



**Inter-religious dialogue,
the source of harmony, unity and the good of society**

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Honorable Minister of Religious Affairs, Honorable Minister of Cultural Affairs, Your Excellencies, Ambassadors of various countries, distinguished speakers gathered at this table, ladies and gentlemen.

1. I would be remiss if I did not begin this talk by thanking the organizers of this event for inviting me to participate in this Conference, devoted to the question of inter-religious relations. In recent years, this area of the life of the human family has assumed a significance which is leading to many positive and constructive steps in establishing harmony among people of religion.

I am happy to say from the very beginning of this speech that Bangladesh must be considered as an example of how it is possible for people of different religions to live together, cooperate together and simply be together.

At the same time, from all the information that I have received, it appears to me that religion here is not used as an excuse for hatred, discrimination, violence or conflict. Needless to say, it is not possible for me to enter into the reasons for this noteworthy characteristic of Bangladeshi society. Is it based in Bangali culture, is it based in constitutional realities, is it based in the history of this country, is it based in the realm of religions themselves, and in particular in Islam as it exists and is lived here? I leave the answers to those questions to experts.

I would like those of you in the audience who are knowledgeable in these areas to pursue these interrogatives, because much can be learned from you. Indeed, Bangladesh has acquired a great patrimony in the area of inter-religious relations which can be placed at the service of the world.

2. Let me turn to the subject of inter-religious dialogue which should be a reality even in places where harmonious relations among people of faith do exist. As you know, I head the Vatican department which follows, encourages and actively participates in inter-religious dialogue. Consequently, today, I would like to offer to you some reflections about inter-religious dialogue, the source of harmony, unity and the good of society.

3. Perhaps, some would immediately be suspect to such a topic, since in some parts of the world, religion is branded and accused as the source and the cause of intolerance and conflict.

Religion is blamed for prejudice and bigotry. Consequently, there is the temptation to see religion as a problem. So the solution is very easy, just put religion aside and make of it a private matter, taken out of the public sphere. On the other side, arguments are made that one religion should be imposed upon all, leaving no room for the beliefs of the minorities, creating as it were a monolithic religion within society.

Obviously, neither is a correct approach. First, for those who wish to push religion aside and relegate it to the point of being invisible, the answer is that religion which is a reality that belongs to the human being has by its very nature a public dimension and must be visible in society. If believers have a right to practice their faith in their respective places of worship, then they also have the right, within the basic norms and laws of society, to do works of charity, to participate in the national debate about the dignity of the human person, to propose essential values that constitute a just and civil society, and “to moralize” the national conscience.

Secondly, for those who wish to impose a religion upon all, it must be answered that there exists a fundamental right to religious freedom. It must be recognized, as Pope Benedict XVI stated in his Message for the World Day of Peace 2011, “openness to truth and perfect goodness, openness to God, is rooted in human nature.” In other words, the human person in its very nature is one that seeks God, the transcendent, the reality of the spiritual and therefore has the right to follow that search according to one’s conscience. To impede that search or to coerce one to one belief is an affront to the dignity of the human person.

4. However, I would like to suggest to you today, that when faced with such seemingly opposed views, which both deny the presence of God and the right of the person to search for God, a solution, if not the solution, is an authentic and honest inter-religious dialogue.

For Bangladesh, from what I have perceived in preparation for this visit and during the talks which I heard yesterday at the University, the reality of inter-religious relationship has been fundamentally positive. The Bangladeshi society, in its beginning affirmed that it would be an all-inclusive society, in which every person of any religion would have a space in this new country. Consequently, the founding fathers of this Nation envisioned a pluralistic society, with a spirit of openness, based on the fundamental right of religious freedom.

Inter-religious dialogue should be understood as an essential ingredient in preserving a pluralistic society by allowing religion, or rather religions, to be present and active in the very soul of the Nation.

Inter-religious dialogue appears to be an element of harmonious relationship of different religions and spiritualities, because inter-religious dialogue takes as its starting point not a relationship between institutions of religions, but people who believe differently. The starting point is not necessarily theological, doctrinal or institutional, and its goal is certainly not the conversion of the other to my religion.

Rather, inter-religious dialogue tries to obtain a better reciprocal knowledge about other beliefs in order to arrive at a harmonious conviviality. In this regard, Pope Benedict XVI has been emphasizing from the very beginning of his Pontificate the importance of the “formation” in the field of inter-religious dialogue, so that the promoters of inter-religious dialogue are well “formed” in their respective religions and well “informed” about others.

In that way, we can discover the richness of each other’s search for and hopefully discovery of God and bring the depth of that insight and revelation to the table of the pluralistic public debate in order to see what we can do together to improve society, to assist it in its growth towards the total development of the human person, and to assure that the universal rights of the human person are

safeguarded. There is no doubt that when people of faith stand together and especially when religious leaders speak together society as a whole benefits.

