

Uniting for Peace
Religious Leaders
Suva, Fiji
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Introduction

Thank you for your kind welcome.

Our theme today is “Uniting for Peace”.

More specifically, it is peace *between* religions.

More generally, it is religions working together for peace *in society*.

At its widest, it is peace *in the world*.

I will address each of these ever-widening dimensions in turn.

I am a Catholic Christian, so I will speak from that point-of-view.

God and Peace

It is my conviction that God is the author or source of peace. It is only God Who can assuage the restlessness of the human heart. As St Augustine famously confessed:

You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.

God alone satisfies the infinite longings and desires of the human heart. In God alone do our souls find rest.

This orientation to God is explicit in the theological traditions which acknowledge God as Creator, but it is present in the other faith traditions too, in the call to Transcendence, to go beyond ourselves, to respond to something greater, to give ourselves to a higher cause, to surrender to the Ultimate Mystery of Being. It is also indicated in the various names that we use for our ultimate destiny - *moksha*, *nirvana*, salvation, Paradise, *al-Jannah*. This transcendent goal is worth striving for ‘with all our heart, and all our soul, and all our mind, and all our strength’ (c.f. Mark 12:30-31) ... but it is ever beyond our efforts. It is gift. It is grace. It comes from Above.

God and the Jewish Scriptures

In the biblical tradition, God is Creator, Redeemer, Provident Guide, and Merciful Judge. God speaks through the prophets, whose words are enshrined in the Bible. At every stage in human history, they assure the people of God’s presence, love, mercy, and promise of peace.

God and the New Testament

Christians believe that God’s final and complete Word to us is Jesus Christ, the Son of God (c.f. Heb 1:2), who assumed a human nature and became one of us. By his solidarity with us in life, death, and resurrection, he has become the source of reconciliation with all peoples and all creation. He is our peace and salvation. (c.f. Eph 2:14)

Jesus assured his followers at the Last Supper:

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; (John 14:27)

In each of his appearances after the resurrection, he greets his followers:

shalom alei-chem

مَعَكُمْ السَّلَامُ (*as-salaam ma^c-kum*)

تو نصیب متی سلا تمہیں (*tumhen salamati naseeb ho*)

Peace be with you. (Lk 24:36, Jn 20:19, 21, 26)

God and the Church

This message of God's peace in Jesus Christ is carried on by the church. Christians are called to promote peace. Jesus said:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons [and daughters] of God. (Mt 5:9)

God and the Religions

Of course, I am not making any exclusive claim for the Christian church as the one and only messenger of peace. Peace is not an exclusive Christian prerogative. Peace is God's gift. God is present in all the religions and faith traditions of the world, in Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, and so on, working for reconciliation, working for justice, working for peace. Peace can flourish anywhere God plants it.

Between the Religions

By the mercy of God, having personally been graced by peace through our respective religions, our common task is to promote peace *between* our religions. It is believers from different religions and faith traditions seeking to understand one another, to reconcile with each other, to create peace between us.

We must not see each other in binary terms, of "black and white", of right and wrong. We must no longer see ourselves as 'competitors', seeking the same potential converts, or seeking to convert each other. Rather, we must adopt a much humbler approach. We must see each other as fellow pilgrims, companions on a journey; listening to one another; seeking, finding and rejoicing in the true, the good, and the holy in each other; learning from one another, supporting one another, journeying together, collaborating with one another ...

In saying this, I am preaching more to myself rather than to you! I readily confess that Christians have not lived up to our divine call to be instruments of peace. We have been involved in religious wars, colonial conquest, forced conversions, and disrespect towards other religions.

But the teaching of the Catholic Church changed dramatically in 1965 with Vatican II, especially with "*Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions". Sadly, this revolutionary new attitude to other religions, and the development of it in Catholic teaching in the decades since, is not known to many Catholics. Priests, teachers, and other Catholic leaders must do a lot more to learn, inform, and educate their communities about this new vision of interfaith relations.

Religions and Society

But our common task is not just to create a comfortable zone of peace for religious believers, where we can live in peace and harmony with each other. That would be a sort of collective religious self-indulgence or self-interest. It would be a contradiction in terms, contrary to the call to Transcendence at the heart of every religion. For we are called not to live for ourselves, for our own self-interests, not even our joint religious interests, but to live for God, however we name that Ultimate Mystery. We are called to be God's agents *to others*. We are called to be prophets and architects of God's peace in society. I am mindful of the words of Pope Francis in Abu Dhabi in 2019:

There is no alternative: we will either build the future together or there will not be a future. Religions, in particular, cannot renounce the urgent task of building bridges between peoples and cultures. The time has come when religions should more actively exert themselves, with courage and audacity, and without pretence, to help the human family deepen the capacity for reconciliation, the vision of hope and the concrete paths of peace.¹

Thus, Pope Francis invites us to a vision of universal fraternity, where all people are sisters and brothers together:

Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travellers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all.²

Religions and the World

However, this task of peace is not just for human beings only, where all people live in peace and harmony with each other. If human welfare is achieved at the expense of other creatures, or of generations not yet born, it is an unacceptable anthropocentrism, which *Laudato Si'*³ names "tyrannical" (LS, 68), "distorted" (LS, 69), "excessive" (LS, 116), and "misguided" (LS, 118, 119, 122).

Physical creation is subject to the iron laws of nature and changes incrementally in accord with the statistical probabilities of evolution, of rise and fall, of growth and decay. Animals are bound by instinct. I think of the ancient fable of the scorpion and the frog:

A scorpion wants to cross a river but cannot swim, so it asks a frog to carry it across. The frog hesitates, afraid that the scorpion might sting it, but the scorpion promises not to, pointing out that it would drown if it killed the frog in the middle of the river. The frog considers this argument sensible and agrees to transport the scorpion. Midway across the river, the scorpion stings the frog anyway, dooming them both. The dying frog asks the scorpion why it stung despite knowing the consequence, to which the scorpion replies: "I am sorry, but I couldn't resist the urge. It's in my nature."⁴

¹ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/february/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_emiratiarabi-incontrointerreligioso.html

² Francis, *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship*, (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html. #8.

³ *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Scorpion_and_the_Frog

Unlike the scorpion, human beings are free. In the whole of material creation, we alone can choose, we alone can rise above our nature, we can serve a higher call. We are the indeed the pinnacle of creation, not because of our achievements – which are many, as are our failures – but because by our God-given freedom, we alone are *responsible*, that is, we alone are *able to respond*. We can recognize and accept our *responsibility*. We can see the havoc we have wrought and can do something about it.

Human freedom can be used for self-indulgence or self-transcendence. Our religions call us to rise above immediate self-interest and serve the greater interest of the whole. They call us to be responsible for the welfare of other creatures, the exploitation and pollution of lands and waters, climate change, the extinction of species, the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth. In God's name, we are *responsible* for the earth and all its creatures. In God's name, we are called to a universal solidarity which embraces everyone and everything. As the opening paragraph of the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* states:

Through faith in God, who has created the universe, creatures and all human beings (equal on account of his mercy), believers are called to express this human fraternity by safeguarding creation and the entire universe and supporting all persons, especially the poorest and those most in need.⁵

Conclusion

In conclusion, we, believers in the world's religions, are called individually and collectively, to peace with self, peace within the family, peace *within* religion, peace *between* religions, peace in society, and peace with all creatures.

Thank you.

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⁵ Francis and Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, "Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together," (2019), http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html.