

**Religions and The Need for
Structural Changes in Today's World**

*By Archbishop Helder Camara**

Blessed be the Lord for our Meeting.

Some years ago, a meeting such as this would have been unthinkable. And, let us admit, even today, each one of us is aware of the difficulties he has to face within his own congregation.

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The important fact is the miracle accomplished by the Lord: we are here. We respect each other. None of us is prompted by proselytizing motives. Each one has come with an open heart, ready to understand and love his bretheren. Nobody is here to ignore human frailties, errors and the sins into which we fall in our daily strife as preachers of a Lord. Above all, we are anxious to find effective ways of coming into agreement with a view to helping Humanity face its immense problems.

We know full well that man has reached a decisive stage: He is now capable both of destroying life on earth, or making it possible for each human being to reach a standard of living worthy of the sons of God.

A real Meeting requires each one to come out of his shell and overcome his selfishness. A real Meeting requires that each one, while remaining loyal to his own conscience and to his own convictions, should aim at discovering whatever may unite us, without measuring sacrifices, and at whatever may make it possible, tomorrow, to work together for the greater glory of God and the well-being of Mankind.

May the Lord help us to be worthy of the Kyoto Meeting:

The World situation is serious.

Without giving way to discouragement and pessimism but, also, without nursing any naive optimistic illusion, and with the realism which our faith will give us, we may, I hope, recognize that:

- there is a growing distance between the small group of countries which are becoming ever richer, and whole continents which, with the exception of a few countries and areas, fall more

and more into misery and underdevelopment;

- in the poor countries, there are usually small privileged groups which, blind and deaf to the sub-human conditions of their fellow-countrymen, maintain their own fortunes at their expense;

- in the rich countries, there are layers of poverty, there are the under-employed leading a life which is in painful contrast with the prosperity, the splendour and the luxury that surrounds them;

- the rich countries tend, instinctively, to think that their own prosperity is due, above all, to racial superiority, and that their wealth is merely a question of intelligence, determination, hard work and honesty. The rich countries tend, instinctively, to think that the misery of the underdeveloped countries is due, first of all, to a problem of racial inferiority and is very much a question of ignorance, laziness and dishonesty and that all this is made worse by an absurd increase in population which annuls any plan for development;

- the real reason for the growing distance between the rich and the poor countries lies in international trade policies. The prices for international trade are set at the great trade centres of the world, where prices for raw materials produced by poor countries are for ever going down while the prices for industrialized products of the rich countries are always going up. It is easy to multiply examples to prove that the poor countries must always produce more in order to receive each time less for their work;

- just as in poor countries the rich classes maintain their wealth at the expense of the misery of millions of fellow-countrymen, the rich countries derive their wealth from the underdevelopment

and misery of the poor ones. In the long-run, what they pretend to give back in the form of technical and financial aid is merely a drop of water which, on no account, makes up for the tremendous losses inflicted on the underdeveloped countries;

- apart from trade injustices in some cases, the sums which, illegally, return to the rich countries as extorsive profit;

The responsibility of Religions.

Let no Religion fall into the temptation of thinking that considerations much as those I have mentioned escape our religious realm and belong to a political sphere.

At the core of today's problems lies a moral issue as well as a crucial religious problem. The moral issue regards selfishness which is at the root of all the evils mentioned here. If only there could be less selfishness, individual and collective, the distances within a country would not be so striking, nor would there be much a shocking difference between the affluent countries and the hungry ones.

The extremely serious religious problem consists in the mystery through which all the great Religions of the world have been unable to overcome selfishness in the world; have, so far, been incapable of reaching the consciences of the privileged--individuals, groups and nations--and the sad result is that, today, we are all witnessing the beginning of an explosion of hate and violence throughout the world.

May my Christian brothers allow me to have the strength and courage to admit that we, Christians, are among the most responsible for this negative state of affairs. It would be easy to lull on

the illusion of listing the benefits which we, through the Christian message, have brought to men. If, however, we go into the heart of the problem, we shall find that 20% of humanity holds in their hands 80% of the resources of the earth and, for our shame, the privileged 20% --who do not succeed in overcoming their own selfishness and in finding their way towards justice and love, which would lead towards peace--are, at least in their origin, Christians.

