

**VISIT TO MALTA BY  
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LECTURE ON  
PEACE, VIOLENCE AND RELIGIONS**

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1. I am very happy to be here at St. Aloysius College to offer a reflection on the theme of Peace, Violence and Religions. This is not a simple subject to discuss because it involves some of the most complex situations of our contemporary world: the new look of war and peace. Conflict in general and war in particular, have, in fact, changed their appearance. They are more horizontal than vertical, more widespread than localized more fragmented than united, seen almost daily rather than rarely, closer than they are distant and they are more immaterial (and even virtual) than they are material.

The events of September 11, 2001 showed that the death of three thousand people was easily carried out – as easily as a hijacker carrying a knife onto a plane. In this regard a careful observer spoke of “democratic wars”<sup>1</sup>. These significant changes were brought about by the phenomenon of globalization. It is necessary to take into account the completely new context in which the problems of peace and of war are found, in order to identify the negative conditions in the quest for peace and to discern the new opportunities to be employed with evangelical hope to create better conditions for peace.

Globalization has changed the social meaning of peace, but has not changed the anthropological and ethical dimension of peace. An additional interpretation of today’s world, in its main dynamics and prophetic courage is needed to announce the call for peace

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<sup>1</sup> A. GLUCKSMANN, *Dostoievski à Manhattan*, Robert Laffont, Paris 2002; tr. it., *Dostoevskij a Manhattan*, Liberal Libri, Firenze 2002.

in this new globalized context. At the same time, it also serves as a means for recovering the full meaning and understanding of peace.

We are then able to seek out the new requirements of peace, along with the roads we can travel to build it and to better realize where we have fallen short in our quest. In this new context we must ask ourselves, above all, what is to be the role of religion in the promotion of peace.

2. Religion, every authentic religion, must never become a pretext for fueling conflict, hatred and violence. I am deeply convinced that a sincere religious sentiment is the principal antidote for violence and conflicts. In this perspective, individuals and religious communities must clearly manifest a complete and radical rejection of violence, all violence, starting with the violence that would wrap itself in the mantle of religion, even appealing to the Holy Name of God as it commits offences against humanity. There is no religious end that can justify the practice of man committing violence against man. Indeed, in the present moment of history, humanity is waiting to see believers make gestures of peace and solidarity, and humanity is waiting to hear words of hope.

At this time, I would ask you to allow me to call to mind the great Pope John Paul II. The beloved Pope John Paul constantly invited believers to cultivate dialogue, and to sustain it with the concrete commitment never to stop listening to one another. He indicated mutual listening as a response to the disturbing questions that we face, as a behaviour useful for dispelling atmospheres of distrust and misunderstanding. John Paul II invited us to take note, everyday with renewed wonder, of the variety by which human life is manifested and of the great number of unique gifts, proper to different cultures and traditions, that form a multifaceted and many-shaped linguistic, cultural and artistic

cosmos: this immense variety is called to form an integrated whole in an exchange of ideas and in dialogue, for the enrichment and well-being of all people.

3. This enlightening teaching of John Paul II is very useful for meeting the problems of our day. With the situations of conflict facing our world as it moves into the third millennium, dialogue between religions must find its loftiest and most noble motivation in the promotion of justice and solidarity. The believers of the various religions need to have a profound awareness of the degree to which wounds are still open and bleeding: the wounds of injustice; of ethnic and social conflicts; of violence and war; of disregard for the rights of individuals and of peoples, which are the source of suffering and endemic poverty; of unemployment and a loss of dignity; of large migratory movements and of new threats of war that are always lying in wait. Believers need to pray so that we may come to know the way of just relations among ourselves. There can be no true peace without respect for the dignity of individuals and peoples, for the rights and duties of each person, without an equitable distribution of benefits and burdens between individuals and society as a whole. Oppression and marginalization are often the origin of manifestations of violence and terrorism. Tragic situations, found in many parts of our world, demonstrate the absolute necessity of dialogue and negotiation. We must open our hearts and minds to the great challenges that await us: the defence of the sacredness of human life under all circumstances; the promotion of the family, the fundamental cell of society; the elimination of poverty, thanks to efforts made to foster development, reduce debt and open up channels of international trade; respect for human rights in every situation, with special attention to those people who are most vulnerable — children, women and refugees; disarmament, the reduction of the sale of arms to poor countries and the consolidation of

peace after the end of conflicts; the fight against widespread diseases and access for the poorest to basic health care and medicines; safeguarding the environment and preventing natural disasters; the rigorous application of international law and international conventions.

