



COME TO DAMIETTA

Nagahuta

1

2005

The reference to Damietta in the title of the Letter takes up again the spirit of the meeting in Nagahuta and the challenge that attends the contemporary world: to re-incarnate the experience of Francis as seen in his encounter with the Sultan, proposing our fraternity-minority as an evangelical alternative to fundamentalist sectarianism, for the construction of a world that is reconciled and made peaceful.

With the three international congresses, the Order has launched a profound and contemporary reflection on three themes that are among the most hotly debated in the world today: multi-ethnic diversity, inter-religious dialogue and economic justice. To align ourselves with peacemakers with the originality of our evangelical and Franciscan spirituality -- reinforced in the rich and varied experiences that so many brothers are already living everywhere in the world: that is the purpose of the international gatherings held in the last three years!

The path, then, seems well laid out, but the journey requires understanding, deepening, and, in the last analysis, a conversion of mind and heart so as to transform the world into a harmonious dialogue of differences. This is the challenge of every brother and every circumscription.

Fra Tewelde Beyene

The International Office Justice, Peace and Ecology

Dear Brothers:

Between the international meetings organized by the International Office for Justice, Peace and Ecology held in Addis Abeba (2004) and Porto Alegre (2006), there was also another one that occurred in Nagahuta (Indonesia) from the 14th to the 19th of February, 2005, with the theme, "Peacemakers through Inter-religious Dialogue." Because of technical difficulties, the document was delayed in its publication. However, given the urgent timeliness of the theme and the attentive clarity of the Capuchin-Franciscan response articulated at Nagahuta, we have seen it opportune to publish the text before the conclusion of the present sexennium.

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Dear Brothers: Peace and goodness from Nagahuta!

(Pematangsiantar, North Sumatra, Indonesia)

At Damietta, our brother Francis met the Sultan. This event has become in our days an important symbol of inter-religious dialogue throughout the world. At Nagahuta, Indonesia, we, your brothers from every conference of our Order, met to discern how to adapt that historic moment to our present day reality and follow his example and exhortation.

We chose to meet in Asia because it is the most religiously diverse region of the world and because it is also where Christianity is one of its “minority” religions. From February 14th to the 19th, 2005, the Province of Medan offered its wonderful hospitality so that we could address the topic of Peacemakers through Inter-religious Dialogue.” With this letter, we invite you, brothers, to help heal the divisions of our world, as Francis himself tried to do in 1219.

In our conferences and discussions, we heard with joy of the many brothers who zealously engage in works of reconciliation, bridge-building and dialogue between members of various religions. They have established centers for inter-religious dialogue and prayer, and promoted social activities and works of charity for people of all faiths.

At the same time, we were distressed by contemporary stories of human rights abuses like stoning, flogging, destruction of homes, imprisonment without trial, and even executions which are the effects of increasing fundamentalist behavior. Christian churches have been destroyed, their missionaries burned alive, their nuns raped, their priests paraded naked, tortured, shot dead and even beheaded. During our conference, we heard specific testimony of such struggles from brothers from Nigeria, Eritrea, and India.

We learned that extreme fundamentalism is a phenomenon that has political, cultural, and religious overtones. It is characterized by aggressive intolerance and the misuse of religion as an instrument of control. Its causes are complex: religious and political oppression and exploitation, growing economic disparity, and some aspects of globalization. “God is on our side” is the declaration of fundamentalists, whose numbers are increasing rapidly in many countries of the world, a phenomenon fed by mutual ignorance and suspicion. These fundamentalists threaten the peace and harmony of society. Throughout the ages, they have appeared in Hindu, Jewish, Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, and other religious forms, as well as in various secular ideologies.

Because the political situation is different in every country, we were cautioned not to generalize the relationships between people of various religions. We note the fact, however, that, while in some countries, the Constitution may guarantee the freedom of religion, in reality that freedom is often restricted. History demonstrates that extremists have used every religion for their political and economic interests. Christians have not been above this criticism.

Our Response as Christians and Followers of Francis

We believe that Catholic Christians have a major role to play in inter-religious dialogue. The example of Jesus demonstrated his openness to outsiders. He cured the Syro-Phoenician woman, commended the ‘heretical’ Good Samaritan as the model of charity, and praised the faith of the Roman centurion. Jesus rebuked the Apostles when they complained, after their first missionary journey, that the ‘one who was not one of us’ was casting out demons. In fact, one might say that Jesus went out of his way to embrace those who did not belong to his fold.

Vatican II exhorts us to live “in esteem and love for all believers of other religions, to share in their cultural and social life by various exchanges and enterprises of human living and to familiarize ourselves with their national and religious traditions.” (*Ad Gentes*, #11)

Pope Paul VI, in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesiam Suam*, has solemnly declared that “dialogue is the new way of being Church.” (#63) In recent years, Pope John Paul II has expounded a theology of communion, in which he describes the Trinity as the model of all relationships. We are to love each other as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit love. In 1986 and again in 2001, the Pope invited the religious leaders of the world to pray together in Assisi. This should inspire all of us to engage ourselves more intensely in this apostolate.

It is even more clear that the example of St. Francis demands that his brothers be competent in the ministry of reconciliation and peace. When Francis met the Sultan as a “brother,” it was an instance of a “dialogue of life.” The Sultan saw the little poor man of Assisi as a man of faith and Francis saw the Sultan in the very same way.