For this meditation of ours it would be very helpful if, instead of each Religion being concerned in justifying itself and accusing her brothers, the representatives of all Religions here present, would unite, confident of finding, together, the way to overcome our faults and to do everything within our reach to attain the triumph of love and peace among men.

Beyond the frontiers that separate us.

We must stand on guard against the innumerable factors that generate division among us and, above all, among our own flocks: language, race, religious differences, present and past wars, prejudices, erroneous information, lack of better acquaintance with each other.

If we don't convince ourselves of the exceptional seriousness of the present hour and of the responsibility of all Religions towards Mankind, chaos will prevail.

Let us keep straight before our eyes the facts which contribute most for the present situation: the injustices which, today, do not affect only individuals and groups, but whole countries and continents; thanks to the extremely rapid means of social communication, the misery and the splendour existing anywhere

in the world cannot remain hidden any longer, they are exposed to the whole world; and, it is worth repeating, we are living a decisive hour of the history of Mankind. Men are capable of annihilating the human race and are, at the same time, capable of providing for all men living conditions worthy of human dignity. But it is a well-known fact that, nowadays, over two-thirds of Humanity vegetate in sub-human conditions.

Let us set clearly before our eyes the inescapable reason why Religions have to work together towards peace, above whatever frontiers that may separate us; at the root of the social-economic injustices and of the misled attitudes in the cultural-political field, we find the real challenge: the moral and religious problem.

Three or four essential points.

Let us not deceive ourselves by trying to subscribe to dozens of conclusions. It would already be outstanding if we managed to agree on three or four essential points.

Let me dare suggest the following:

- a) Peace will only become a reality when justice prevails;
- b) Without wasting time, let us try, as far as possible together, to pin-point with accuracy which are the realities of each region, each country, each continent and the world, which are the most obvious, the most glaring injustices that constitute threats to peace;
- c) Without hate, without incitement to violence and without fear but with firmness, let us denounce injustice as the great obstacle to peace; injustice is the source and cause of all violence.

Summing up, I shall repeat these three essential points:

- without justice, we shall have no peace;
- let us try, without delay, to pin-point the gravest injustices around us and in the world;
- let us get together to claim for justice and for love; the only path for real and lasting peace.

Action for Justice and Peace.

Perhaps humility, added to a certain amount of discouragement, may lead us to think that what each one of us may accomplish is nothing, or almost nothing. But we must have in mind that small, active and determined minorities, full of faith, hope and love can achieve wonders.

Waves of radicalization and hate are invading all countries and threatening the world. God, who is love, must be awakening innumerable vocations in the depth of consciences, vocations for servants of peace within all languages, races and Religions, among men and women of every age and social class. The Spirit of God must be manifesting itself.

Let us, without any further delay, try to find within our own country, those whom the Lord is calling to work towards justice as a precondition for peace: young, adult and old; men and women; students and teachers; workers and employers; illiterate and intellectuals, civilians and military

The Lord demands our effort, our participation, but He is already working, He has already made the decisive appeal, has already bestowed the touch of love.

How can we succeed in putting all our efforts together and work in the same direction?

It is by no means through a political party, or a new sect,

nor a movement with national or world bosses.

I refer to the gathering of brothers with the same ideal of working towards the justice that will lead to peace. We want an Action for Justice which will lead to Peace. In short: Action for Justice and Peace.

If the hour of Providence has struck, if it has the seed of God, no matter our limitations and frailties, our divisions and selfishness, the Action for Justice and Peace will unite men of good will in the whole World.

What will it do? Empty and ineffectual appeals in favour of justice?

It will demand changes in the structure of slavery with, or without that name, wherever slavery exists.

It will be that internal colonizers, neo-colonialisms and imperialisms, be they capitalist, or socialist, come to an end.

It will insist that trade relations between peoples be made in the name of justice and not of ruthless exploitation and greed.

Utopia? Absurd?

If the Religions of the world, each remaining true to herself and to the message received from the Lord, would get together to support Action for Justice and Peace, something that seems absurd may become possible, what seems utopic may become a reality.