

Intervention
by
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Permanent Observer of the Holy See to UNESCO
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Venerable Masters,
Excellencies.
Ladies and Gentlemen.

I really thank the Ambassador of Sri Lanka for inviting me and allow me to take part to a so important celebration.

Let me start my speech by reading the Message for the Feast of Vesakh in which H.Em Jean-Louis Tauran wrote: "Dear Buddhist friends, In the name Pontifical Council for interreligious Dialogue I wish to once again extend to all of you our/my heartfelt best wishes on the occasion of *Vesakh*."

My cordial greetings this year are inspired by Pope Francis' Message for the World Day of Peace 2014, entitled *Fraternity, the Foundation and Pathway to Peace*. There, Pope Francis observes that "fraternity is an essential human quality, for we are relational beings. A lively awareness of our relatedness helps us to look upon and to treat each person as a true sister or brother; without fraternity it is impossible to build a just society and a solid and lasting peace..." (n. 1).

Dear friends, your religious tradition inspires the conviction that friendly relations, dialogue, the sharing of gifts, and the respectful and harmonious exchange of views lead to attitudes of kindness and love which in turn generate authentic and fraternal relationships. You are also convinced that the root of all evil is the ignorance and misunderstanding born of greed and hatred, which in turn destroy the bonds of fraternity. Unfortunately, "daily acts of selfishness, which are at the root of so many wars and so much injustice", prevent us from seeing others "as beings made for reciprocity, for communion and self-giving" (*Message for World Day of Peace 2014*, n. 2). Such selfishness inevitably leads to seeing others as a threat.

As Buddhists and Christians, we live in a world all too often torn apart by oppression, selfishness, tribalism, ethnic rivalry, violence and religious fundamentalism, a world where the "other" is treated as an inferior, a nonperson, or someone to be feared and eliminated if possible. Yet, we are called, in a spirit of cooperation with other pilgrims and with people of good will, to respect and to defend our shared humanity in a variety of socioeconomic, political and religious contexts. Drawing upon our different religious convictions, we are called especially to be *outspoken* in denouncing all those social ills which damage fraternity; to be *healers* who enable others to grow in selfless generosity, and to be *reconcilers* who

break down the walls of division and foster genuine brotherhood between individuals and groups in society.

Our world today is witnessing a growing sense of our common humanity and a global quest for a more just, peaceful and fraternal world. But the fulfilment of these hopes depends on recognition of universal values. We hope that interreligious dialogue will contribute, in the recognition of the fundamental principles of universal ethics, to fostering a renewed and deepened sense of unity and fraternity among all the members of the human family. Indeed, "each one of us is called to be an artisan of peace, by uniting and not dividing, by extinguishing hatred and not holding on to it, by opening paths to dialogue and not by constructing new walls! Let us dialogue and meet each other in order to establish a culture of dialogue in the world, a culture of encounter!" (Pope Francis, *To Participants in the International Meeting for Peace, Sponsored by the Community of "Sant' Egidio"*, 30 September 2013).

Dear friends, to build a world of fraternity, it is vitally important that we join forces to educate people, particularly the young, to seek fraternity, to live in fraternity and to dare to build fraternity. We pray that your celebration of *Vesakh* will be an occasion to rediscover and promote fraternity anew, especially in our divided societies. Once again allow us to express our heartfelt greetings and to wish all of you a *Happy Feast of Vesakh*."

Now, let me propose my contribution: the difference between the dialogue and a mere and simple talk is given by the investment of our existence within a relation, by availability to get from a relation the deepness of a person (with his religion and culture) and how much of myself and of my existence is involved within a relation.

The dialogue is an "event of truth" (Heidegger), not only a hearing the other but above all a concrete engagement with the other for truth and peace. Of course, it is important to underline that the dialogue is something uninterrupted, something continuous, never over, because a formulation of truth can never be considered final, definitive, perfectly concluded.

This premise allows me to propose a short reflection on "the added values of dialogue between cultures and religions".

I will focus on the following two: 1) the renewed awareness and understanding of one's own self and/or culture, and 2) dialogue as a means of mutual understanding.

Where do we find ourselves? We noticed that our world is increasingly marked by tensions and conflicts which have cultural dimensions. I believe that as human persons, we have an important responsibility to be "artisans of peace". All of us, we are called to be intelligent and respectful participants in dialogue. There are many dialogues which happen between notable cultural icons or at some level in the upper echelons of social hierarchies, but what about everyday people? Are they we not also representatives of our culture and society? Yes, they are! Therefore I propose some suggestion for everybody dispel misapprehensions and to give an objective and informed appraisal of cultural identities.

The first added value of dialogue between religions and between cultures is self-awareness. People who engage in the process of inter-cultural dialogue are very often quite conscious of their identity and sensitive to their surroundings. Whether arriving to this point either prior to taking part in a dialogue or gaining this insight through the process itself, it is a benefit for all of society. For those who already have some kind of self-awareness, they usually find something new about themselves. As I understand it, dialogue is not a mere conversation of “you speak/I listen” and “I speak/you listen;” rather it is a deeper and meaningful interaction between the stakeholders. Dialogue between cultures, therefore, draws us toward the healthy practice of introspection at the collective and personal levels because one cannot truly enter into a dialogue without introspection. In fact when we engage in dialogue, not only did we discover something new about our counterparts, but we are able appreciate our culture in a new light.

The second added value of dialogue is with the dialogue we have a means of mutual understanding. With the dialogue of life you can spend more time with each other a fraternal spirit was building, so too the bonds of trust. This allowed for deeper exchanges.

Clearly a dialogue of this nature only touches upon the experience of individuals and not to an overarching generalization of an entire culture, nor does it enter into questions of theology and dogma. The point here is that while the participants were of different faith traditions, they were able to see that the experience between what ought to happen and what actually takes place also exists in another culture. Coming to realize that someone who was thought to have been different is actually quite similar is a powerful realization in terms of overcoming barriers. The distance between the stakeholders is bridged with this experience and knew knowledge. The result of this process of interpersonal exchange was that each participant painted a more human face of his/her counterpart and not simply pre-categorising them as X, Y, or Z based on what they had previously known about the other.

In conclusion, I firmly believe that if dialogue between cultures is to be effective, we need to expand dialogue opportunities beyond the big names and symbolic gestures. We need to promote it at all levels, but most especially at the grassroots level. This is a large goal to accomplish; and a necessary one which cannot be ignored. Taking note of how susceptible young people can be in terms of the exploitation of cultural differences by ideologues intent on swaying people to their causes, this is a crucial aspect to consider in achieving peaceful coexistence in multi-cultural societies. It is necessary for young people to have the necessary tools to comprehend, analyze, and act accordingly for a better world. So I close with a call to UNESCO, its member states, and to NGOs for an increase in support for inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue, in particular one which engages young people.

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