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Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Francis in the Kingdom of Bahrain on the occasion of the “Bahrain Forum for Dialogue: East and West for Human Coexistence” (3 to 6 November 2022) – Closing of the “Bahrain Forum for Dialogue: East and West for Human Coexistence”

Closing of the “Bahrain Forum for Dialogue: East and West for Human Coexistence” at Al-Fida Square

This morning, after celebrating Holy Mass, at his residence, the Holy Father Francis greeted His Excellency Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan, Minister for Tolerance of the United Arab Emirates, His Excellency Rustam Minnikhanov, President of the Republic of Tatarstan, and the Nobel Peace Prize laureate (2014) Mr. Kailash Satyarthi.

Then, at the end of the meeting the Pope transferred by car to Al-Fida Square at the Sakhir Royal Palace for the closing of the “Bahrain Forum for Dialogue: East and West for Human Coexistence”.

Upon arrival, at 10.00 (8.00 in Rome), the Pope was welcomed by the King of Bahrain, His Majesty Hamad bin Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa, and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Professor Ahmad Al-Tayyeb. Together they went to the garden for the ceremony of the Tree of Peace. As they approached the stage, an exhibition of several parade aeroplanes and helicopters took place.

After the recitation of the prayer and the addresses of His Majesty the King of Bahrain and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Pope Francis delivered his discourse. At the end, the Pope returned by car to the papal residence, where he lunched privately.

The following is the Holy Father’s address to those present during the closing of the “Bahrain Forum for Dialogue: East and West for Human Coexistence”:

Address of the Holy Father

Your Majesty, Your Royal Highnesses,
 Dear Brother, Dr Al-Tayyeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar,
 Dear Brother Bartholomew, Ecumenical Patriarch,
 Distinguished Religious and Civil Authorities,
 Ladies and Gentlemen,

I greet you all most cordially and I am grateful for your welcome to this Forum of dialogue organized under the patronage of His Majesty the King of Bahrain. This country takes its name from its waters: the name Bahrain means “two seas”. It make us think of the waters of the sea, which bring lands and nations into contact and connect distant peoples. In the words of an ancient proverb, “What the land divides, the sea unites”. The Earth, seen from above, appears as a vast blue sea that unites different shores. From the heavens, it seems to remind us that we are indeed one family: not islands, but one great archipelago. This is how the Most High wants us to be, and this country, which is an archipelago of over thirty islands, can well symbolize that desire.

Yet we are living at a time when humanity, connected as never before, appears much more divided than united. Here too, the name “Bahrain” can help us to reflect: the “two seas” of which it speaks refer to the fresh waters of its underwater springs and the brackish waters of the Gulf. Nowadays, in a somewhat similar way, we find ourselves overlooking two seas with very different waters: the calm, freshwater sea of a serene life together, and the salty sea of indifference, marred by clashes and swept by the winds of war, its destructive billows growing ever more tumultuous, threatening to overwhelm us all. Tragically, East and West increasingly resemble two opposing seas. We, on the other hand, are here together because we all intend to set sail on the same waters, choosing the route of encounter rather than that of confrontation, the path of dialogue indicated by the title of this Forum: “East and West for Human Coexistence”.

After two terrible world wars, a cold war that for decades kept the world in suspense, catastrophic conflicts taking place in every part of the globe, and in the midst of accusations, threats and condemnations, we continue to find ourselves on the brink of a delicate precipice and we do not want to fall. It is a striking paradox that, while the majority of the world’s population is united in facing the same difficulties, suffering from grave food, ecological and pandemic crises, as well as an increasingly scandalous global injustice, a few potentates are caught up in a resolute struggle for partisan interests, reviving obsolete rhetoric, redesigning spheres of influence and opposing blocs. We appear to be witnessing a dramatic and childlike scenario: in the garden of humanity, instead of cultivating our surroundings, we are playing instead with fire, missiles and bombs, weapons that bring sorrow and death, covering our common home with ashes and hatred.

Such will be the bitter consequences if we continue to accentuate conflict instead of understanding, if we persist in stubbornly imposing our own models and despotic, imperialist, nationalist and populist visions, if we are unconcerned about the culture of others, if we close our ears to the plea of ordinary people and the voice of the poor, if we continue simplistically to divide people into good and bad, if we make no effort to understand one another and to cooperate for the good of all. These are the choices before us since, in a globalized world, we only advance by rowing together; if we sail alone, we go adrift.