4. Dialogue between religions is a necessary prerequisite for meeting the complex and difficult needs of our world. Above all, dialogue makes it possible for us to overcome the danger of religious fundamentalism, which today is very threatening and widespread. Not long ago, there was a certain political fundamentalism that was predominant; today, however, there is often the risk of falling into forms of religious fundamentalism. Just as in the recently ended twentieth century certain ideological concepts corrupted the truth of politics, so the power of men over other men threatens today to exploit religions, deeply disfiguring their intrinsic truth. The true face of religion is tarnished if religion is used to justify men fighting against other men. Despite this year's tragic terrorist attacks, with their devastating toll of death and suffering, we can nonetheless take solace in the enormous progress that the human conscience continues to make, strengthening the conviction that no authentically religious cause can bring us to treat another person as an enemy against whom we must fight.

5. The message of Jesus invites us to place value on what we share in common and on what unites us, and to see these as the foundation and measure of those things that set individuals and peoples apart. Of course, considering various and diversified forms of social and political organization can have a powerfully innovative and liberating value with

respect to mechanisms of oppressive and unjust force. Looking beyond borders, of whatever type these may be, and learning from others — seeing a value in their and our own diversity — are elements that free us from narrow limits and that allow people to come together and appreciate each other. All of this promotes peace and solidarity. In certain moments of history, however, a proper awareness of just how much we are all alike in our inner-most being, despite our differences, will have an even more innovative significance for relations among peoples. This same positive effect will result from correctly seeing the value of our differences, that is, understanding them as representing the inexhaustible richness of our shared human nature. Political regimes are sometimes afraid of this demanding truth. But they can overcome this fear by being open to considering the value of the diversity of others, by welcoming a spirit of dialogue; but even more, they can overcome this fear by recognizing the common bonds uniting all men and women in the one human family. This kind of recognition represents a great service to humanity and to human rights. There is a time to learn from diversity; there is a time to learn from those things that we share in common. In our present day, it is this second scenario that must be more prevalent.

**6.** In the light of this demanding perspective it is possible to meet the most dangerous challenge of our time: terrorism. Terrorism is among the most brutal of behaviours tearing the international community apart today and sowing death, hatred, desire for revenge and retaliation, and a spirit of opposition. This malevolent social phenomenon has always been present, even in the past, but in recent years, especially after the end of the Cold War, it has shown alarming new outbreaks. It has been transformed

from the isolated acts of single extremists into a sophisticated network of political, technological and economic cooperation; it often has access to immense financial resources and plans strategies on a vast scale, striking innocent people who are in no way connected with the issues involving the terrorists. Places of daily life are targeted and not military objectives within the context of a declared war. Terrorism plans its activities in secrecy and strikes surreptitiously, outside the scope of the rules by which men have always tried in some way to regulate their conflicts. Using their own followers as weapons to be unleashed against defenceless people who are not forewarned, terrorist organizations show forth with ever greater vehemence the death-instinct that drives them, an instinct that is already implicitly found in their choice of terror as a political and military strategy. All of this makes terrorism unacceptable in the most absolute of manners. It is based on contempt for human life. No end can justify the sacrifice of human life, since man is always an end and never a means for a further end. The absolute dignity of the human person derives from the fact that men and women are, in the entire universe, the only creature that God has willed for itself<sup>2</sup>.

7. Terrorism, besides killing innocent victims, gives rise to isolation, distrust and closed-mindedness, all of which inevitably lead to a climate of perennial hatred. Individuals and Nations struck by terrorism are tempted to turn to retaliation and revenge: in this way, violence engenders further violence and brings into its tragic vicious circle even future generations, which inherit the hatred that divides the present generations. Terrorism is an attack on human dignity: it is an aggression committed against every person because all people can be targeted by it; it is for that reason an offence committed

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<sup>2</sup> Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 24.

against all humanity. And it is for this same reason that there exists a right to defend oneself against terrorism. International cooperation in the fight against terrorist activity must also include a particular commitment on the level of politics, to resolve with courage and determination the problems that, in certain dramatic situations, can add fuel to terrorism. The recruitment of terrorists, in fact, is more easily accomplished in social contexts where hatred is sown, where rights are trampled, and in situations where injustices have been tolerated for too long.

