

Intervention of Msgr Francesco Follo  
Permanent Observer of the Holy See to UNESCO  
24<sup>nd</sup> May 2018

Buddhists and Christians: Reaching peace through intercultural dialogue

Excellences,

On behalf of the Holy See, I am very pleased to once again extend our/my heartfelt best wishes on the occasion of *Vesak* to all of you. My cordial greetings are inspired by Pope Francis' Message for the Fiftieth World Day of Peace 2017, entitled *Nonviolence: a Style of Politics for Peace*, Papal message which is particularly aligned to the theme of today's commemoration event of *Vesak*. There, Pope Francis pointed out that "An ethics of fraternity and peaceful coexistence between individuals and among peoples cannot be based on the logic of fear, violence and closed-mindedness, but on responsibility, respect and sincere dialogue." (n.5).

Dear friends, your religious tradition inspires the conviction that friendly relations, open dialogue and the respectful and harmonious exchange of views lead to attitudes of kindness and love which in turn generate authentic and fraternal relationships. We all agree that ignorance and misunderstanding, resulting from greed and hatred, are an evil and lead to the destruction of the bonds of fraternity.

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. Unfortunately, as Pope Francis' noted in His message for World Day of Peace "To this date, the new century has registered no real breakthrough: armed conflicts and other forms of organized violence continue to trigger the movement of peoples within national borders and beyond." (*Message for World Day of Peace 2018*, n. 2). Nevertheless, we are called to respect and to defend our shared humanity in a variety of socioeconomic, political and religious contexts united by a spirit of cooperation with other believers and with people of good will. In particular, drawing on our different religious beliefs, we are called to be honest and frank in denouncing all those social ills that harm 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.

Today, we are witnessing a growing quest for a more just, peaceful and fraternal world. To this end, we should keep in mind that the fulfilment of these hopes deeply relies on the recognition of universal values. This is why we hope that intercultural 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.

Dear friends, to reach our common goal to build a world of brotherhood, it is crucial to join our force to educate people, particularly youth generations, to seek fraternity, to live in fraternity and to dare to build fraternity. We pray that your celebration of *Vesak* 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 Vesak*.

Now, please allow me to outline some premises: to truly be able to establish a fruitful dialogue, it is vital to keep in mind what dialogue means. Indeed, there is a difference between the dialogue and a mere and simple talk (chat) which is represented by the investment of our existence within a relation, by the willingness to get the deepness of a person (with his religion

and culture) from a relation 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.

Dialogue should be conceived as an opportunity not only to be known and tolerated, but to get to know the “other” and enhance humanity. Thus, dialogue is not impoverishing, but on the contrary it enriches all sides. It is to be noted that engaging in a dialogue does not mean to abandon its position and accept the lowest common denominator which would result in depletion. Along those lines, John-Paul II spoke about the dialogue as “an obliged passage of the path to go towards the self-realization of man, of the individual as well as of the human community.” Each dialogue has a global and existential dimension; the dialogue between communities engages in particular the subjectivity of each of them. In this view, it is not just an exchange of ideas, but somehow an exchange of presence too.

In addition, it is also relevant to point out that another fundamental characteristic of the dialogue is to be seamless, continuous, never over, because no formulation of truth can ever be considered ultimate, definitive, perfectly concluded.

Now, this outlined premise enables me to suggest a brief reflection on “the added values of dialogue between cultures and religions”.

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

As we said previously, our world is increasingly marked by tensions and violence which have cultural dimensions. I believe that as human persons, we do have an important responsibility to be “artisans of peace”. All of us, we are called to be intelligent and respectful participants in dialogue. Close attention is given when dialogue elapses between major cultural icons or at some level in the upper echelons of social hierarchies, but what about everyday people? Shouldn’t they also be taken into account as representatives of our culture and society? Yes, they should, because they also embody our culture and society. Therefore I would like to propose some suggestion to help 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 do we discover something new about our counterparts, but we are able to appreciate our culture in a new light.

The second added value of dialogue is that 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 allows 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 new 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-categorizing them as X, Y, or Z based on what they had previously known about the other.

In conclusion, I am truly convinced that we do need to enlarge dialogue opportunities beyond the renowned names and symbolic gestures if we want dialogue between cultures to be effective. To this end, we should promote it at all levels, but most especially at the grassroots level. This is a broad goal to reach; and a necessary one which cannot be ignored. Taking note of how susceptible youth 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. Hence, I would like to call upon UNESCO, its member states, and NGOs to enhance their support to dialogue among cultures including their cultural roots, in particular with respect to youth.

Msgr Francesco Follo