



**Conference on The Challenges Facing Arab Christians
Amman, 3-4 September 2013
Remarks by His Eminence Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran
President, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue**

Your Majesty,
Your Royal Highness,
Eminencies,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Friends,

My first thought goes to God Almighty, Who loves humanity (*muhibb al-bashar*) and, Who, in His Providence, has gathered us in Jordan, an oasis of peace and fraternity.

Our thanks go to His Majesty King Abdullah II ibn Al Husein for taking this initiative in favour of Arab Christians. We are aware that this is not the first time that His Majesty has placed himself in the front line in order to secure religious freedom for the inhabitants of this country, not fearing to stress the religious and cultural heritage of Christians here.

We are aware of and also very grateful for the numerous interreligious activities promoted by Jordan under King Abdullah's leadership, namely through the Royal Aal Al Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, under the guidance of HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad, organizer of this Conference for King Abdullah. The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, in the Vatican, which I am honoured to serve as its President, has very constructive relations with Prince Ghazi and with the Aal a-Bayt Institute.

Another partner in Jordan of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue is the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies (R.I.I.F.S.) established and wisely guided by HRH Prince El Hasan bin Talal, a messenger of dialogue, especially important during this difficult time for the Arab region. It is important to remember that the conservation of Christians in the Arab world and the safeguarding of their particular contribution to the Arab culture are among the main objectives of the R.I.I.F.S., for which we are all grateful.

Regarding the challenges that face Arab Christians it is obvious that Christian leaders and the faithful themselves know better than anyone coming from outside what these challenges are and the best way to meet them. I hope, however, that a particular point of view from a special 'point of observation' – that of interreligious dialogue at the level of the universal Church – might be useful.

My first remark regarding Arab Christians is that they are not 'minorities' in their respective countries, they are 'full-board' citizens. Numerically speaking, and to use Jesus' words, they are a 'little flock' (Luke 12, 32). As for their mission, they are called to be the 'salt of the earth' (Matthew 5, 13) and the 'light of the world' (Matthew 5, 14); in both cases, quantity counts little: what matters is quality!

We are aware of internal challenges facing Christians in the Middle East, some of which are: self-marginalization, with the constitution of 'ghettos' if not on the ground, in the mind; renouncing participation in socio-political life; the temptation of emigration; lack of confidence in themselves, to mention a few. Lack and loss of hope, of enthusiasm, of the joy of life - these internal threats are often more dangerous than the external challenges.

External challenges can be: cultural, social and political discrimination and marginalization; limitation or negation of the liberty of worship and of religious liberty in general; attacks on places of worship and on religious personnel; ambiguity or even incitement to violence in the speeches, writings and fatwas of some religious leaders. A painful recent fatwa has been the one according to which Muslims cannot work on building or repairing churches, because kufr is proclaimed in those places of worship! What would those who emanated this edict say about the Prophet of Islam, giving hospitality to Christians in his own mosque in Medina? What Pope Francis wrote to Muslims on the occasion of 'Id al-Fitr 2013 can be illuminating: "It is clear that, when we show respect for the religion of our neighbours or when we offer them our good wishes on the occasion of a religious celebration, we simply seek to share their joy, without making reference to the content of their religious convictions."

After listening to many moving witnesses on the condition of Christian in the Arab world, I would like to thank the Arab Christians for their witness. I would propose a minute of silent prayer for those who died and for their families. I wish to pay tribute to the Muslim friends who have the courage to denounce the acts committed by some of their mistaken co-religionists against Christians.

His Majesty King Abdullah, who met Pope Francis on 29 August, invites us to look to the future. For this, confidence is needed, actions that will pave the way towards a common goal.

I wish to propose three priorities for our living together for you to consider:

1) Let us continue to live, not alongside each other, but with each other. Christians are at home in Arab lands. They were the inhabitants of these regions since the first Christian preaching. History has made them a minority, as far as numbers are concerned, 'a little flock', but, nevertheless, a community which matters. I recall what the Lebanese Grand Mufti said to Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI during his visit to Lebanon in September 2012: "Christians are for us a richness!"

2) Let us continue on the path of interreligious dialogue, but in a way which makes it credible: how can we justify bombed churches, also during worship; Christians - including priests and bishops -, kidnapped; school books which present other religions in a grossly distorted way. When we have these kinds of monstrous episodes, we wait for some outspoken condemnation from Muslim religious leaders.

Ignorance, among other factors, is often the cause of many misunderstandings: we do not yet know each other sufficiently well. At this end, schools and universities are important for a better future.

3) Let us be united – Christians and Muslims – to remind everyone that religion and violence do not go together; in this regard, there is not only the physical violence, but also the verbal one. An Arab proverb illustrates this saying that a wound of the tongue is worse than one of the sword. Pope Francis asserted recently that the followers of Jesus and, indeed, everyone, should “renounce all evil and egoism, ...do good, and choose truth and justice.” (Angelus prayer, Sunday 19 August 2013).

As has been the case throughout history, the contribution given to society by Christians becomes a guarantee for freedom and progress. Religious liberty frees individuals and communities, giving them a framework in which it is easier to look for ultimate truth. For all, religion and spirituality are fundamental factors for individual and community life. Peace is a value dear to all religions; religions help a great deal in maintaining public order and civic participation.

Finally, Arab Christians must have the courage to remain in their land, the perseverance to continue interreligious dialogue, showing by the coherence of their life that God is love and peace.

To conclude, believers who see their religious convictions respected and, if necessary defended, will willingly cooperate in the building of a harmonious civil society. We Christians recognize the ‘*imago Dei*’ (God’s image) in every human person; this divine image is the basis and source of dignity and rights. This is the reason why we believe that each individual human being is deserving of respect.