Indeed, believers have a common religious approach dealing with the social aspects of life, namely,

-the openness of the transcendent dimension of the human person;

-respect of human life;

-defense of the family, based on the union of man and woman;

-respect of fundamental rights coming from the natural law enshrined within the hearts of all human beings;

-preservation of the environment;

-a holistic development of the human person and so on.

Moreover, when believers and people of good will sit together even more common approaches and convictions are discovered, and the ultimate winner is always society.

5. Yet, inter-religious dialogue is not a mere social phenomenon, that is, getting people to find common ground, or something like political compromises, or even just ignoring differences so that we can be at peace.

There is an extremely positive and indeed essential theological basis for inter-religious dialogue, that is, believers in spite of their doctrinal differences and diverse religious practices can nonetheless be united in fighting the emergence of a world without God which is becoming in some parts a world against God.

The fundamental theological root of this approach is that we are all creatures of the one God and therefore brothers and sisters. Consequently, God is working in everyone of us. Yes, God in the great expanse of his existence is working in each and everyone of us and we must say “differently”. Just consider the teaching of our faiths in how to seek God and to find God, and how to explore the mystery of a divine reality. We are all doing the same, searching and yearning for God, the greatest mystery of our life.

Certainly, we can even help each other to deepen our respective spiritual identity, to purify our behavior and to go nearer to God.

Consequently, inter-religious dialogue is theologically based in our common seeking of God and then to recognize the positive values of another religion which does not mean to abdicate our own religious convictions, but rather to improve them and to discover what we have in common. The communalities unite, rather than divide

The teachings of the Catholic Church are very clear on this matter. In the document of the Second Vatican Council, which is one of the highest teaching instruments of the Church, *Nostra Aetate* we find this affirmation:

“Religions found everywhere try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing "ways," comprising teachings, rules of life, and sacred rites. The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many

aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men” (NA, 2)

In other words, the Catholic Church recognizes that there is a part of the truth and sanctity in other religions.

So we begin by listening, by trying to comprehend and understand and by testifying to our convictions that we are all searchers of the truth, which is ultimately found in God.

6. Obviously, some difficulties remain. Yet, generally speaking the climate of inter-religious relations has positively changed. More and more, we are witnessing a desire for these dialogues. I am even aware that many have been taking place here. Common declarations are becoming more and more specific leading to greater and greater understanding.

One of the great challenges that remains is to bring this positive development closer to the grass root level. In that regard, I would like to stress a very concrete point. It is necessary to monitor books used in our schools on how they deal with religions. Very often, at least in some parts of the world, school books portray religions in a bad light, misrepresenting their beliefs and so forth.

Even here, we ask ourselves is this the result of pure ignorance? Perhaps, not, because misinformation can and should be objectively rectified. Often, this is the result of prejudice against an adversary based on the erroneous assumption that someone who does not believe like me must be my enemy and consequently can be the object of violence.

The Catholic Church and the present Pope are more than ever convinced that to make mockery of religious practices, to use religion to justify violence or to exploit religion for political gain is an abuse of the very core meaning of religion. For this reason, for example, the Holy See, through the Vatican Department that I head, did not hesitate to condemn in unqualified and unambiguous language the news of the planned burning of the book considered sacred by our Muslim brothers, expressing deep concern for such an action, calling it “an outrageous and grave gesture.”

Those same sentiments are even more justified when learned that the burning of the Quran took place.

Indeed, no book considered sacred, no place considered holy, no feast considered revered should ever be the object of disrespect by people of different faiths and beliefs, much more attacking people when they are gathered in worship. Such actions can only be understood as an affront to God himself.

7. Dear friends, inter-religious dialogue here in Asia, and in particular Bangladesh, should have a special place, not necessarily due to problems or terrible conflicts, although in some places that may be the case, but because there exists a true “primacy of God” in the very heart of your society. To use the same words of Pope Benedict XVI speaking to the diplomats accredited to the Holy See in his annual state of the world address in 2009, this “primacy of God” ... “sets up a healthy order of values and grants a freedom more powerful than acts of justice” (January 8, 2009).

Consequently and in conclusion, I would like to encourage you to continue on this fascinating adventure that you have embraced in your daily interaction of people of different faiths, preserve it, enhance it and celebrate the many fruits that come from it.

Finally, I would like to tell that on Easter Sunday before I departed from Rome, I serving His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI to celebrate the Mass of Easter Sunday and to impart the Apostolate Blessing “Urbi et Orbi” . At the end of the ceremony, the Pope, aware that I was about to leave for

Bangladesh asked me to assure the people of this country of his prayers and to extend to all a special blessing from Almighty God, which I am very pleased to do right now.