The Foundation of True Dialogue Among Religions and Cultures Which Would Not Put in Jeopardy Their Integrity

Remarks by John M. Klink
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Your Excellencies, Fathers and Sisters, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am honored to have been asked to address you today by our friends Angelo Sala and Olivetta Danese at Crossroads. I would like to express my gratitude not only for allowing me to provide some small points of reflection, but even more fundamentally for their having created this point of encounter which the name **crossroads** itself enunciates. I am also honored to be in the presence of H.E. Ambassador Dr. Adnan Ahmed Al-Ansari thank him for the beautiful address of Ambassador Al-Nassir to whom I send my warm greetings. I have fond memories of visiting Doha as a guest of H.H. Sheika Moza some years ago for a family conference and I am very grateful for their Highnesses strong support for the family. I am also very grateful for the support of the Alliance for Civilizations on world migration issues. I thank H.E. Ambassador Oscar de Rojas for his kind introduction. Amb. de Rojas and I had the pleasure to share many UN negotiations together, most memorably during UN World Conferences and Summits.

Being at the Holy Family Church brings back many wonderful memories of the masses we celebrated for the heads of state and heads of government during world conferences at the United Nations and I am very grateful to my friend Father Murray for hosting Crossroads this evening.

I need to begin also with my own confession, that I am a Catholic Christian, and thus my own faith provides the prism through which I see and tell my own life stories. My additional acknowledgement is that most of my life

has been led internationally and I am personally extraordinarily recognizant and grateful for the inquisitiveness regarding and appreciation for, other cultures that that provides.

In reviewing the foundation of true dialogue among religions and cultures, what is perhaps most striking to me personally is that history is unfortunately replete with instances where religious dialogue has not only not existed, but where its exclusion, often based on insecurity and fear, has been the source of extraordinary upheaval.

Wars have all too often been based on a desire to prove—supposedly for once and for all—that truth resides exclusively in a particularly refined confessional creed. Thus, innumerable battles have been, and undoubtedly will continue to be, described in emblematic terms of the will of God, where being on God's side is often defined by being the winner.

As we know, the divine right of kings led repeatedly to moments when those rights were tested and retested—perhaps because God did not get it right the first time?--by monarchs who hoped to be proven correct in their boast that their right was more divine than another king's, with the unfortunate involvement of literally hundreds of millions of most often conscripted individuals, who fought and died trying to prove their sovereign's particularly momentous historical point.

Life in city states from ancient Greece through to the Middle Ages and beyond could result in lives that literally knew nothing but continual armed conflict. The *Pax Romana* perhaps provided a step up from days of enduring chaos, but subjugation by Romans had its price for those non-Romans who became subjugated and who wanted their own liberty. Names burned in history such as The 100 Years War speak to conflicts almost literally without end. And the end of the crusades, which never resulted in global victories for either Muslims nor Christians, succeeded perhaps only in keeping the sectarian embers hidden, but burning.

In current times these embers now flame out in the grotesque flash points of terrorism which vainly seek the legitimacy of a religious cover and have led to further wars and prolonged civil strife. Boston has sadly recently joined New York in falling prey to acts of public terrorism which prove no point but that innocent children and women are easily butchered by those who wish to exploit and annihilate them as grist for their mills of violence.

With this historical backdrop, it is all the more obvious that religious dialogue not only should, but must be welcomed, as a precursor for any serious efforts at lasting peace and human progress.

Holy men of all faiths, like Saints Ignatius Loyola and Francis of Assisi, who had themselves first been tempted by the glories of military battles, have experienced a call out of their seemingly pre-destined paths. Their calls to holiness were precipitated by a common revelation that their paths needed to be in search of a much greater reality. The lures of glory and wealth give way in such men's lives to the realization, often through a shattering personal experience, or by specific divine revelation, that life is a pilgrimage: That as great and wondrous as particular moments in earthly life reveal themselves to be, without a greater vision, mortality is life's most striking feature.

For this reason, those who consider themselves religious, that is, as Augustine defined "religious" persons as "those who *re-eligere"*, or "choose again and again" to bind themselves to God—Religious individual--regardless of the specifics of their creed--continually seek to place themselves in the presence of the sacred. They seek what W. B. Yeats called the ultimate seemingly incongruous irony, "the profane perfection of mankind".[1] They seek an eternal moment of union with the transcendent, with God who is the Wholly Other, the Alpha and the Omega, who created, but is always beyond time. For religious persons, life is not simply a life of the moment, but it transforms the individual into a pilgrim embarked on a pilgrimage whereby mortal life becomes infused with essential, additional and endless meaning.

Thus, the experience of pilgrimages, that is, where an individual commits her or himself to a spiritual journey, is infused with not only allegorical or metaphoric meaning, where something has multiple layers of significance, but actually, at least in the Christian context, it has sacramental importance, that is, it goes beyond symbolism and actually is what it signifies.