Because we are created in the image of a Trinitarian God, we are incomplete without relationships. Brother Francis realized this. Therefore, for a Capuchin, every human being is a brother or sister. Indeed, we call one another “brother” precisely to remind ourselves of how we are to relate to one another and to every human being, no matter what his/her religion might be. The Legend of the Wolf of Gubbio is a model of cosmic brotherhood. It teaches us the power of fraternal relationships and shows us how we can relate to extremists. In the Legend, Francis addressed the wolf as “brother” and reminded the wolf that his actions had caused harm and fear among the people. Then he told the people about their own sins and injustice and demanded that they welcome the wolf in peace.

Suggestions for Becoming Peacemakers

Mutual respect and acceptance are based on the conviction that God reveals Himself and works in the lives of people of all religious persuasions. We realize that we may never put an end to all fundamentalist behavior. Nevertheless, we offer the following ways to help build a more just and peaceful world.

Practical

1. Our credibility will be enhanced if we learn to serve all people as minors (PCO VII). This helps us integrate with the culture of a region and understand the feelings and sufferings of the people. By doing so, we identify with them and avoid the often negative label of “foreigners.”
2. Rather than focusing on the faults of others, we ought to be sensitive to and speak positively about the cultural, human, and theological values that other religions offer the world. Believing this, we overcome our fears and can fashion practical ways to live together and to search for truth and goodness in every religion.
3. The example of St. Francis when he went to the Sultan encourages us to initiate and to cooperate in common social, spiritual, cultural, ecological and peace-making activities. In light of this, we could engage more fully in the “dialogue of life,” by finding ways to share in each other’s cultural and religious celebrations and festivals. In addition, we could make our facilities available for this purpose.

Formation

1. In *Nostra Aetate*, we are told to “acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods” found among other religions (#2). We urge all formation programs throughout the Order to include courses to study the values of various religions and philosophies, so that all the brothers might have the special skills needed to be good mediators in inter-religious dialogue. In this way, fear, suspicion, and ignorance could be overcome. Our libraries should include the holy books of other religions, as well as other books on these topics.
2. Some of our brothers ought to be encouraged to study a Franciscan theology of communion, in order to become experts in the knowledge of how to dialogue with various religions to advance our awareness of their gifts.



Spiritual

1. Francis was often called a “living prayer.” Since we hold this value in common with all religious communities, we should be totally committed to become “disciples and masters of prayer” through intensive common meditation, other spiritual exercises, and through preaching the value and importance of contemplation and dialogue.
2. As minor brothers, we are to be “simple and subject to all.” This demands:
 - (a) personal conversion,
 - (b) an admission of our personal sinfulness and that of our church, and
 - (c) the willingness to repent and seek forgiveness, after the example of John Paul II.

3. We commit ourselves never, under any circumstances, to use violence of any kind as a means of proving the correctness of our position, thereby following the example of Jesus Christ (cf. Mt 5:38-42). Tolerance and heroic love are also exemplified by: Mahatma Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Oscar Romero, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and countless others who gave their lives rather than lift the sword.

Fraternal

1 PCO VII #42 reminds us that “our fraternities should be focal points of peace and reconciliation in our neighborhoods.” In light of this, could we not open the doors of every friary and parish to our non-catholic brethren for regular prayer and dialogue? People ought to see how we relate to each other (how we en flesh the theology of communion) and be inspired by our example.

2. PCO VII #51 also tells us to “stand by and support our brothers who serve in regions where religious fundamentalism is growing rapidly.” To this end, we need to call upon the expertise of Franciscans International (www.franciscansinternational.org) to fairly and honestly present those situations to the United Nations, asking for the restoration of basic human rights.

3. If we are truly minor brothers, we anticipate the needs of all, we develop a high code of courtesy and we respect the opinions and beliefs of others. This follows PCO VII #47 which promotes evangelization by showing us the way: “When we go among those who do not share our faith, we are called in the first place to be witnesses of Christ by our life, and secondly, following the recommendation of St. Francis, to dialogue with others and not to proselytize or despise or wrongly interpret the beliefs of others. Consequently, we wish to live among the poor without distinction of religion, to dialogue with cultures, religions and denominations and inculturate the gospel.”

4. As brothers we are to live closely with the people, bearing witness by our lives and waiting on the operation of the Holy Spirit to prompt us to preach (*Regula non-Bullata*, X).

5. Wealth does not create peace. Developing a “fraternal economy” has as its principle goal, unity among persons, communities, and nations. To do this, it is necessary to find creative ways to use our local, provincial and international financial resources to unite rather than divide “the haves” from the “have-nots,” thereby creating a communion with and among the poor.

Conclusion

There is great wisdom at the core of every religious and spiritual tradition. The goal of all dialogue is “to unify under one Spirit all human persons of whatever nation, race, or culture ... in order to build up the world in genuine peace.” (*Gaudium et Spes*, #92)



Bringing together people from every level of society, from science, and spirituality, for in-depth discussions could help reconcile people of different ideologies. To those who say this cannot be done, consider the case of the end of apartheid in South Africa. After centuries of bitter suffering and bloodshed, a peace process was developed which, for the first time, brought both parties together. If it can happen there, it can happen elsewhere!

Brothers, in addressing the question of extremist behavior in today’s world, humankind now has an awesome responsibility and Capuchins, with our charisms of fraternity, minority and contemplation can play a significant part.

We wish to remind you of what John Paul II told the religious leaders at the Assisi World Day of Prayer for Peace Conference (1986): “Let us see here an anticipation of what God would like the developing history of humanity to be: a fraternal journey in which we accompany one another towards the transcendent goal which He has set for us.”

Peace and goodness always,

The Brothers at the Nagahuta Conference

Nagahuta, February 19, 2005