

PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE: A PANACEA FOR TRUE DEMOCRACY 1 TIM:1:1-4

A talk by Revd. Fr. Robert Lubem Waya, osj, on the occasion of the World Day of Ecumenism held on 26th January, 2019 at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church, Victoria Island, Lagos.

INTRODUCTION

I should like to begin by once again thanking and welcoming you all distinguished and venerable ladies and gentlemen in Christ Jesus, who is the reason for this season of our gathering here today on the occasion of the highpoint of our unity/ecumenical week, culminating with the celebration of the World Day of Ecumenism, as we assemble here now not as strangers but true to our identity and vocation as brothers and sisters in Christ. We are not here to discuss creed or denomination. What I share with you here drawing from scripture, borders on that which is open to us through faith in God, in obedience to the admonition of St. Paul to Timothy to instruct teachers of the faith to shun all falsehood or myths and uphold the truth (1 Tim 1:1-4). The truth is open to us all as what unites us all, first of all as human beings and children of the same one God, and secondly as people called by this same God to live out our identity as His children. How then can we answer this call of living out our identity as the children of God? We can only do this when we dwell in peace with ourselves and with one another.

PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE AS A VOCATION

WHAT IS PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE AND WHAT IS A VOCATION?

Peaceful co-existence was a theory developed and applied by the Soviet Union at various points during the Cold War which was a period of geopolitical tension between the Soviet Union with its satellite states (the Eastern bloc), and the United States with its allies (the Western bloc) after World War II from 1947-1991; that the socialist states could peacefully co-exist with the capitalist bloc. In other words, it is a policy of peace between nations of widely differing political systems and ideologies, especially between Communist and non-Communist nations.

On the other hand, vocation from '*vocare*' means call, but at the same time, vocation is more than just an ordinary call. In every call there is the caller and the receiver of the call. So who is calling and who is receiving the call? Basically, the concept of vocation rests on the belief that life is about more than me. A vocation is a call from God. So when God calls and we respond to that call of God; that is a vocation. To speak of "vocation" or "calling" is to suggest that my life is a response to something beyond myself. For us Christians, we believe this "something beyond myself" is God. But even people outside of our tradition often sense a call to serve others, to create beauty, and to do good in the world. Therefore, a vocation is one's response to a call from beyond oneself to use one's strengths and gifts to make the world a better place through service, creativity and leadership.¹ And since the human person is not a being alone in the world but a being with others, by nature he is created to co-exist with others. However, co-existing with others to make the world a better place is not possible without the condition of peace.

Scripturally we find evidence of peaceful co-existence in the very first book of scripture in Genesis 1:26-28 where God created the first humans to exercise dominion over the entirety of creation. And verse 27 makes it clear that God created them in His image as male and female – that is, two persons. He didn't create the two of them to be fighting each other, but He created them to co-exist with each other. That is why even the blessing of God in verse 28 is for them when they co-exist – God blessed them and God said to them; be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it. Can a woman or a man multiply alone without co-existing with the other? To have created them in His own image and likeness means that God seeks to co-exist with humanity. The Council Fathers likewise lay credence to this fact when they aver that: 'the eternal father, in accordance with the utterly gratuitous and mysterious design of his wisdom and goodness, created the whole universe, and chose to raise up men to share in his own divine life; and when

¹ Roger Ebertz (Department Chair and Professor of Philosophy & Religion at the University of Dubuque), August 17, 2015, accessed on 17-01-2019 at <http://www.dbq.edu/CampusLife/OfficeofStudentLife/VocationalServices/WhatisVocation/>

they had fallen in Adam, he did not abandon them, but at all times held out to them the means of salvation, bestowed in consideration of Christ the redeemer.²

From the foregoing, it is clear that without first imbibing the divine life of God who is our father and creator, we cannot co-exist with our neighbours in peace. The Christian God is understood as a Trinity of persons; Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, who co-exist in peace, and the person who is Christian is also called to emulate this example of God because the mystery of the Trinitarian God is the guarantor of peace in our society today. So if we divorce ourselves from God, then we cannot co-exist in peace with our neighbours, because we have automatically divorced ourselves from peace. Therefore, it is true as Pope Benedict XVI says, that, ‘when mystery no longer counts for anything, then politics necessarily becomes the religion.’³ And so is the case in our country now that politics and not religion is seen as the new path to salvation, so God is being technically and gradually displaced from the human mind and the public sphere.

ANY NEED FOR PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE?

It is no longer news that politics is the new popular religion in our country that is gaining momentum; very attractive, accommodating to all, and employs all means to obtain the power of the ballot not with the intention to serve the interest of the masses but to perpetuate in office. This is politics without conscience that all the more has continued to tear down the fabrics of unity in our country, and has placed us where we are now. And this is what has necessitated the urgent clarion call for peaceful co-existence amongst Nigerians.

