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Tomáš Halík

Mr President, dear guests, for three days, we participants of the Prague conference Forum 2000 - people coming from different backgrounds, different cultures, people of different convictions - have all been pondering the situation of humankind on the threshold of the 21st century. We have been thinking about all the threats faced by humankind, we have been talking about all our hopes: what we can follow as an example, and what should be avoided. We have gathered here on this holiest of all sites in the Czech Republic to experience what has not been experienced throughout the history of humankind. And it is wonderful that on this occasion the spiritual content of this conference is compounded by the presence of the Czech public. We should like to feel here everything that is inside us, that has been part of our traditions, of our history. This mystery, as I call it, has got a different appearance.

There are different religions, and there are different barriers but then these religions could be used as a bridge between different traditions and religions. And I believe that our meeting here today also provides some kind of answer, some kind of hope to all these questions, questions related to the responsibility of religion, for the destiny of mankind. So before we start meditating led by the representatives of these major religions, I would like to ask his Eminence, Prague Archbishop Vlk to greet this assembly, to be followed by Dr Hilde Kieble, who is the President of the European Federation of the Community of Saint Agidio that has also participated in organising this conference.

Miloslav Vlk

Mr President, dear friends, ladies and gentlemen, I greet and welcome you all here to today's meeting on this holy site overlooking Prague at the heart of Europe.

We are not meeting here today just in a drive for some vague unification that would not be based on profound contextual links with the history of many centuries. The fact that we are meeting here today is a manifestation of something much more profound, much deeper. Our meeting today on the occasion of the Forum 2000 conference is the fruit of a long journey pursued by various religions, of our common pilgrimage that has led to mutual understanding, to deeper understanding and to more respect for one another.

Individual religious faiths are different by nature. But these differences should not be a motif behind any separation or a reason for mutual hatred. These common meetings are a manifestation of the value of dialogue in this large world in which people of different religions coexist together. The face of our large world has been scarred. It has been scarred by the violence of wars. But it is the world that we all love and we expect peace and joy connected with the healing of these scars and wounds. What we would like to say here together is that we love this world.

At present times, unfortunately, we have also seen - and we are still seeing - believers who have succumbed to the logic of violence and often to the logic of death. Representatives of individual religions facing this world have decided to start meeting one another as Pope John Paul II said in 1986 in Assisi - not one against each other but one with another. And now believers develop their confidence not in power per se but in the power of spirit. We have embarked on a new path, a path that has led to more tolerance and more peace. We started discovering a new kind of heroism of our time: dialogue. Dialogue is a more important type of heroism than waging weapons against your own brother. The value of a meeting like the one today lies in the fact that we have found the courage not to fight but to lead this dialogue.

It is time to address the implications of the pollution of the world. Just as we have the pollution of our nature there has also been a pollution of our spiritual environment by violence, indifference, egoism, by distorted relations between representatives of different generations. And yet this is often seen as a sign of our civilisation. Large religions, however, feel that they can co-operate for the sake of the ecology of spirit. And that is also a reason why we are meeting here today.

I should like to welcome you all here, and also our public. I am very grateful that our cathedral is really full here today because I see this as a manifestation of your interest in hearing what these religions have to say. I should like to welcome you all most cordially. I should also like to use this opportunity to thank the Community of Saint Agidio for helping us organise this assembly. In conclusion I should like to wish you all that this evening on this holy site overlooking Prague should be a very profound experience that will become an impulse for our future endeavours. Thank you.

Hilde Kieboom

Mr President, your excellencies, distinguished representatives of world religions, ladies and gentlemen, let me first of all express my sincere feelings of thanks and acknowledgements to the organisers of this meeting for asking for the participation of the Community of Saint Agidio. The mutual responsibilities of religions towards the future of mankind lies at the very heart of the vocation of our work throughout the world. Indeed, as an international Christian lay community, Saint Agidio is involved in various efforts to promote human rights and real power of peace in different conflict areas in the world.

