



**To Participants in the Plenary Assembly
of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue
(28 November 2013)**

Your Eminences,
Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am pleased to meet with you in the context of your Plenary Session: I extend to each of you a most cordial welcome and thank Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran for the words he addressed to me on your behalf.

The Catholic Church is aware of the value inherent in the promotion of friendship and respect between men and women of different religious traditions. We understand more and more its importance, both because the world, in some way, has become "smaller", and because the phenomenon of migration increases the contact among individuals and communities of different traditions, cultures, and religions. This reality interpellates our Christian conscience; it is a challenge to the understanding of our faith and the concrete life of the local Churches, of the parishes and for many believers .

The theme of your meeting is, therefore, of particular relevance: "Members of different religious traditions in civil society." As I stated in the Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, "an attitude of openness in truth and in love must characterize the dialogue with the followers of non-Christian religions, in spite of various obstacles and difficulties, especially forms of fundamentalism on both sides." (n . 250). In fact, we are not without situations in the world where coexistence is difficult: often political or economic reasons superimpose themselves on cultural and religious differences, leveraging also on misunderstandings and mistakes of the past: anything that is likely to generate suspicion and fear. There is only one way to overcome this fear, and that is dialogue, an encounter marked by friendship and respect. When you walk this path, then you can say it is a human one!

Dialogue does not mean giving up one's own identity when one encounters the other, nor is it compromising on faith and Christian morality. On the contrary, " ...true openness involves remaining steadfast in one's deepest convictions, clear and joyful in one's own identity," (ibid. , 251) and therefore open to understand others , capable of respectful human relations , convinced that the meeting with those who are different from us can be an opportunity for growth in fraternity, in enrichment and in witness. It is for this reason that interreligious dialogue and evangelization are not mutually exclusive, but nourish each other. We do not impose anything, we do not use any underhanded strategy to attract the faithful, but witness with joy and simplicity to what we believe and who we are. In fact, a meeting in which each puts aside what he believes in, pretending to give up what is most precious, certainly would not be an authentic relationship . In this case one could speak of a false fraternity. As disciples of Jesus we must strive to overcome fear, be always ready to take the first step, without becoming discouraged in the face of difficulties and misunderstandings.

The constructive dialogue between people of different religious traditions also serves to overcome another fear, which, unfortunately, we find increasing in the more strongly secularized societies: fear of the different religious traditions and of the religious dimension in and of itself. Religion is seen as something useless or even dangerous; in some instances it is mandated that Christians renounce their religious and moral convictions in the exercise of their profession (cf. Benedict XVI, *Address to the Diplomatic Corps*, Jan. 10, 2011). It is widely thought that coexistence is possible only by hiding one's religious identity, encountering others in a kind of neutral space, devoid of references to transcendence. But here, too, how would it be possible to create true relationships, build a society that is an authentic common home, by requiring that one put aside what he or she considers to be an intimate part of his or her being? It is not possible to think of fraternity "in a laboratory." Of course, it is necessary that everything proceed with respect to the beliefs of others, even those who do not believe, but we must have the courage and the patience to encounter each other for who we are. The future lies in the respectful coexistence of diversity, not in the uniformity of a single thought, theoretically neutral. We have seen throughout history the tragedy of the uniformity of thoughts. It therefore becomes essential to recognize the fundamental right to religious freedom, in all its dimensions. The Church's Magisterium has spoken with great commitment on this in recent decades. We are convinced that this is the way of building peace in the world.

I thank the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue for the valuable service it performs, and I invoke upon each of you an abundance of the Lord's blessing.

Thank you