



Address
by Bishop Dr Bertram Meier (Augsburg),
President of the Commission for International Church Affairs and
President of the Committee for Interreligious Dialogue
of the German Bishops' Conference
at the Tolerance and Human Fraternity Summit
on 6 February 2023, Abu Dhabi

“Let us build bridges!”

Your Eminences and Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Brothers and Sisters,

As President of the Commission for International Church Affairs of the German Bishops' Conference and as the Catholic bishop responsible for interreligious dialogue in Germany, it is an honour and a pleasure for me to participate in this distinguished summit. I would like to thank the Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence of the United Arab Emirates as well as the Muslim Council of Elders for their kind invitation and for all their efforts to strengthen the bonds of human fraternity.

As brothers and sisters we have the ability, but also the obligation to engage in greater cooperation, to meet common challenges on the basis of shared values, to reduce tensions and conflicts, to promote the understanding and appreciation of different cultures, to advocate for fair economic conditions, to treat every human being and all of creation with respect. Fraternity is by no means a luxury item, but a matter of survival.

Let us not close our eyes to the wounds of our time: global injustice, the climate crisis and other ecological catastrophes, hard-heartedness towards refugees, war and discord between peoples. These existential questions of humanity also form the background against which the Abu Dhabi

Document was written. Allow me to take a closer look at some of its theological and practical foundations from a Catholic point of view.

“Since God the Father is the origin and purpose of all men, we are all called to be brothers. Therefore, [...] we can and we should work together without violence and deceit in order to build up the world in genuine peace.”¹ This quote from the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* offers a solid religious foundation of equal dignity, while also echoing the joint responsibility of all human beings, regardless of their origin or religious affiliation.

This motif of a “brotherly” connection between all people has been taken up and developed further by Pope Francis. The aim is clear: “a social friendship that excludes no one and a fraternity that is open to all”.² For we are all related to one another through our relationship with the Creator, who has entrusted us with caring for the earth, our common home.³

A devout awareness of the fact that we are God’s creatures can protect us from the temptation of arrogance and self-conceit. Hence, religions have a significant role to play – also and especially under the auspices of modernity and secularism. As the Pope put it during his journey to Azerbaijan: “Religions are called to help us understand that the center of each person is outside of himself, that we are oriented towards the Most High and towards the other who is our neighbor.”⁴ This must not be confused with fatalism or resignation. Rather, it is a message of encouragement and liberation. Genuine faith can help bring out the best in a person.

At the same time, the Pope warns religions against the temptation of violence. Religious leaders have a duty “to denounce violations of human dignity and human rights” and to condemn all attempts to justify “hatred in the name of religion”. For God is “the God of peace,” *salam*.⁵ The Pope expressed this thought succinctly in his prayer for the victims of war and terror in Iraq: “If God is the God of peace – for so he is – then it is wrong for us to wage war in his Name. If God is the God of love – for so he is – then it is wrong for us to hate our brothers and sisters.”⁶ With these words spoken in the church square of Mosul, he commemorated victims of different faiths and denominations.

This leads us to another important dimension of human fraternity: Shortly after the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis visited the island of Lampedusa. There, he linked God’s question to Cain in the face of fratricide (Gen 4:9) with Europe’s indifference to the death of

¹ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes* (GS), 92.

² Cf. *Fratelli tutti*, 94.

³ Cf. the encyclical *Laudato si'* which bears the subtitle “on care of our common home”.

⁴ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/october/documents/papa-francesco_20161002_azerbaijan-incontro-interreligioso-baku.html.

⁵ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/april/documents/papa-francesco_20170428_egitto-conferenza-pace.html.

⁶ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/prayers/documents/papa-francesco_pregchiere_20210307_preghiera-iraq.html.

refugees in the Mediterranean: “Where is your brother?” And he added another question: “Has any one wept?” – “Has any one of us grieved for the death of these brothers and sisters?” Empathy and compassion are true expressions of a fraternity which transcends all boundaries. It is therefore no coincidence that the interpretation of the example of the Good Samaritan forms the spiritual focal point of Pope Francis’ encyclical *Fratelli tutti*: “Love does not care if a brother or sister in need comes from one place or another.”⁷

During the pandemic we have learned with new urgency: No one can save himself alone; we are sitting in the same boat.⁸ It is a matter of entering into a relationship with our neighbor, of building multilateral alliances of fraternity and solidarity, of serving the well-being of our common home. The believers of the different religions must be craftsmen of justice and peace, respecting each other’s faith and everybody’s dignity.

Fortunately, the Pope is not alone in this vision. Above all, he has an energetic Muslim counterpart, the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar in Egypt, Grand Imam Ahmad al-Tayyib. This brings us to the historic meeting four years ago, here in Abu Dhabi: a journey remarkable in every respect. 800 years after the memorable meeting between Saint Francis of Assisi and Sultan al-Kamil of Egypt, the no less memorable encounter between Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Azhar took place. For the first time in history a Pope visited the Arabian Peninsula.

All those in Rome, Cairo and Abu Dhabi who made this momentous event come true deserve great appreciation. From my exchange with the Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Elders, who played an important role here, I know that there was a thorny path to be travelled. But it was worth every effort.

With the “Document on Human Fraternity” the Pope and the Grand Imam set a milestone in interreligious dialogue and global cooperation. With one voice, they called on Christians and Muslims to recognize each other as brothers and sisters, to commit themselves to a culture of tolerance and peaceful coexistence, to defend human rights, and to overcome violence and hatred. For a long time to come the Abu Dhabi Document will remain a central reference work for interreligious dialogue – in the Middle East, Europe and worldwide. Let us build bridges! Above all, we must bring the message of human fraternity to the young generation. The young people are the future of our religious communities and societies.

The content of the Abu Dhabi Document is by no means trivial. Already the very first sentence is demanding and challenging: “Faith leads a believer to see in the other a brother or sister to be supported and loved.” If we really were to live up to this claim, the world would be a different place. Each and every one of us is called upon to overcome what divides us. War and armed conflicts, grave poverty and human rights violations in various parts of the world, the hardships of deportation and flight, the dramatic impacts of the climate crisis – none of these problems will be mitigated or solved without a reliable attitude of fraternity, strong forms of multilateral

⁷ Cf. *Fratelli tutti*, 62.

⁸ Cf. *Fratelli tutti*, 32.

cooperation and a clear commitment to global engagement. The Pope and the Grand Imam are aware of the hatred that can be unleashed in the name of religion. And precisely for this reason, they forcefully remind us that we are all destined to live together as sisters and brothers.

It is more than appropriate that the United Nations decided to proclaim the 4th of February as the International Day of Human Fraternity. This day sends a clear signal: Religions have the potential, but also the responsibility to contribute to peace and justice on earth – our common home. We do this by trusting that God is the one who “unites divided hearts and elevates the human soul”.⁹

Thank you very much for your attention.

⁹ See the end of the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living together*.