Undoubtedly, Mozambique's peace treaty is the most known example. But also in other countries like Algeria, Burundi, Guatemala and Kosovo, we have both been supporting and promoting peace processes and initiatives. In this perspective the encounter between religions is being put into concrete service to peace. This evening we will share interventions with representatives from different world religions - not a common prayer nor syncretism but a meditation on peace arising from different religious traditions. These reflections are the expression of our common will to design responsibilities and chances for our world and they are rooted in dialogue and a growing solidarity. We are aware that so many questions and wounds still remain open, some even in a tragic way. We do not wish to hide them. An awareness of problems and the memory of tragedies makes us more responsible for our world.

In this 20th century, which is running to its end, people of different religions have gathered more than ever before in history. But ours is also an undoubtedly terrible century of confrontation. Some recent calculations pointed to about 170 million people who died in wars. The Second World War revealed how strong evil can be in mankind. A huge cry rises from Auschwitz and, after that day in Assisi, we felt the need to keep the spirit of peace and understanding alive in order not to allow it to become an isolated instance. We have been continuing the meeting every year with the help of leaders belonging to different religious traditions, in dialogue with the representatives of the political, cultural and secular world who felt responsibility for the holiness of man's destiny. So we gathered year after year offering occasions for meeting, for friendship and understanding.

But are these Utopian ceremonies or powerless meetings far from daily scenarios? I do not need to expatiate on the political and ideological changes after 1989 in a city like Prague. That plays a decisive role in the non-violence process. The political geography was no longer marked by the division of the world into East and West. Many hearts and minds were longing for a better world, for peace, for more contact between peoples and countries. Religion and politics were no longer separate reigns. They could co-operate. But then difficulties arose. Ethnic and nationalist conflicts exploded as never before. Examples of peaceful coexistence between different cultures broke down in a disastrous way. The city of Sarajevo became a symbol in this sense.

It is not the only case in today's world, and today we think particularly about the holy city of Jerusalem that has been wounded again. A lot of the present conflicts do have religious roots or connotations. We hear people interrogate religions about their sense. Are they a factor of confusion and division in society? What can religions really mean for mankind? In the face of an ever more complicated society a kind of pessimistic resignation often paralyses the hearts of believers. In an age where society is waiting for hopes and dreams they can yield, we cannot imprison the treasure of religion in a sacred cage by a feeling of generalised powerlessness and indifference. Peace is the name of God. And religions have to remind this to society. In every religious tradition the value of peace is written in its fundamentals. Religions are called to collaborate more than ever with all constructive partners in society in the name of peace.

The various religions do not have power on their own. Considering their own weakness, religions can lament over their situations and dream of imitating the great ones of this world. We even see religious persons become prisoners of a conflictual logic, even in the most extremist expressions as to disapprove of life. But do not they become in the end spiritually poor and a ridiculous copy of civil and political authorities? We are convinced that religions do have energy of their own, their own kind of power which differs from that of this world's. We called it the weak strength of religions. Over the past years, starting in Assisi, we have realised that only the ancient arms of forgiveness and dialogue can purify an environment which has been polluted by personal and collective feelings of violence. It is necessary to fight against this pollution by disarming the hearts of people.

Religions do not want war and they cannot be used for it. There is no such thing as a holy war. Only peace is holy. In this sense something is still unfinished. This is an incomplete revolution that may occasionally turn into indifference or barbarity. The political changes must be followed by changes at a level of people's consciences. They must turn into reconciliation and the building of bridges. Religious duty is the reconciliation of hearts. This genuine but essential dream has an echo in different hearts and religions and it is also a need. Today we try to reach the depth of these peace energies by listening to the various religious traditions. And we do believe that the weak strength of encounter and dialogue can change history and build in the new millennium a new era of peace.

Tomáš Halík

Turning to the oldest of the three monotheistic religions, Rabbi Albert Friedlander from the Westminster Synagogue in London, will read from The Messiah.