Nigeria according to the 2018 estimate, has a population of over 198,577,125 million people. It is the most populous country in Africa and the most populous black nation on earth, and the seventh most populous country in the world. It has the third-largest youth population in the world, after India and China, with more than 90 million of its population under the age of 18. It is a multinational state as it is inhabited by over 250 ethnic groups who speak different languages and are identified with a wide variety of cultures who mostly practice Christianity or Islam, with a few practicing indigenous African religions. With all of these richness which can count as comparative advantage, Nigeria is even all the more poor and divided now than ever before. And some of the major factors that have led to divisions amongst us include but not limited to:- tribalism, politics, religion, marginalization, corruption e.t.c. I shall however limit myself to three of these factors.

a) Tribalism and Politics – Tribalism and politics are scarcely separable in our country. Nigeria is blessed with over 250 ethnic groups. The number of the ethnicities on its own is a wonderful resource if there is unity among them, for unity in diversity is the strength of many other nations. However, this is not the case with Nigeria due to the ugly trend of tribalism. Tribalism is the strong feeling of loyalty to your tribe that makes you exalt the tribe over and above other groups. This in our country Nigeria has become deep seated such that there is division of the nation along tribal lines in every facet of our lives even in the Church. People always only think of their individual and tribal advancement first and this has completely led to suspicion, hatred, lack of trust and discrimination among the different ethnicities, which has led to a total loss of any sense of national cohesion, robbing us of the patriotic consciousness that should characterize the citizens of a nation. Nigeria now has no real national loyalty and unity. So Nigeria today can best be described as a ‘nation without citizens’ since everyone thinks of tribal interests over national interests, including politicians. Therefore, the dominant political argument in our country even as we approach the polls evidences itself as argument between individuals competing for power, or groups of people including tribes quarrelling over the best way to perpetuate in power and to share the limited national cake. This is what makes tribalism so fierce that it has divided us not just along tribal lines but also political lines, and all of these affect our political affiliations. People do not then care to vote those whom may be qualified for the various elective posts vied for, instead they vote mostly according to religion and tribe.

² VATICAN II, *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), 21 November, 1964, no.2

³ Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance; Christian Belief and World Religions*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004, p.126

Religious affiliation and tribe therefore becomes the yardstick today that confers eligibility. One can therefore only imagine how divided Nigeria is now with over 91 registered political parties.

b) Religion and Politics – Religion from the Latin *religare* means to bind. And this relates to the factor that binds the human person to the Supreme Being. Religion therefore rightly ought to be a binding factor that unites us with God and ourselves in co-existence. However, today religion itself has become one of the chief catalysts for disunity amongst us due to differences in creed. Every religion claims and asserts itself as the true religion. Christianity’s basic claim as *religio vera* (true religion) is rooted in John 14:6 – ‘I am the way, the truth and the life.’⁴ With such absolute claims as this in every religion, it becomes difficult for adherents of the different religions to peacefully co-exist together since they do not see things in the same way. This is what has led to religious intolerance in our world today, when everyone lays claim to be the possessor of the truth, and this has resulted into extremism in forms like *al Qaeda*, *isis*, *boko haram*, that seek to violently extinguish other religions. However, this trend can be reversed if there is an open dialogue in truth and tolerance among religions. That is why in his first homily as Pope on 20th April 2005, Benedict XVI said that the Church wants to engage in an open and sincere dialogue with followers of other religions, in order to seek the true good of every person and of society as a whole.⁵ As such any true religion must seek to uphold the good of the human person and the society in which he lives, since his life is a gift from the Supreme Being (God) who is the object of religion. And in the same vein, Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* adds that ‘an attitude of openness in truth and in love must characterize the dialogue with the followers of non-Christian religions, in spite of various obstacles and difficulties, especially forms of fundamentalism on both sides. Interreligious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world, and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities.’⁶ This does not mean the experience is different within us Christians since there still exists amongst us different denominations, making more urgent the call to ecumenical dialogue as we are doing now.

For the Council Fathers, ‘commitment to ecumenism responds to the prayer of the Lord Jesus – *ut omnes unum sint* - that “they may all be one” (Jn 17:21). The credibility of the Christian message would be much greater if Christians could overcome their divisions and the Church could realise “the fullness of catholicity proper to her in those of her children who, though joined to her by baptism, are yet separated from full communion with her.”⁷ In this light, Pope Francis says, ‘we must never forget that we are pilgrims journeying alongside one another. This means that we must have sincere trust in our fellow pilgrims, putting aside all suspicion or mistrust, and turn our gaze to what we are all seeking: the radiant peace of God’s face.’⁸ So beyond and above every religion and denomination is our humanity which comes first, and we must be able to look beyond our religious differences to see our oneness as human beings who all have one origin in the same one God and are called to live together in the same world as pilgrims advancing towards that same God.

PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE AS A PANACEA FOR TRUE DEMOCRACY

Martin Luther King Jnr once defined peace as not the absence of war but the presence of justice. Justice and freedom are the basic principles of a true democracy, which in the Gettysburg address of Abraham Lincoln is a system of government of the people, by the people and for the people. Justice connotes the law, and for the Christian, God is the true and chief law giver who first made this known to Moses when He handed over to him the Decalogue in Exodus 20:2-7. His gifts to His children are always for good as the psalmist attests in psalm 19:7 – ‘the Law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple.’ And Christ who came to fulfil the law, when He was asked by a lawyer, the greatest commandment in the law, reduced all the laws to two; love of God and love of neighbour (Matt 22:36-40). This is the true face of the law, which is not meant for punishment but for the good of man and society in love. Man and woman must therefore respect the law because it is for

⁴ Ibid, p.184

⁵ Cfr. *Insegnamenti di Venedetto XVI*, Vol. 1, Vatican City, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2006, p.12

⁶ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (On the Joy of the Gospel), (November 24, 2013) no.250

⁷ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 4.

⁸ *Evangelii Gaudium*, no.244

their own good. That is why Thomas Aquinas defines law as an ordinance of reason promulgated by a competent authority for the common good. Any law therefore that does not work for the common good such as laws that are anti-life, and anti-human, are evil laws, and we have the moral obligation as Christians to oppose such laws. So Ratzinger in view of this upholds that ‘freedom to destroy oneself or to destroy others is not freedom but a diabolical parody.’⁹

For our democracy to be true, it must uphold its basic tenets of justice and freedom, since freedom without justice will lead to chaos and the freedom of man is a shared freedom. It is to respect the boundaries of this shared freedom that the law becomes necessary to ensure peaceful co-existence among people. In this light, Benedict XVI argues that ‘the freedom of man can only continue to exist within an ordered co-existence of freedoms. This means that law is not contrary to freedom but its condition, a constitutive element of freedom itself. Therefore the absence of law is the absence of freedom,’¹⁰ and by extension the absence of peace. So without law in the society, there won’t be order and peace among the members of the society. It is with the presence of law that we can co-exist in freedom and peace with others; and a true democracy cannot be sustained without entrenching in its system the supremacy of the law. Freedom must always be thought of together with responsibility. The growth of freedom can no longer consist simply in the demolishing of barriers to individual rights ever more widely – something that leads to absurdity and to the destruction of those very individual rights. It must consist in the growth of responsibility. That includes the acceptance of ever greater ties, as demanded by the claims of human co-existence, by what is appropriate for the essence of being human.¹¹

CONCLUSION

As Pope Benedict XVI observes, the reality of the individual carries in it an element of reference to the whole, to others. So there is such a thing as the common truth of the one human existence within every man – ‘nature’ of man.¹² This truth is the fact that man is always a being like God since he comes from God, and a being with others since he must live with others. He is a product of co-existence and only can live out fully this co-existence in obedience to God’s commandments which makes him resemble God. The Decalogue are then the foundation for every law of freedom and are the one truly liberating power in human history. Hence as Christians, children of God we are called to live under the law, so we must respect the law of God and also those of the state. This would ensure peace and lead to cohesion and mutual respect for each one another even amidst our seeming differences, such that even engaging in dialogue we will do so in love, respect, truth and tolerance. Even as we look forward to the polls this year in the much polluted political space, it is incumbent on us Christians to go about the electioneering process following the tenets of our faith that calls us to be peacemakers. To shun all that is evil by overcoming falsehood with truth, violence with peace, hatred with love, leave behind hate speeches and adopt kind speeches. Let us build bridges and not walls, to overcome tribalism, discrimination, religious intolerance and nepotism with unity and tolerance, then following Khalil Gibran, we would be able to say, ‘the universe is my country and the human family is my tribe,’ because I see my humanity bound up in yours, knowing fully well that we can only be human together. So each person will be concerned about the welfare of the other. And then we will realise that we are called to live first of all as human beings before we can be good Christians or Muslims. If we are not truly human, we cannot be good Christians or Muslims.

⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, Truth and Tolerance; p.248

¹⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, Truth and Tolerance; p.249

¹¹ Joseph Ratzinger, Truth and Tolerance; p.251

¹² Joseph Ratzinger, Truth and Tolerance; p.254