



Religion and Humanitarian Action in the Age of Politics and Conflict

Workshop on

Reaffirming Global Solidarity, Restoring Humanity

Casina Pio IV, 22 February 2016

H.E. Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher

Your Royal Highness, Your Eminence, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends,

from the outset I must ask your understanding if time prevents me from treating very exhaustively the various aspects of the important subject matter chosen for this encounter, and I do apologize that I have to leave soon as I have made these few remarks, because we have a commitment with the Holy Father with the whole of the Curia in the Basilica of St Peter in a few minutes.

I trusted that many of those elements will be appropriately considered during the course of your work today. For my part, I wish to begin by calling to mind the theme chosen by Pope Francis for his World Day of Peace message on 1 January this year, "Overcome indifference and win peace".

There is indeed an urgent need to overcome indifference and to reaffirm solidarity at a global level. Furthermore, there is the need to help the men and women of our time to rediscover that principle of human solidarity which in the circumstances of today has become elusive for too many, while for others it is considered the ideology of failing and irrelevant societies. Taking our inspiration from the current Jubilee Year of Mercy, we can formulate a fundamental affirmation: peace is built through mercy. As men and women of faith, even if representing different creeds, we are certain of this, and such a conviction must lead to action. If we are convinced that peace comes through mercy, we must ourselves become reflections in our human and limited manner, of the infinite mercy of God.

In this way we can build a culture of peace and fraternity which have their origins ultimately in the one Creator. The title of today's workshop "Reaffirming global solidarity, restoring humanity" may sound somewhat incongruous in a global context of conflict, violence, terrorism, and other manmade disasters, in a world of humanitarian emergencies arising from environmental crises and from unscrupulous political interests that coalesce and change with disconcerting rapidity to the detriment of countless victims.

And all of this continues in spite of the hope for progress coming from cultural, political, and social achievements and the considerable advances in the sciences and in technology, which have the potential to assure food, clean water, shelter, medical treatment, the possibility of a life of dignity and security for every person on our planet.

At the same time we also find ourselves in a world ever more interconnected and interdependent, in which events related to the pressing global questions, such as the environment, climate change, food security, migration, economics, development, and communications frequently overwhelm the capacity of the state and of established international institutions to address them quickly enough.

This is tragically evident particularly in humanitarian action. If we consider today's situation of armed conflict, as has been shown, 90% of the victims are civilians. In violation of every norm of international humanitarian law, they're not only victims of indiscriminate attacks by state and non-state forces, but in many cases they are the principal target of such forces, who strike with a ferocity that is devoid of any sign of humanity.

The international community has walked a long and tortuous path in its effort to identify a minimum humane limit to violence and war and to guarantee access to appropriate support for victims and for populations not involved in the fighting. The family of nations has tried before, and especially after the terrible experience of two world wars and of the concentration camps, to establish norms that, also during war and situations of occupation, of internal violence, and of emergencies of various sorts, can mitigate their destructive effects upon defenceless victims.

But such norms both written and customary are today increasingly being challenged and sometimes even publicly rejected. We are witnessing in our world then terrible crimes against humanity through the use of children as human shields, the deliberate bombing of hospitals, schools, places of worship and refugee camps,

through the use of systematic rape as a weapon of war, through irresponsible economic and financial policies that result in starvation for entire populations, through the illicit trafficking of arms, of drugs, or of defenceless human beings.

To this litany of horrors can be added other situations of great suffering in many places, coming from the violation of human rights and environmental degradation. The forthcoming World Humanitarian Summit to be held in Istanbul will constitute both a challenge and an opportunity for reaffirming humanitarian principles and norms, and for inspiring new and coherent commitments to build the future of humanitarian action, placing victims and the most needy at the centre of the international community's response. In addition to this present gathering, other important meetings held in 2015 and some planned for 2016 are considering various humanitarian themes, such as respect for human rights in the conduct of hostilities and in the treatment of prisoners, the question of crossing national borders to attack armed persons or armed groups, the use of remotely controlled weapons and cyberattacks, the use of force by UN contingence, and the deliberate interspersing of civilians and civilian structures, with competence.

