promote peace and harmony, I have had to cope with very little inconvenience or hardship. I have generally met with good will in most quarters. Of course, when I see situations of conflict and disharmony causing unnecessary hurts and pains, I feel very sad. Every report of violent bloodshed in my country Nigeria fills me with

deep sorrow. But in every situation, one can always thank God for his gift of peace and tranquillity in most of our nation, outside the few and restricted theatres of conflict and violence, and most of the time, except the truly exceptional occasions when the Devil seems to get the upper hand.

3. I am encouraged by the convictions that move me, which include the following:
 - a) The first is my deep faith in God who is the powerful Creator and loving Father of all humanity, irrespective of creed, nationality or social status. This God is a God of Peace who abhors discord and hatred, dishonesty and oppression. My faith reveals Him to me as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, who has given us a promise which is also a charge: “Blessed are the peace makers: they shall be called children of God.” There can be no greater motivation to work for peace. I was born and bred in this faith, to parents who had deep confidence and transparent trust in God the Almighty Father. They also taught me both by words and practical example to respect the faith convictions of others, and to acknowledge goodness wherever it is found. I cannot thank God enough for the gift of my family.
 - b) I am also inspired and guided by the directives of the Church to which I am proud to belong. I started my study of Catholic theology during the last session of the Vatican Council II, in October 1965. I grew and matured in my knowledge of the faith in the spirit of that Council and of subsequent pronouncement of the teaching office of the Catholic Church, which we call the “*magisterium*”. I have derived my attitude to inter-faith relations from the teaching contained in documents such as *Nostra Aetate* and *Lumen Gentium* of Vatican II, and especially papal exhortations issued after the two sessions of the Synod of

Bishops for Africa, *Ecclesia in Africa*, (1995) of Pope John Paul II and *Africae Munus*, (2011) of Pope Benedict XVI. My interfaith encounters and experience have been mainly with Muslims with whom I live my daily life in Nigeria. The Church has challenged me to seek for and discover in every true believer that “Light which enlightens every person” coming into this world. I can sincerely say that this has been for me a most exciting and rewarding project.

- c) It is along these lines that I have discovered what a great amount of common grounds we all share at all levels of our human existence. It is very sad to observe that there are people who tend to define themselves in terms of where and how they differ from others. They do not seem to know that by so doing, they are defining themselves in terms of what they are not. It is true that no two people are exactly the same. But what we share with all other human beings is far more important than our specific traits. On the physical level, our colour, for example, is only skin deep. Even on the spiritual level, we often overlook the great values that we share, beyond and beneath the differences in our languages and doctrinal formulations. When we are able to discover our common grounds, then shall we be able to celebrate the beauty of our diversities and successfully work at reconciling our apparent contrasts and conflicts.
- d) Another conviction which I have consistently found valid is that the vast majority of people are normal persons like me. In situations of conflict, there is often a large silent majority which only wants to go about their lives in peace, but which often gets drafted into taking belligerent positions by a vocal dangerous minority with extremist agenda. The challenge is to build on the foundation of the good will of the majority, get the silent majority to abandon its silence and speak out and put together a vocal critical mass of peacemakers.

4. In the light of the above, I see some urgent tasks ahead of us as we face our fast evolving world scenario.

a) Humanity is moving inexorably towards one global village.

Technology is making us all neighbours of one another. Fast transportation and immediate communication means that there is no more distant stranger. This process, often called “globalization”, is fraught with both dangers and possibilities. Among the possibilities is the fact that humanity can now truly become the one human community and family which God created it to be. We just have to find better ways of living together in peace across the globe.

b) There are many causes of conflict among peoples and nations. It is a pity that in human history religion too has often been drafted into conflicts over other competing interests. This is the history of “holy wars” by whatever name. It is sometimes true heroism to die for a good cause and for God’s sake. That is what genuine martyrs do. But it should no longer ever be acceptable to kill “in the name of God”. Pope John Paul II called this a grievous sin of blasphemy. A God that needs me to kill people in his defence is not worthy of my worship. If we can succeed in liberating religion from manipulation for other interests, then will it be able to play its positive role of reconciling people in conflict where other efforts fail.

c) Christianity and Islam boast of having the largest numbers of adherents in our world today, covering almost every part of our planet. It is about time that these two faiths seriously assume the special responsibility which they have for peace in our world. They will not be able to do this if they do not work for peace with one another. Each of these two religions claims to have a divine mandate to spread all over the world and embrace the entire humanity. We

have to find ways of carrying out this divine mandate while at the same time living in peace with our neighbour, which is also a divine commandment. This is by no means a futile project.

- d) Globalization means that plurality of religions is now the order of the day. This calls for a greater emphasis on the common citizenship of all who belong to the same nation. Where the rights and duties of every citizen are respected and promoted, there is more likelihood of a peaceful nation. Those who pretend that they do not have citizens who belong to other religions need to recognise the real situation around them.
- e) Thus the rights of religious and other minorities must be respected as fundamental human rights. After the right to life itself is the right to freedom of conscience. This includes the right to practice a religion that one freely chooses. In an international community where the rights of rhinos and forests are defended with all vigour, it is a great and sad mystery that the right of human beings to be human is in many places considered negotiable or denied outright!
- f) We must thank God for the phenomenal progress that humanity has attained in the technological field. This has put tremendous power and skill in human hands. There is need for a similar progress in moral awareness and judgment to guide humanity in the proper use of this technology for the common good of everyone. Unless this is done, and done quickly, we run a high risk of destroying ourselves. This is clear enough in the area of war and peace. We are sitting on vast stock-piles of weapons of mass destruction that can go off at any time. It is the height of stupidity to keep accumulating weapons that one does not expect to use under any circumstance. When will they ever learn?

g) It used to be said that “*Si vis pacem, para bellum*” (If you want peace, prepare for war). This is the grave lie which has led to many wars down through the ages. Pope Paul VI offered a different recipe for peace when he said: “If you want peace, work for justice”. Most wars have been caused by injustice or perceptions thereof. Working for justice is certainly hitting at the root cause of war. Pope John Paul II however carried this further by adding another dimension to the equation: “If you want peace, learn to forgive”. In our concrete living conditions, it is very difficult to make full justice reign. Very often, we need to accept less than full justice, for the sake of peace. Forgiveness, solidarity, sharing, reconciliation: these are the concepts that the Servant of God, John Paul II offered to humanity as the most effective way to achieve and maintain peace.

Conclusion:

The way to peace can be long and tortuous. But it is nevertheless a necessary way to go if our world is to avoid destroying itself. As we make our feeble efforts, we are encouraged to know that this is the direction that God himself is leading his world, to his kingdom of justice, love and peace.

Mechelen, 31 October 2012

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