On the stormy sea of conflicts, let us keep before our eyes the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, which calls for a fruitful encounter between West and East, to help cure their respective maladies.[1] We are here, as men and women who believe in God and in our brothers and sisters, to reject “*isolating thinking*”, the approach to reality that overlooks the great sea of humanity by concentrating only on its own narrow currents. We want the divergences between East and West to be settled for the good of all, without distracting attention from another divergence that is constantly and dramatically increasing: the gap between the North and the South of the world. The emergence of conflicts should not cause us to lose sight of the less evident tragedies in our human family, such as the catastrophic inequality whereby the majority of people on our planet experience unprecedented injustice, the shameful scourge of hunger and the calamity of climate change, a sign of our lack of care for the common home.

When it comes to such issues, which we have discussed in these days, religious leaders must surely commit themselves and set a good example. We have a specific role to play, and this Forum has offered us a further

opportunity in this regard. It is our duty to encourage and assist our human family, interdependent yet at the same time disconnected, to sail the sea together. I would therefore like to propose *three challenges* that emerge from the *Document on Human Fraternity* and from the *Kingdom of Bahrain Declaration*, on both of which we have reflected in these days. These challenges have to do with *prayer, education and action*.

First of all, *prayer*, which touches *the human heart*. Truth to tell, the tragedies we are enduring, the dangerous divisions we are experiencing, and “the imbalances under which the modern world labours are linked with a more basic imbalance which is rooted in the heart of man” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 10). That is their ultimate cause. Consequently, the greatest risk lies not in specific objects, material realities or institutions, but in our human inclination to close ourselves in our own immanence, our own group, our own petty interests. This is not a failing of our age: it has been present from the beginning of humanity and, with God’s help, it can be overcome (cf. *Fratelli Tutti*, 166).

For this reason, prayer, the opening of our hearts to the Most High, is essential for purifying ourselves of selfishness, closed-mindedness, self-referentiality, falseness and injustice. Those who pray receive peace of heart; they cannot fail to bear witness to this and to invite others, above all by their example, not to fall prey to a paganism that reduces human beings to what they sell, buy or are entertained by, but instead to rediscover the infinite dignity with which each person is endowed. The followers of the religions are men and women of peace who, as they journey alongside others on this earth, invite them, with gentleness and respect, to lift their gaze to heaven. They bring to their prayer, like incense that rises to the Most High (cf. *Ps* 141:2), the trials and tribulations of all.

For this to be the case, however, there is one essential premise, and that is religious freedom. The *Kingdom of Bahrain Declaration* explains that “God instructs us to exercise the divine gift of freedom of choice” and consequently, “compelled religion cannot bring a person into a meaningful relationship with God”. Any form of religious coercion is unworthy of the Almighty, since he has not handed the world over to slaves, but to free creatures, whom he fully respects. Let us commit ourselves, then, to ensuring that the freedom of creatures reflects the sovereign freedom of the Creator, that places of worship are always and everywhere protected and respected, and that prayer is favoured and never hindered. It is not enough to grant permits and recognize freedom of worship; it is necessary to achieve true freedom of religion. Not only every society, but also every creed is called to self-examination in this regard. It is called to question whether it coerces God’s creatures from without, or liberates them from within; whether it helps people to reject rigidity, narrow-mindedness and violence; whether it helps believers to grow in authentic freedom, which is not doing what we want, but directing ourselves to the good for which we were created.

If the challenge of prayer regards the heart, the second challenge, that of *education*, essentially concerns *the mind*. The *Kingdom of Bahrain Declaration* states that “ignorance is the enemy of peace”. It is true, for where opportunities for education are lacking, extremism increases and forms of fundamentalism take root. Yet if ignorance is the enemy of peace, education is the friend of development, provided that it is an education truly befitting men and women as dynamic and relational beings. An education that is not rigid and monolithic, but open to challenges and sensitive to cultural changes; not self-referential and isolating, but attentive to the history and culture of others; not stagnant, but inquisitive and open to embracing different and essential aspects of the one human family to which we belong. In that way, it can enter into the heart of problems without claiming to have easy answers to resolve complex issues, but willing instead to *embrace a crisis without seeing it in terms of conflict*. Conflict always leads to destruction. A crisis helps us to think and grow. For it is unworthy of the human mind to think that power should prevail over reason, to bring the methods of the past to present-day issues, to apply models based on technology or mere convenience to the history and culture of human beings. This means that we must raise questions, allow ourselves to be challenged, learn to enter into dialogue patiently, respectfully and with a willingness to listen, to learn the history and culture of others. That is how to educate human minds: by encouraging mutual understanding. For it is not enough to say we are tolerant: we really have to make room for others, granting them rights and opportunities. This is an approach that begins with education and it is one that the religions are called support.