Albert Friedlander

Let me begin with the text in Hebrew and then in English. "Comfort you, comfort you, my people, says the Lord. Jerusalem, take heart and proclaim unto her that a time of service is accomplished, that her guilt is paid, that she has received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins. Clear in the wilderness the way of the Lord, make plain the desert a highway for our God."

Why this text? Such a simple text. How good and how pleasant it is for siblings to live together in unity, but

that would have been an easy option and I am in the presence of my teacher and friend Elie Wiesel who does not permit me to have easy options. So I took this text. It is a text for our time, which follows suffering. All of us, God's children, we all suffer. The text does not apply solely to Jerusalem and Israel. We have come together because we have all suffered in this century. We all live after the holocaust, we all still need comfort and yet particularly in this time one must also make it a special prayer, a prayer for those who died in Jerusalem, a prayer that comes out of the Hebrew tradition and ask God, the God of compassion, to take the children, the loved ones into his arms and to bless them with perfect peace.

We all need comfort, sometimes as an individual, sometimes as a people, and we turn to religion at such times. Sometimes a people need a very special comfort on an occasion, at a moment which becomes the pain of a nation. I left Great Britain totally in tears and I too wept when I thought of a long conversation I once had with Princess Diana, when she talked of the charities which would now become her total occupation. It is difficult to judge individuals but it is easy to admire beauty and the shining vision of a woman coming at least to a special task. But let us return to the text. It is repeated, and it is more than the thought that we, the children of God and a dark world, should find comfort. It refers to the profits. The teachers, the leaders, some of you assembled here have led nations. Were you able to comfort your people in times of darkness? Did you confront the past with its sins and shortcomings? Did you demand repentance and restitution? Is their hope for the people and the leaders?

Hope rests in the awareness that the divine brings us into the world, that it can heal, that it can give comfort. And it is the task of religion to cry out in this world. A voice calls; sometimes it is a voice that is supposed to come out of the wilderness but it does not cry out in the wilderness in this text - it is a word that comes to the prophets and teachers. We must understand Hebrew poetry. It is a parallelism that in beautiful terms, and in Hebrew particularly, cries out: "Clear in the wilderness the way of the Lord, make plain the desert a highway for our God." The second line supplements the first. It is a constant vision of religion, a faith that sees the divine pathway upon which the people can walk and walk towards a promised land. The year 2000 may well be viewed as a gateway beyond which we can explore a better way which can bring humanity together, which can lead toward what many religions see as a coming world of God. But how do we reach it unless we have come to terms with the past? To be comforted does not mean that our pain, our wounds, our shortcomings, have been stripped from our bodies or our communities.

We will carry our pain into the future as well. Sometimes I think of Von Hugel who looked at his audience and muttered: "That bunch just wants to be happy." But pain and unhappiness are an important part of human life. If we do not feel the pain of our neighbors, if we do not use our religious face to examine and judge ourselves with this year 2000, will it be different from the last year, from the last decade, from the last century? We have lived in the century of the greatest brutality and we still carry that burden within us.

Perhaps here religion can help us. Perhaps that is why I selected this text. We know that we must be comforted, and we know that there must be a comforter. I have admired so many of you who are assembled in this cathedral today. I still expect you to be prophets of the year 2000. If the burdens of office have been relinquished it means that the chains have been discarded. Prophecy might be combined with presidency. We have an example here in Prague, I think. But it is easier to be the proclaiming voice when one stands among the people and listens to them. We do not give comfort from a distance, but when we stand next to the other and reach out to touch the person who needs comfort. Give comfort and be comforted - surely that is a central insight of our religious faith when we are all so near to God and so far away from God. All of us are still in exile, but there is a highway - a path which we can walk together with the divine presence within us. Amen.

Tomáš Halík

This Koran text calls for peaceful coexistence between Muslims, Christians and Jews.