While on pilgrimage one inserts oneself into active spiritual participation in contemplation and prayer, and most often, in actual physical travel from one physical point to another, generally to a particularly blessed place

[1] W.B. Yeats, *Under Ben Bulben*

such as a cathedral dedicated to a saint, to the river Ganges whereby purification is obtained, to the Hajj to Mecca, or in the indigenous American Indian and African cultures such as the Masai, where one in a real sense does not exist unless, and until, he ventures forth and embraces the spiritual world.

As a quick aside I remember that as a young man on safari in Kenya I made the mistake of photographing some young Masai warriors-to-be who were *beautifully statuesque* with their dark bodies covered in white chalky dust, with camouflaging insignia that made them symbolically disappear. My young classmates and I on this trip were literally held hostage with raised spears by this normally peaceful tribe in their village unless and until we relinquished our film. In our resultant discussion it became clear that these young men were "in the process of becoming" during their pilgrimage of initiation until they proved their bravery—confronting the fear of their mortality headlong by hunting for lion.

In the view of the Masai tribe, they explained through an interpreter, the young men's transitioning souls could be captured by my camera and needed to be given back. This was not an allegory, for the Masai, this was a crucial existential reality.

Thus literature is replete with allusions to life as pilgrimage, through which life is lived simultaneously on both the temporal and eternal planes. And this literature is filled with stories of the pilgrims' actual lives that enrich and are enriched by other pilgrims' tales. And here we are again, therefore, back at the emblematic name of the organization of our hosts this evening—as persons of varying spiritual backgrounds and beliefs—we find ourselves often most enriched at crossroads where we meet other traditions, other beliefs, and other cultures such as our mutual encounter here in New York City tonight.

In the Judeo Christian tradition, the Holy Scriptures call the faithful to welcome the stranger. We are called to cross the barriers of our, at times, carefully pre-scripted boundaries of our individual lives; and we are called in a larger sense, beyond the boundaries of our pre-scripted nationalities and cultures, to recognize that we are ourselves strangers in a strange land. We are temporal beings in search of the eternal; we are exiled pilgrims in a dry land thirsting for God. And by welcoming the stranger, including those of other faiths and cultures, we are called to recognize the

dignity and worth of each human being despite the fact that they might be as different from us as light from dark.

Thus, in both the Old and the New Testament, we are told stories whereby the strangers who are not initially recognized, but who are nevertheless welcomed into the Collective Tent, are found to be angels or prophets—visitors sent by the Most High to transport the welcomer to a transcendent moment, to remind us that we are from God and are always in the process of returning to Him.

Thus, again in the Christian tradition, the Holy Family of Joseph, Mary and the infant Jesus itself becomes what Pope Pius XII referred to as the *Exiled Family of Nazareth*. Within days or weeks of the birth of Jesus, Joseph is instructed by an angel in a dream to immediately awake and flee with his nascent family in the middle of the night out of imminent danger. In Christian theology, Christ Himself is not only incarnated as flesh and blood man, born into the humblest of surroundings, but has even to flee from that meager allotment within days or weeks of His birth and become a refugee living as a foreigner in a foreign land speaking perforce a foreign tongue. As their Jewish forbearers who had to flee from Egypt, and wandered in the Sinai Desert, the Holy Family's alienation from their familiar surroundings appears to be a "necessary evil", and part of a greater redemptive plan of which the realization of alienation is a necessary spiritual first step.

As Pius points out, the Refugee Holy Family of Nazareth serves as:

> the archetype of every refugee family. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, living in exile in Egypt to escape the fury of an evil king, are, for all times and all places, the models and protectors of every migrant, alien and refugee of whatever kind who, whether compelled by fear of persecution or by want, is forced to leave his native land, his beloved parents and relatives, his close friends, and to seek a foreign soil.[2]

Pilgrimage imagery is not limited to Christian literature alone, and the great religions of the world are replete with images of pilgrimage, or call to wandering such as the *Khaggavisana Sutta*, the famous Buddhist Sutra which advises a path to holiness by "wandering as lonely as rhineros" or the honorific title of El-Hajj accorded in Islam as religious and cultural

[2] *Exsul Familia Nazarethana,* Apostolic Constitution of Pope Pius XII, 1951

acknowledgement to those who have completed the pilgrimage to Mecca. Each tells a unique story, but with the commonality of people who recognize their incarnation as mortal man, but who are called to recognize that they are also on the move--enroute to something uniquely sacred, to a participation in an eternal moment. And it is precisely that recognition by religious man of emptiness that is the precursor, the *sine qua non*, that is needed precisely in order to have the profound hope of faith to be filled with something more, to become infused by the sacred, to become, in a word, holy.

And I would pose that this humility of pilgrimage during which one not only speaks, but listens, both to human stories and to the silence of prayer, that is required of those who together embark on a journey of common faith, is even more greatly required for those of disparate faiths and cultures. Just as we are called to welcome strangers, so are we called to welcome the insights gleaned by holy men and women of different faiths--for these collective strangers and their cultures can enrich our joint pilgrimage immeasurably.

