

## ***RELIGION IN DIALOGUE***

### ***The Importance and Imperative of Dialogue in our World***

His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

St. Mary's University, Twickenham London

(November 4, 2015)

Right Reverend Bishop Richard of Arundel and Brighton, Chair of Governors, and Dr. Francis Campbell, Vice-Chancellor of this esteemed university;

Your Excellencies;

Distinguished faculty and guests; Very beloved students,

We gratefully accepted this invaluable honor offered to us by St. Mary's University on the occasion of our formal invitation to London by the Most Reverend Archbishop Justin of Canterbury, in order to address you and receive the unique award of the Pope Benedict XVI medal, the highest award conferred by your institution for the first time ever. We warmly welcome this privilege as recognition of the sacred ministry of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, an apostolic institution with a history spanning seventeen centuries, throughout retaining its venerable See in the historic city of Constantinople.

### ***Orthodox Theology and Religious Freedom***

Christianity challenges the concept of the human person as merely an economic entity or consumer. The Christian tradition insists that every human person is “an animal called to deification” (*zōon theoumenon*), to adopt the words of St. Gregory the Theologian. (*Oration* 38.11) We are creatures called to share in God's glory and become “partakers of divine nature.” (2 Pet. 1.4) The

most important fact about our humanness is that we are formed in the image of God. (Gen. 1.26) We have the capacity and freedom to offer the world back to God in thanksgiving, and it is only in this act of offering that we become genuinely human and truly free.

Of course, freedom is not only personal but also interpersonal. As human beings, we cannot be genuinely free in isolation. We can only be genuinely free in a community of other free persons and in the context of connection with the natural environment. To refuse to share is to forfeit liberty. This indeed is specifically what is implied by the Christian doctrine of God, according to which we profess that the being of God is a relational being.

And if we are formed in the image of the Trinity, it follows that everything said about God also applies to humankind. We are called to reproduce on earth, so far as this is possible, the same movement of reciprocal love that in heaven unites the three persons of the Trinitarian God. Even our social program is the doctrine of a God in communion. Every form of community – the workplace, the school, the city, the nation – has as its vocation to become a living icon of the Trinity. Such is surely part of the role of religion in a changing world: namely to promote freedom among human beings as the basis of encounter and communion.

### ***The Initiatives of the Ecumenical Patriarchate***

The Ecumenical Patriarchate has always been convinced of its wider role and ecumenical responsibility. This inspires its tireless efforts for Orthodox unity throughout the world as well as its pioneering efforts for ecumenical dialogue. Some of the highlights of this dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church include the historic meeting between Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras and Pope Paul VI in 1964, which led to the mutual lifting of the anathemas from 1054, and the equally historic visit between the late Pope John Paul II and our predecessor Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios in 1979, which led to the announcement of the

theological dialogue between our two churches. The visit of the present Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI to Turkey in 2006, in response to our invitation to attend the Thronal Feast of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, led to a renewal of that commitment to dialogue. Perhaps above all, however, the recurring encounters and exchanges with our beloved brother, Pope Francis, have signaled and sealed our obligation and dedication to solidarity in the world as well as our fidelity to tradition and our responsibility for unity in the Church.

Nevertheless, even at the cost of defamation for “betraying” the Gospel, we have never restricted such engagements merely to Christian confessions. Standing as it does on the crossroads of continents, civilizations and cultures, the Ecumenical Patriarchate has always served as a bridge between Christians, Moslems, and Jews. Since 1977, it has pioneered a bilateral inter-religious dialogue with the Jewish community (on such topics as law, tradition, and social justice); since 1986, it has initiated bilateral interfaith dialogue with the Islamic community (on such matters as peace, justice, and pluralism); and since 1994, it has organized a number of international multi-faith gatherings for the purpose of deeper conversations between Christians, Jews and Muslims (on such issues as tolerance).

### ***The Importance of Interfaith Dialogue***

We hear it stated often that our world is in crisis. Yet, never before in history have human beings had the opportunity to bring so many positive changes to so many people simply through encounter and dialogue. While it may be true that this is a time of crisis, it must equally be underlined that there has also never been greater tolerance for respective traditions, religious preferences and cultural peculiarities.