Mohammed Amine Smaili

This passage from the Koran is able to bring a religious message. Because God created man who by his nature is religious, but the human being changes. It becomes a layman or an atheist. Because God has left us the freedom. Like here in the House of God we have all assembled without God asking anyone of us where we come from, what is the colour of our skin, what is our race. Every human being, religious by nature, has the right to enter this House of God. And man, who wanted to live a different life than a religious one, heard the promise of God that if he followed the way of religion, he would achieve peace. And no matter what difficulties there are - religious, political, economic - God offers religion and we cannot live without it because we are all believers, although we sometimes do not know this because religion or faith is inside us.

Why do we have religions, or rather why do we have people who are followers of religion and yet become fanatics? Why do they become fundamentalists? Why do they become laymen? Because they do not read the scriptures. Because they do not return to the sources of religion. We have never seen followers of religion or religious representatives drawing on religion, on true religion, and becoming a fanatic. Only religious politicians who pretend to be representatives of religion are becoming what they are. They become ill when they leave their faith. So we are standing face to face with diseased persons, not followers

of religion. Religion is tolerant. That is what we learn from the Scriptures, that is where we find tolerance. And that is why the third millennium will be the third millennium of religion for us, the inhabitants of the South of this planet. It means we expect Europe or the modern world to become really religious, to understand the true love of God. After that there will be no fanatics, no fundamentalists.

Thank you, thank you, Mr President because you are preparing your nation for the third millennium, because you speak of the need for faith. How can we live without faith? What would life be without faith? And you, Mrs Albright, I pray for you. I hope your mission will be successful - and it will be successful because you will be departing on this mission from the House of God. You have entered the House of God and from here you will start your mission. That is, you will start with a pure heart, with a heart filled with the spirit of this House of God. I shall pray for you. I wish you success. And also I hope you shall be able to express the spirit of faith in the Middle East, which is the spirit of religion. The Western world - that is the strength, also the material strength - and we need both material and spiritual strength to be able to live. Thank you, thank you a lot for receiving me, a Muslim among Christians and Jews. Thank you.

Tomáš Halík

I invite A bishop of the Lutheran Church, Mr Jonson of Sweden. First he will read from Gospel.

Jonas Jonson

In this magnificent cathedral, to the glory of God, but also demonstrating Christian hegemony and the relationship with power and art through the years, I have chosen to read from St Matthew, chapter five: "Jesus began to speak and taught them saying: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the Earth. Blessed are those who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness's sake for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven'."

These words which we so often read and meditate upon point to the single-minded, to the committed and the downtrodden people and put them at the centre, and they challenge the men of wisdom and power. But the words indicate a dilemma which we share with adherents of all religions. Sacred texts point in one direction - to a life in humble and self-giving compassion. The world where we live our faith takes us in other directions, and may even make us partakers of death and destruction. There is this tension between text and context, between the sacred heritage and the actual expression of religious life, between the God we confess with words and the God whom we proclaim by our life. History and confessional bias determine our interpretations of faith and limit our ability for open and sympathetic appreciation of the other.

As the 20th century draws to a close we cannot but reflect on the most complacent expansionist and violent period in the history of Christendom. The gap continues to widen between the worlds of the haves and the have-nots, the burden of history remains heavy with us. We tend to trade forgiveness for forgetfulness.

Only with a deep sense of humility and repentance could Christians conclude this century. But it was, however, also a century of martyrs for justice and peace, for human rights and freedom. It was a time of liberation from broken promises of the past, the case of rereading our common narrative and a century of ecumenical engagement. This is a time to keep memory alive, to share experience and to be grateful for all the innocent, the meek and mourning, the peacemakers and the persecuted who did not compromise the fundamental common values of humanity.

There are no ready roads into the future. They are made as we walk. We are called to walk the roads into tomorrow along with the poor in spirit and pure in heart. It is a pilgrimage Christians will have to make with people of other faiths, in dialogue and learning, with burning hearts and prayer. The Gospel turns established social values upside down. It places children at the centre and makes the first to be the last and the last to be the first. It invites us to borrow the eyes of the suffering and destitute as we look at the world. Decision-makers must have the capacity to imagine the pain of parents losing children for lack of food and shelter. Women must be given an equal voice and must share their hopes and their experiences with men. We all know the facts of injustice and misery but we lack the ability to live, speak and act with and for the whole of humanity. Only when we make our own a perspective from below will the healing of the world be possible. Living Christian theology is an attempt to see the world in the way God sees it - from a manger and a cross, from the depth of human abandonment and the reign of death.

