



Statement of the Workshop "Syria: Can We Remain Indifferent?"



For His Holiness Pope Francis

On the Deliberations of the Workshop of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on the Crisis in Syria and the Hopes for the Geneva 2 Conference

January 13, 2014

The horror of violence and death in Syria has brought the world to a renewed reflection, and thereby to a new chance for peace. The Geneva 2 Conference on January 22 allows the people of Syria, the region, and the world to conceive of a fresh start to end violence that has claimed more than 130,000 lives and left a beautiful country in ruins and dislocation. Let us therefore all work in harmony and trust to chart an urgent path to reconciliation and reconstruction.

The first and most urgent step, agreeable to all men and women of goodwill, should be an immediate cease-fire and end to violence of all kinds, an end without political preconditions. All internal combatants should put down their weapons; all foreign powers should take immediate steps to stop the flow of arms and arms funding that feed the escalation of violence and destruction. The immediate cessation of violence is in the interest of all. It is a humanitarian imperative, and represents the first step to reconciliation.

The end of fighting should be accompanied by the immediate start of humanitarian assistance and reconstruction. Millions of Syrian people have been displaced. Countless numbers are refugees, being housed temporarily in camps in neighboring countries. The displaced populations are suffering from extreme and life-threatening deprivations of nutrition, safe water, sanitation, electricity, safe shelter, telecommunications, transport, and other basic human needs required by any well-functioning society. Let Syria embark, with the full plentitude of global financial and human support, to a path of rebuilding, one that can begin even before all political and social questions are resolved.

In this vital rebuilding, young people and the poor should be given a preferential role, with access to jobs and to training for vital reconstruction skills. The Syrian economy is in a state of collapse and youth unemployment is pervasive. The re-employment of young people will not only meet urgent material needs, but urgent social and personal needs as well. In this way, the start of material reconstruction can attend to the urgent needs of survival.

Inter-community dialogue and reconciliation should also tend to the urgent needs of spiritual and community rebuilding. Syria is built upon a complex, historic, and wondrous tradition of pluralism of religions, ethnicities,

and cultures. The Holy See is committed to supporting all religious faiths and communities in Syria to reach a new understanding and significant restoration of trust, after years of inter-communal violence.

It is widely understood that the conflict in Syria has drawn its violent force from the conflicts and deep distrust in the region. As many have noted, the conflict in Syria has often been more about the rivalries of the regional and international powers than about conflicts within the Syrian community itself. On the one hand, this is promising.

The people of Syria have lived amongst each other in peace throughout history, and can do so again. On the other hand, the regional conflicts that have engulfed Syria must also be addressed in order to create the conditions for long-lasting peace.

To build the basis for regional peace, Geneva 2 needs to ensure inclusive participation of all parties to this conflict, within the region and beyond. Of particular note is the vital importance of the recent agreement reached between Iran, with the permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany, to find an agreement on Iran's nuclear program. This interim agreement gives the world great hope that an extended period of grave distrust between Iran and other nations in the region and beyond might now be followed by a new era of trust and even cooperation. The success of this new agreement would also provide a vital foundation for a lasting peace in Syria. So too would a breakthrough in the ongoing Israel-Palestinian peace negotiations being facilitated by the United States.

These, then, are preconditions for lasting peace: an immediate cessation of violence; the start of rebuilding; inter-communal dialogue; and progress to resolve all regional conflicts, and the participation of all regional and global actors in the pursuit of peace in Geneva 2. They provide a base of security and reconstruction upon which lasting peace can be built. New political forms in Syria are needed, to ensure representation, participation, reform, and the voice and security of all social groups. Political transformation is needed. It is not a precondition for ending violence; rather, it will accompany the cessation of violence and the rebuilding of trust.

As Pope Francis said¹ in September of last year, at the time of a prayer vigil for peace:

I once again ask the Lord that we Christians, and our brothers and sisters of other religions, and every man and woman of good will, cry out forcefully: violence and war are never the way to peace! Let everyone be moved to look into the depths of his or her conscience and listen to that word which says: Leave behind the self-interest that hardens your heart, overcome the indifference that makes your heart insensitive towards others, conquer your deadly reasoning, and open yourself to dialogue and reconciliation. Look upon your brother's sorrow and do not add to it, stay your hand, rebuild the harmony that has been shattered; and all this achieved not by conflict but by encounter!

¹ Pope Francis, Vigil of Prayer for Peace, 7 September 2013.

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