Concretely, I would emphasize *three urgent educational priorities*. First, *the recognition of women* in the public sphere: namely, their right “to education, to employment, [and] their freedom to exercise their social and political

rights" (cf. *Document on Human Fraternity*). In this, as in other areas, education is the path to liberation from historical and social legacies opposed to the spirit of fraternal solidarity that ought to mark those who worship God and love their neighbour.

Second, "*the protection of the fundamental rights of children*" (ibid.), so that they can grow up, receive schooling, be helped and supported, so as not to live in the grip of hunger and violence. Let us teach others, and learn ourselves, how to view crises, problems and wars through the eyes of children: this is not a mark of naiveté, but of farsighted wisdom, because only if we are concerned for them will progress be reflected in innocence rather than profit, and lead to the building of a better and more humane future.

Education begins in the heart of the family and continues within a community, village or city. Third, then, I would stress *education for citizenship*, for living in community, in respect for one another and for the law. Then too, the particular importance of the "concept of citizenship", which "is based on the equality of rights and duties". Here, commitment is demanded, so that we can "establish in our societies the concept of *full citizenship* and reject the discriminatory use of the term *minorities* which engenders feelings of isolation and inferiority. Its misuse paves the way for hostility and discord; it undoes any successes and takes away the religious and civil rights of some citizens who are thus discriminated against" (ibid.).

And so, we come to the last of our three challenges, that which concerns *action*, we might say *our human abilities*. The *Kingdom of Bahrain Declaration* states that whenever hatred, violence and discord are preached, God's name is desecrated. All who are religious reject these things as utterly unjustifiable. They forcefully reject the blasphemy of war and the use of violence. And they consistently put this rejection into practice. For it is not enough to proclaim that a religion is peaceful; we need to condemn and isolate the perpetrators of violence who abuse its name. Nor is it enough to distance ourselves from intolerance and extremism; we need to counter them. "This is why it is so necessary to stop supporting terrorist movements fueled by financing, the provision of weapons and strategy, and by attempts to justify these movements, even using the media. All these must be regarded as international crimes that threaten security and world peace. Such terrorism must be condemned in all its forms and expressions" (*Document on Human Fraternity*). And also ideological terrorism.

Religious men and women, as people of peace, are likewise opposed to the race to rearmament, to the commerce of war, to the market of death. They do not support "alliances against some", but means of encounter with all. Without yielding to forms of relativism or syncretism of any sort, they pursue a single path, which is that of fraternity, dialogue and peace. These are the things they support. Dear friends, let us pursue this path; let us open our hearts to our brothers and sisters; let us press forward on the journey towards greater knowledge and understanding of one another. Let us strengthen the bonds between us, without duplicity or fear, in the name of the Creator who has put us together in this world as guardians of our brothers and sisters. And if different potentates deal with each other on the basis of interests, money and power plays, may we show that another path of encounter is possible. Possible and necessary, since force, arms and money will never paint a future of peace. So let us encounter one another for the sake of humanity and in the name of the One who loves humanity, the One whose name is peace. Let us promote concrete initiatives to ensure that the journey of the great religions will be ever more effective and ongoing, *a conscience of peace* for our world! I address to all my heartfelt appeal for an end to the war in Ukraine and the start of serious negotiations for peace.

The Creator invites us to act, especially on behalf all those many creatures of his who do not yet find a sufficient place on the agenda of the powerful: the poor, the unborn, the elderly, the infirm, migrants... If we who believe in the God of mercy, do not give a hearing to the poor and a voice to the voiceless, who will do it? Let us take their side; let us make every effort to assist a humanity wounded and sorely tried! By doing so, we will draw down upon our world the blessing of the Most High. May he enlighten our journey and join our hearts, our minds and our strength (cf. *Mk 12:30*), so that our worship of God may be matched by a concrete and fraternal love of our neighbour. So that, together, we may be prophets of community, artisans of unity and builders of peace. Thank you.

[1]“The West can discover in the East remedies for those spiritual and religious maladies that are caused by a prevailing materialism. And the East can find in the West many elements that can help free it from weakness, division, conflict and scientific, technical and cultural decline. It is important to pay attention to religious, cultural and historical differences that are a vital component in shaping the character, culture and civilization of the East. It is likewise important to reinforce the bond of fundamental human rights in order to help ensure a dignified life for all the men and women of East and West” (*Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, 4 September 2019).
