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Here below the statement by H.E. Archbishop Paul R. Gallagher, Secretary for the Holy See’s Relations with States, at the Meeting “*Religious and cultural pluralism and peaceful coexistence in the Middle East*” (Athens, 18-20 October 2015):

Statement by H.E. Archbishop Paul R. Gallagher

Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates,

Before addressing a few brief remarks on our Conference theme, I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the Greek Government for organising this Conference. It is a clear statement that Greece, notwithstanding the economic crisis that it has endured over the past few years and the challenges that it faces in this regard, is conscious of its noble traditions of being the birthplace of democracy and the values that are central to Europe’s identity, and that it is also the gateway and bridge between Europe and the Middle East. Especially now, as Greece finds itself on the frontlines of the greatest humanitarian and refugee crisis facing Europe since the Second World War. This Conference, therefore, is an important initiative to address and to respond to the crisis unfolding in the Middle East.

As you know, in these days, the Synod of Bishops of the Catholic Church is meeting in Rome to reflect on the theme on the Family in the life of the Church and the World. It calls to mind the meeting in October 2010 of the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East in Rome. One of the most important fruits of that meeting was the papal document, the Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente* of Pope Benedict XVI that he signed during his Apostolic Visit to Lebanon in September 2012.

In between these two dates, we witnessed the so-called 'Arab Spring' uprisings in various countries in North Africa and Middle East region that aspired for a new era of freedom, democracy, citizenship, justice and the rule of law in these countries. In many respects, these themes had already been anticipated by the Bishops during their meeting in Rome in October 2010, and they were developed by Pope Benedict in *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente*. It was no surprise that the papal document was delivered in Lebanon since that country holds a special place in the hearts of successive Popes and the Catholic Church. Christianity has flourished in Lebanon from its very beginning: Lebanon is as much a part of Christianity as Christianity is a part of Lebanon. In 1997, Pope John Paul II stated that *"Le Liban est plus qu'un pays, c'est un message"* and, despite difficulties, especially the current constitutional crisis, Lebanon still continues to bear witness to the message that the common good of all requires the participation and cooperation of all; that harmony and peaceful coexistence are grounded in respect for the inherent dignity of each human being.

The message of Lebanon remains valid for the future of the Middle East and thus the resolution of the constitutional crisis is urgent, not only for Lebanon, but for all of the Middle East region.

In this context, therefore, I wish to share with you some ideas that I believe are essential to promoting peaceful coexistence among the various peoples and cultures that make up the rich mosaic of the Middle East.

1. Respect for human rights and in particular freedom of religion and of conscience.

Respect for human rights, and in particular freedom of religion and of conscience, is the most effective strategy for obtaining the common good that is the basis of social harmony and respecting the multi-layered fabric of society in the Middle East. An important element of the fabric of society is religion and its values. Religious freedom is an intrinsic human right and it is in no way incompatible with building societies on the basis of common citizenship, indeed, it is unacceptable that believers, regardless of their faith, should have to suppress a part of themselves – their faith – in order to be active citizens. In the Arab world Christians, alongside their fellow Muslim citizens, are ready to play their part as citizens in building societies that respect the human rights of all citizens while at the same time acknowledging that *"a vision of life firmly anchored in the religious dimension can help to achieve this, since recognition of the transcendent value of every man and woman favours conversion of heart, which then leads to a commitment to resist violence, terrorism and war, and to promote justice and peace."*1

2. Nurturing a culture of democracy

While it is almost a cliché to say that democracy is more than holding elections, it is nevertheless true. It is important that the exercise of democracy not be limited merely to the holding of electoral contests, but should also be about developing and nurturing a **'culture of democracy'** that includes developing the rule of law, where all are equal before the law, and developing state institutions which are at the service of all citizens. In this regard, the holding of democratic elections is an important first step in establishing the legitimacy of interlocutors on behalf of the people. There is a danger, however, that democracy may legitimise extremist and fundamentalist ideologies which represent a fundamental threat not only to religious minorities in the region, such as Christians, but also to the majority of Muslims in the Arab world who seek democratic institutions based on citizenship and participation rather than religious affiliation. Developing a 'culture of democracy' will take time, effort, patience and civic education. It also requires engagement with civic and religious leaders in eliciting respect for basic freedoms, such as freedom of religion, freedom of expression, etc, as the guarantee of fundamental human freedoms particularly for religious minorities. Alongside the need for the development of a 'culture of democracy' the real and concrete problems of unemployment and economic disadvantage of the masses need to be addressed.

Such a process was described in the Post Synodal Exhortation *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente* as a 'healthy secularity': *"A healthy secularity…frees religion from the encumbrance of politics, and allows politics to be enriched by the contribution of religion, while maintaining the necessary distance, clear distinction and indispensable collaboration between the two spheres. No society can develop in a healthy way without embodying a spirit of mutual respect between politics and religion, avoiding the constant temptation either to merge the two or to set them at odds. The basis of a constructive relationship between politics and religion is, first and foremost, human nature – a sound understanding of man – and full respect for inalienable human rights. A sense of this correct relationship should lead to the realization that relations between the spiritual (religious) and the temporal (political) spheres should be marked by a kind of unity in distinction, inasmuch as both are called, while remaining distinct, to cooperate harmoniously in the service of the common good. This kind of healthy secularity ensures that political activity does not manipulate religion, while the practice of religion remains free from a politics of self-interest which at times is barely compatible with, if not downright contrary to, religious belief. For this reason, a healthy secularity, embodying unity in distinction, is necessary and even vital for both spheres. The challenges raised by the relationship of politics and religion can be met patiently and courageously through a sound human and religious formation."* (Ecclesia in Medio Oriente, N. 29).

An important tool in developing a 'healthy secularity', particularly in the Middle East, is interreligious dialogue. Promoting interreligious dialogue, since it belongs to the religious sphere, is a particular responsibility of religious leaders. However, civil society and political leaders can do much to facilitate the necessary space for interreligious dialogue to take place. Our meeting here in Athens is an important example of this role. In promoting interreligious dialogue, religious leaders must do everything in their power to promote education and mutual understanding of the other since religious fundamentalism thrives on a defective understanding of religion and a readiness on the part of some to manipulate others and religion to obtain power, often by violent means. In this regard, I think it opportune to highlight the *Athens Declaration*2 of 3 September last, the fruit of a meeting of Christian and Muslim religious leaders, organised by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and the KAICIID International Dialogue Centre in Vienna, at which the Holy See's Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue also participated. The Declaration, in denouncing violence in the name of religion, called on all leaders and policy makers to preserve religious and cultural diversity in the Middle East and to support those initiatives designed to strengthen the social fabric of Middle Eastern societies based on the principle of common citizenship.

In sharing with you some fundamental elements of the Catholic Church's vision for the Middle East, I renew the constant appeal of His Holiness Pope Francis to the hearts of all men and women of goodwill, both believers and non-believers, to work unceasingly for peace, to remain steadfast in the face of the seemingly impossible hurdles to peace in the Middle East. Peace is always possible, because, in God, all things are possible, and God is our Peace.

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1 Address of Pope Benedict XVI to the General Assembly of the United Nations, April 2008.

2 *Athens Declaration* 'United Against Violence in the Name of Religion: Supporting the Citizenship Rights of Christians in the Middle East', 3 September 2015.

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