This does not mean that differences on the level of doctrine are insignificant or inconsequential; for, a difference on the level of doctrine leads to a different worldview and, accordingly, a different way of life. Accordingly, then, we do

not approach dialogue in order to set our arguments against those of our opponents in the framework of conflict. We approach in a spirit of love, sincerity and honesty. In this respect, dialogue implies equality, which in turn implies humility. Honesty and humility dispel hostility and arrogance. But just how prepared are we to love and to learn in dialogue?

True dialogue is in fact a gift from God. According to St. John Chrysostom, fourth-century Archbishop of Constantinople, God is always in personal dialogue with human beings. God always speaks: through Prophets and Apostles, through saints and mystics, even through the natural creation itself; for, “the heavens declare the glory of God” Οἱ οὐρανοὶ διηγοῦνται δόξαν Θεοῦ, in the original Greek. (Cf. Psalm 19.1)

### ***Creation Care and Interfaith Dialogue***

Dialogue does not only involve people; it involves the very ground that we tread, the world where we live, and the air that we breathe. As you are aware, our Ecumenical Patriarchate has long taken pioneering initiatives to raise awareness on the vital challenge of creation care. We have repeatedly emphasized that the environment is not only a political or a technological issue; it is, as we have come to appreciate, primarily a religious and spiritual issue. Religion has a key role to play; and a spirituality that remains uninvolved with outward creation is ultimately a faith that is uninvolved with the inward mystery too.

We firmly and fervently believe that, in the struggle to save our planet, everyone without exception – irrespective of confessional or religious conviction – must be included and involved. Moreover, since we are addressing you within an academic institution, we would underline that every science and discipline should also concur and contribute. This is because environmental issues are intimately related to cultural and social issues, such as war and peace, social justice and human rights, as well as poverty and unemployment. Indeed,

as one mystic, Abba Isaac the Syrian (who lived where our world today experiences so much pain and suffering), encouraged us to “acquire a merciful heart, burning with love for all of creation: for humans, birds, and beasts.”

By some mysterious connection that we do not always understand (and sometimes even choose to ignore), the earth reminds us of our calling to embrace dialogue. We will be judged by the tenderness and delicacy with which we respond to nature, which reflects the way we pray to God and treat others. Such is the way of humility, of treading lightly and gently. The earth itself has the humility and resilience to heal us all, if we allow it to survive. This is why, in all of our ecological activities over the past three decades, we have always insisted on an interfaith presence and approach. After all, inter-religious dialogue should inspire a spirituality of compassion and connectedness. If we had such vision and feeling, we would surely appreciate the importance of sustaining the planet’s resources just as caring for the world’s poor.

### ***Conclusion: The Imperative of Interfaith Dialogue***

We would not be so naïve as to claim that dialogue comes without cost or danger. Approaching another person – or another belief, another culture – always comes with a risk. One is never certain what to expect: Will the other suspect us? Will the other perceive us as imposing our own belief or way of life? Will we compromise – or perhaps lose – what belongs uniquely to our own tradition? What is the common ground on which we can converse? What, if any, will be the fruitful results of dialogue?

These questions will naturally plague us when we approach for dialogue. Yet, we are convinced that, in the moment when one surrenders one’s mind and heart to the possibility of dialogue, something sacred happens. In the very willingness to embrace the other, beyond any fear or prejudice, a mystical spark is kindled and the reality of something – or Someone – far greater than us takes over. Then, we recognize how the benefits of dialogue far outweigh the risks.

We are convinced that, in spite of cultural, religious and racial differences, we are closer to one another than we could ever imagine.

Dear friends, it is this grace of encounter with other cultures and faiths that we urge you to pursue. For we are deeply and unwaveringly convinced that this will bring about the surprise of justice and harmony that our world so urgently desires and demands. May God bless you all – administration, faculty and students alike – in your journey toward such dialogue with all people and with our planet.