States have the primary responsibility to protect and assist their own citizens in regard to their essential needs. When a state cannot or will not do so, humanitarian law allows, with the consent of the state in question, that non-state humanitarian actors provide assistance to these populations.

Unfortunately, we're all too familiar with how political, military, economic and security obstacles can prevent access to such help. Here one must consider the related issues of the mobilization of resources for humanitarian assistance, even though greatly increased in comparison with a few years ago such funding is still largely insufficient.

Ms Kristalina Georgieva and His Highness Sultan Nazrin Shah will bring these challenging problems to your attention. In this sombre context we must note as a positive development the growing awareness that the great global questions, some of them negligently overlooked up to now, must be squarely confronted and that they can yield solutions only through the sincere cooperation between nations guided not by self-interest but by the desire to find lasting solutions. Pope Francis, in his address of November last to the United Nations Office in Nairobi, recalled that no country can act independently of a common responsibility.

If we truly desire a positive change we have to humbly accept our interdependence. What is needed is sincere and open dialogue with responsible cooperation on the part of all: political authorities, the scientific community, the business world and civil society. Positive examples are not lacking: they demonstrate that a genuine cooperation between politics, science, and business can achieve significant results. In recent years we have seen the growth of an understanding of religion as a crucial factor in relations at the political, institutional, and international levels. In certain countries alas there has been a parallel growth in exploitation of religious categories for political ends.

Religion, in one way or another, has become a staple of political, cultural and social discourse, even for those who are opposed to every religious reference and by whom religion is seen as an exclusive, polarizing, partial and above all discriminatory force, and at times part and cause of many conflicts. It has been argued that in the final years of the last century and even more so since the beginning of this millennium, political and geopolitical debate has moved from a Cold War basis to a clash of civilizations.

The focus of such analysis is often on the contrast between cultures and traditions that have different religious origins, overlooking, however, the fact that such contrasts will subsequently find their way into ideologies or, in the worst case, terrorist actions do not have, in fact, a generally religious character but merely use religion as a cover for other interests of a local, regional or international nature.

As a director of one of the largest international humanitarian organizations observed during a recent visit to the Vatican, the problem is not with religions per se but indeed with the fact that their precepts are not lived out. In any case it is now recognized that religions are to be included among the fundamental characteristics of societies and while at times presenting challenges, represent also one of the most vital forces for change.

In addition, there is an increasing appeal to religion as the only resort in the face of so many barbarities, even if, as Pope Francis affirms in his Encyclical "Laudato si'", the Church does not pretend to substitute for politics. She does not have a special recipe, nor as Cardinal Pietro Parolin recalled during his recent visit to a refugee camp in Dobova in Slovenia, does she offer to governments technical solutions but rather guiding principles, first and foremost that of solidarity. At the same time, religions and religious faith, as a privileged space of humanity, can help to elevate hearts and, in spite of the general context, generate hope that will restore a responsible commitment to the protection of rights and the dignity of every person.

This is pre-eminently the role of religions in the public square. They cannot identify themselves with or substitute for politics they are, rather, by their nature, open to a larger reality and thus can lead people in institutions

towards a more universal vision, to a horizon of universal fraternity going beyond the character of mere humanitarian assistance.

A person truly formed by this religious vision cannot be indifferent the sufferings of men and women and indeed must be moved to pour the oil of human solidarity on their wounds. In this we find the high measure of our engagement also as political men and women and we find too the grounds to hope for peace.

The words of Pope Francis during his visit to the United Nations Office at Nairobi can, once more, give us encouragement: "We believe that human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good and making a new start". This much-needed change, of course, cannot take place without a substantial commitment to education and training. Nothing will happen unless political and technical solutions are accompanied by a process of education, which proposes new ways of living. A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal. We still have time.

Thank you very much for your attention.