Personal Christian commitment is a vocation to live one's life the way Jesus lived it. Created in the image of God, men and women are called to breathe life into all creation and build a world rich in diversity, to be a home for all. Our source and destination is the merciful God of eternity who made himself poor, meek and hungry for righteousness's sake. God's solidarity with humanity and all creation is conclusive in faith and ethics, and a critical reference for all institutional forms of Christianity. In this faith, often disguised by power and ambition, but at times like a diamond cut and ground by pains, suffering and doubt, we are moving to the future.

Religions will continue to play a decisive role, providing a source of ultimate hope, offering symbols and the language of cohesion and universal ethical values. In spite of all that we call secularism, man's inherent

religiosity will always find old and new expressions. The pressure and the trials of traditional as well as new religions is a hallmark of our era, but the religious language of identity is often that of loneliness. And this may be particularly true of Christianity. This makes room for exclusivism and fear. The challenge as we enter the next millennium is therefore not the threat of secularism, but the need for authentic pluralism. As the cry for ethnic, national, racial and religious identity grows loud we must learn to acknowledge the limits of our own spiritual experience and understand other faiths in their own terms.

The conviction that God surpasses all human thinking and reveals himself in powerlessness is our point of departure. A from-below perspective, shared with the many who are dispossessed of power is the condition, and a commitment to the well-being of humanity whose faith is now torn by fear, despair and want of equality, is our strength. Plurality and diversity are found in every religious community. But through pluralism, which is a condition for peace and a shared future in the world, there is much more than a recognition of plurality and mutual respect. Pluralism is actively to make a home not only for oneself but also for one's neighbour in this multifaceted world. It is to worship God transcending all particular languages and images. It is to affirm that God is greater than our understanding. It is to trust the spirit of God giving life and truth for all. It is a drive to find out how others have known God, to seek the depth of one's own faith by encountering other sacred traditions. It is to understand the suffering of others in the past and the present. It is to maintain one's own commitment and in this it differs from relativism - it assumes not only openness but commitment. Pluralism as distinct from tolerance assumes equality and neutrality. Dialogue which is a two-way language real encounter is the very basis of pluralism and must become the language of tomorrow.

As we enter the third millennium of Christendom the world is already a global multireligious forum. The potential conflicts supported by confessional loneliness and institutional power are many. But the opportunities to draw from the old spiritual sources, to refresh and renew the whole human community and to develop an ethos of common destiny, are also ours. A gift of Christianity to the world could possibly be the profound and costly insight that the spirituality of hope must be born out of participatory suffering, that there is no life without death and no resurrection without the cross. The future rests with people who are often hidden from our eyes, people despised by history, the future rests with the ones who live by the promise that they will see God.

Tomáš Halík

And now from the depth of Buddhist traditions we will hear the words of His Holiness, The Dalai Lama.

