



GRAND MAGISTERIUM – VATICAN
EQUESTRIAN ORDER OF
THE HOLY SEPULCHRE OF JERUSALEM

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

Coexistence, a damnatio?

The crisis of relationships



As we approach Christmas, Cardinal Filoni, Grand Master, invites us to dwell on the great gift that God gives us on that day and always: the gift of relationship. How often in our daily lives we see that relationships with others, with nature, with ourselves, and even with God are difficult, sick, conflicting. Yet, in the Child who is born in Bethlehem from a young virgin, God takes our flesh, enters into the concreteness of our reality, takes it upon Himself and, at the same time, welcomes us into the Trinity and opens us to dialogue with Him, to a deeper relationship with Him. Let us therefore open the doors to this gift of grace that heals all our relationships.

This question is the fruit of what we are experiencing today. But not only today! The wars in Ukraine, Palestine and Israel, Sudan and elsewhere continually place us before the doubt that differences, either the result of interests or atavistic reasons, even religious ones, frequently seem irreconcilable, indeed harbingers of violence. Is coexistence, living together, really a *damnatio*, a condemnation? The dramatic episodes of feminicide, of family fractures, of young people who make violence a way of living and being, the vicissitudes of complicated inter-religious situations and of politics in sick attachment to power question us as to why seemingly impossible relationships exist. The inherent crisis deepens or diminishes in ways that are greatly affected when rationality, intelligence, the search for truth and the role of conscience itself remain marginalized.

As a young man, I lived in mostly culturally homogeneous, mono-religious, Catholic settings. Then, after my thirties, I found myself in many multi-cultural and multi-religious countries where the Christian faith was a minority. I became familiar with new environments (Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu) which, I recognize, were providential for my formation and also beautiful. Basically one is opened to a wealth

of values and esteem that is unparalleled. The ugly, always, comes from fanaticism and contempt; and I also found myself in the midst of wars.

I have made precious friends. Here I will refer to two. One friendship was born while I was living in Hong Kong. On a courtesy visit, a rabbi of German origin but transplanted to New York City, where he headed the Park East Synagogue, came to visit me. As a boy he was interned in the Nazi death camps and still has his identifying number tattooed on his arm. He is a survivor so that he can tell and we do not lose memory of those horrors (a visit to the death camps is always a worthwhile meditation). With Benedict XVI, as Substitute of the Secretariat of State, I advocated a papal visit to his Synagogue because the Pope had to go to the United Nations; it was the event of a lifetime for this extraordinary Rabbi who had dedicated his existence to the peaceful coexistence of peoples.

Before I left Iraq in March 2006, after the war but still in a period of severe civil and political instability and persecution of Christians, a Muslim came to see me. He wanted to meet me by bringing me a pectoral cross, the one that Catholic bishops usually use. He said it was a gift for me and that he had made it himself, being a craftsman. The value of the metals used were not what mattered (they were not precious metals), what mattered was the meaning: A Muslim had created a Christian symbol for a Catholic bishop. He said that gift was for sharing with the people of his country the suffering of war and its terrible consequences.

I keep grateful memories of those two relationships as a precious gift.

Again, is coexisting peacefully between different realities really impossible? What is required to achieve it? The crisis of relationships, we know, is human, but the quality of them depends on our cultural, religious and human health.

In his teaching, Jesus exhorted the Disciples to be in the world, but not to belong to it (cf. Jn. 15:19); that world in which human beings by cultivating their own selfishness, become resentful, hateful, false, unspeakably dissatisfied, envious, and even murderers. The Web has helped melt instincts into the presumption of servile anonymity.

Looking deeper, what emerges is the crisis of *relationships*. Relationship is not a marginal aspect of living but an essential one, beginning with that from the womb, gradually involving every aspect of our living being; even in relation to the *spirit*, which should represent the reference to the *other*, a different ideal of living together.

Every relationship, on closer inspection, always has a three-dimensional form: that with nature, of which beauty is the most fascinating aspect; that with the other, not infrequently convoluted, but indispensable; and that with the spirit, which is neglected today. In this regard, an interesting writer (Benjamin Labatut) believes that most people who are or even who do not repute to be enlightened, awake and intelligent *have lost faith in all that is not visible*, in all that is Other. As a result, we are all, for some reason, losing the attitude of inwardness, of prayer, of faith in prayer, of asking for something. We have also lost, in so many ways, our relationship with God, to whom the conscience, which is the shrine of our human being, appeals.

Let us return to our original question. Indeed, if we lose the sense of our three-dimensional relationship we remain alone; and the loneliness is not the creative one of Anthony, anchorite in the desert, who aroused emulation and had so many followers until now, but of those who do not look into the eyes of others, do not grasp their beauty and develop feelings of closure: terrorism and war are the most manifest and devastating expression of this.

The ancient Church Fathers, those who theologically sought to explain the Mystery of God, spoke of a God who is Relation, both in the Trinitarian sphere, as a communion of Persons, and in the anthropological sphere, the Christmas of Christ, in which God assumed corporeality, so that the relationship between God and man would be truly meaningful, not ideological, not dreamlike, not mythological.

With Christmas now approaching, we remember that unprecedented Event of the most important of relationships.

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