**8.** In his message for the World Day of Peace 2006, the Holy Father Benedict XVI warned that at the roots of terrorism we often find fundamentalism or nihilism. Fundamentalism consists in the belief that one is in complete possession of the truth, such that one can impose it by force. Truth, however, must be continually sought; it can only be contemplated and never possessed, because God is truth (cf. *Jn* 14:6). For this reason, any kind of fundamentalism is a behaviour that is radically contrary to faith in God. To the nature of the truth that one presumes to possess, whether this truth is philosophical, political or religious in nature, there correspond different forms of intolerance that can result in terrorist violence. Nihilism too, that is, the belief that no truth and no real objective foundation exists, can be used to justify terrorist violence as the extreme cry of desperation or as the lone affirmation of a single individual. Every authentic believer knows that the Truth is larger than the believer himself. For this reason, it is profanation and blasphemy to proclaim oneself a terrorist in God's name, to kill and visit violence upon people in God's name. In such cases, not only are men and women being exploited, but God too is the subject of exploitation, in that one believes to be totally in possession of

God's truth rather than being possessed by that truth. In the end, terrorism is a new chapter in the history of a mankind that wants to make itself God by definitively ridding itself of God.

**9.** No religion can tolerate terrorism, much less preach it. This is particularly true for the great monotheistic religions. Terrorism, in fact, is contrary to faith in God the Creator of mankind, contrary to a God who cares for people and loves them, contrary to a God who is Father of all men and women. It is totally contrary to faith in Christ the Lord, the One who, sent by the Father, said to us: "Love one another; even as I have loved you, so also must you love one another" (*Jn 13:34*); the One who prayed to the Father that we "may all be one" (*Jn 17:21*) in him. For this reason, the Christian faith, the great monotheistic religions and the great religions of mankind should all work together among themselves to spread a greater awareness of the unity of the human race, in order to eliminate the cultural causes of terrorism, teaching that the dignity of the human person is great in God's eyes and that violence can never be done in the name of the One who is Love. From an ever greater cooperation there can arise a common effort, a spiritual and educational effort, against fundamentalism, regardless of the guise under which it may operate.

**10.** Public opinion is often led to believe that there is a connection between terrorism and religion. Nothing could be further from the truth. Such an erroneous conception can only be effectively corrected by cooperation between religions with the intention of showing in the behaviour of their own members the complete incompatibility between

religion and violence. This is a new area for ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue and cooperation, a new form of service that religions can render to humanity and to peace among peoples. A commitment of this type on the part of religions should be particularly careful to follow the path of constant dialogue that opens the participating parties to mutual understanding, respect and trust. There is a right to defend oneself against terrorism, but we must not forget that the true defence against terrorism is found in the spiritual and cultural order. Even when human justice has been restored, we must not forget that, as Saint Gregory the Great wrote, “human justice, when compared to divine justice, is injustice; it is like a lantern shining in the darkness: placed in the bright splendour of the sun, its light can no longer be seen”<sup>3</sup>. Love passes through justice and, in a certain sense, seeks justice and sustains it, but it is not reduced to justice. Love fosters and assists reconciliation, bringing it ever closer to absolute justice, which is Divine Mercy. The service that religions can render to peace and to the fight against terrorism consists precisely in the pedagogy of love and reconciliation.

**11.** Peace, which is an enormously great good, although sometimes difficult to achieve, is the result of a just order in the relationships existing between human beings, regardless of their race, color, culture or social class. This peace is possible on the condition that the dignity of the human person and fundamental human rights are respected. It is a peace that calls on all people to fulfill their own duty towards others. This entails a sincere cooperation, an attitude of responsibility, a society built on truth, justice, freedom and above all on love. Everyone must make their proper contribution to the promotion of peace through daily gestures of peace. Gestures of peace, at every level,

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<sup>3</sup> *Moralium*, V, c. 37, par. 67; PL, LXXV, 716-717.

are one of the most effective means for bringing about peace. Such gestures arise in the heart and are an act of the will; they find expression in generous decisions aimed at mutual understanding, reconciliation and forgiveness. The hearts of those who make gestures of peace become oriented to the common good, and such gestures are a powerful source of social and civil education. Peace, besides being the result of political decisions made at various national and international levels, is also the fruit of countless gestures of peace made by each one of us: it is here that we find the secret of that spiritual revolution that is so urgently needed in our modern day, a spiritual revolution capable of renewing hearts and minds, and therefore capable of making the world a place of greater solidarity and of greater goodness.