Dalai Lama

Spiritual brothers and sisters, my English is very poor but in order to save time I want to speak in English, So please listen carefully. There is danger I will use a wrong word, I think. Now, first, I am very happy about the speech and about this big spiritual gathering because from my own little experience as a Buddhist monk and also as a Buddhist practitioner, material comfort is very important but material development cannot solve our problem. If we expect that everything we want can be provided by money or by power, that is wrong. Simply we have this body and this mind, although we sometimes find it difficult to identify what is mind, but still daily we experience this mind. So some happiness or satisfaction come mainly from the level of mind. Another comfort or satisfaction comes in merely physical comfort. So between these two the mental happiness, the mental satisfaction, is superior to the physical comfort. That is very clear. So in our daily life the peace of mind, inner peace, is a very crucial factor, very important. Now we cannot buy that mind in a shop. Even if you are a billionaire you cannot buy peace of mind from a shop. A piece of mind cannot be produced by a machine. I think a tranquilliser may provide you with some temporary sort of peace of mind but I do not think that is the genuine article either. Peace of mind must develop to a mental, or a sort of mattered, turning of the mind. So the various different spiritual traditions, I feel, are still very relevant to this world. Therefore the first cordial or close relations on the basis of mutual understanding, mutual respect among the different religious traditions, are extremely important. If we, religious persons ourselves, argue with each other instead of having peace of mind, and if we are fighting each other, then how can we tell other people of the true spiritual practice: you will get peace of mind, then people will love. So first ourselves, those people who believe in religion, believe in spirituality, should implement these things sincerely daily. And through that you will get some kind of inner spiritual experiences. Through that we can show other people a good example, a warm-hearted and honest compassion to people. So the harmony among the different religious traditions is extremely important now. I really feel happy in recent years that harmony among different religious traditions is now growing, and one person has mentioned the spiritual Assisi. I think that it is very important, it is very encouraging at the moment. So this also has significance. You see, people from different religious traditions are coming together, sitting together in a marvellous cathedral and praying or meditating together. That I think is very good. Now, capturing the essence of Buddhism, one of my favourite quotations is roughly translated like this: So long as space remains, so long as the suffering of human beings exists, I will remain in order to serve. So this is the quotation. These verses always bring me inner strength and I think each practitioner has to think, has to consider and as much as he can, serve our fellow human beings - you can help them. So the basic

Buddhist tradition is that if you can help another being, do it; if you cannot, at least restrain from harming other beings. Once you see it yourself, you see practice sincerely and gain some experience, then this tremendously helps to understand the value of other traditions also.

So the different various religious traditions which still exist on this planet in spite of the different philosophy - some differences are fundamental differences - yet all teach us to be a good person. All teachings carry the message of love, compassion and forgiveness. So those people who believe in different religious traditions, please practise sincerely and make religious teaching part of one's own life. Religious teaching living in a cathedral but with no feeling outside that won't help. It must be part of our life. Then those people who may not have particular faith in any religious tradition, all right it is their individual freedom. You can remain an atheist, but at the same time be a warm-hearted person, be a good person or a nice person: so long as we are part of the world human community.

The purpose of our life is not to create pain for others, not to be destructive. If you create pain for others, ultimately you will also suffer. So our future - even the individual person or family - relates very much to meeting other's interests. So my interests and other people's interests are very much related. If you take care of other people's interests, eventually you will benefit. If you neglect other people's interests, if you think of yourself and do your worst for selfish reasons, for selfish goals, exploiting without hesitation, to harm another, ultimately you will be the loser. Therefore let us be a warm-hearted person, a sensible person.

I think that is very important, that is the foundation of a good future, the foundation of a better world in the next century. With these moral principles and warm-hearted feelings, a sense of responsibility with a sense of care, with these qualities our every action becomes constructive. If our motivation is hatred, jealousy, negative sort of competition (positive competition is OK), then our every action, including the teaching of religion, also becomes dirty, like politics. So, without the proper motivation, our every action becomes useless. Therefore the first, the most important thing, is taking care of one's own good heart. So let us be a good human being. Thank you very much.

Perhaps, a few minutes of silent meditation would be good. Just one minute of meditation. So meditate on love or compassion, or meditate on mind or meditate on something else.

Tomáš Halík

His Holiness has asked us to meditate and I think that we can combine this with something that we had intended to do and that is since we know that this century has been a century of suffering, of wars, I pray you to stand up and to respect this silence for the victims of poverty, violence, suffering, wars, and we should also meditate upon good will and a good heart as His Holiness has asked us to do. Thank you. And now, in conclusion to our assembly, 16 personalities from our ranks, representatives of different countries, of different continents, will now light a flame as a symbol of hope and commitment to the struggle against poverty, suffering and violence. May this light symbolising hope never die.