It is interesting to note that Pope Benedict XVI pointedly referred to his recent decision to retire in terms of his entire life as a pilgrim: "I will simply be a pilgrim who is starting the last phase of his pilgrimage on this earth." And just two months before his resignation, in his Christmas Address to the Roman Curia, he focused on the need for religious dialogue:

> In man's present situation, the dialogue of religions is a necessary condition for peace in the world and it is therefore a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities. This dialogue of religions has various dimensions. In the first place it is simply a *dialogue of life*, a *dialogue of being together*. This will not involve discussing the great themes of faith – whether God is Trinitarian or how the inspiration of the sacred Scriptures is to be understood, and so on. It is about the *concrete problems* of coexistence and *shared responsibility* for society, for the state, for humanity."[3] (emphasis mine)

As pilgrims together for a short time on a journey of faith, Benedict points out: "In the process, it is necessary to learn to accept the other in his

[3] *Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI on the Occasion of Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia*, December 21, 1012

otherness and the *otherness of his thinking*. To this end, the *shared responsibility for justice and peace must become the guiding principle of the conversation*." [4](emphasis mine)

From a personal perspective, having had the saving grace of a very saintly mother, I remember from a very early age being called to service—to try in some way to follow her example of dialogue and openness to others that always began with service. While her efforts were indefatigably philanthropically focused on local charities, I was intrigued by cross-cultural settings. Emboldened by one year of my college years spent in Rome, and encouraged by a girlfriend who had ventured to work in Upper Volta to join Catholic Relief Services, I have been particularly blessed in my professional life in not only visiting particular cultures, but by living in their midst. In my CRS work we were active in socio economic development work in countries with little Christian, let alone Catholic presence.

In Morocco, CRS worked with the Royal Moroccan government to establish the first nation-wide Mother-Child Nutrition Project, while in the Yemen Arab Republic we staffed the first hospital in the Tihama Desert, and initiated the first nation-wide Yemeni Primary Health Care Initiative, and worked with Blessed Mother Theresa with the unlikely combination of lepers, orphans and the insane.

In these instances we were a miniscule minority, but were warmly welcomed. While in Morocco there was a *tiny foreign Catholic population*, in Yemen, WE WERE the only Catholics.

And our work did not seek conversion, but understanding through concrete action. In this we never compromised our Catholic spirituality, but rather plumed it more deeply. Again in Benedict's Christmas discourse he points to the need to have the literal courage of conviction and to not be afraid to engage in dialogue as it is your faith which will sustain you in your search for Truth.

Interestingly, my predecessor in CRS/Yemen had already bridged the gaps between Muslims and Christians--through her simple nutrition outreach program to families in one of the most inhospitable climates in the world. (Mother Theresa maintained that the Tihama was the WORST climate in

[4] Ibid.

the world). In fact, Sister Rosita, a 50's something nun from Texas, literally gave her life for her work when she died in the mobile camper she used to visit the most remote areas in the desert.

> As an ironically amusing side note, I literally overheard of Sister's untimely death as I was in the office of my boss, the good Msgr. Harnett, who received the sad phone call from the CRS/Yemen office.
> Naturally my interest was piqued since Monsignor had informed me the day before of my immanent transfer to be the Yemen Director as he repeated out loud what he was hearing on the phone—"So Sister Rosita contracted cerebral malaria"—"and she was found dead in her camper in the desert"—"and her body is being sent on ice in an embassy coffin for embalming in Cairo since embalming is not allowed in Yemen?"
> When I started to inquire regarding details, Monsignor was duly incensed that I should be so snoopy.
> Obviously, from my point of view, I felt I had some reason to take the news personally. For me, apart from the tragic loss of this great woman of faith, this was a bit like the story of the difference between the pig and the chicken in their viewpoint of their respective contributions to breakfast. In my mind, I was beginning to feel a longing to be the chicken. The possible implications of the commitment of my new assignment were suddenly striking.

What was particularly remarkable about Sister Rosita's inspiring life and death, especially when taken into consideration that the year was 1979, was the bridge between cultures and religions that Sister fostered. This was beautifully evidenced when the very male mullahs of the region came together for a day of fasting in front of the Catholic Relief Services office as a memorial to this good and very female sister. And this was a time where women in the Tihama played no significant part in the culture outside of their motherly/home duties, and were not allowed in the presence of other men, even replete with their triple veils.

The mullahs never compromised their religious beliefs and sister lived hers to the full, but there was a bond which had been formed based on their mutual recognition of their convergent paths in the pilgrimage of life—again, in Benedict's words, our common concern for the "concrete

problems of coexistence and shared responsibility for society, for the state, for humanity."[5]

In my next field assignment, I found myself in South East Asia where CRS' work involved bringing food, shelter and medical care to over 400,000 Khmer, Vietnamese and Hmong refugees living primarily in the border areas of Thailand. Clearly, the census statistics of Thai religious practices reveal the fact that conversion was not a priority since Catholics in Thailand number less than .5% of the overall population. If high conversion rates was ever a goal, it obviously did not meet with significant success.

On a recent trip to Rome—in fact on the afternoon of Pope Francis' election, I reconnected after a hiatus of 30 years with Cardinal Michai Kitbunchu, the 90-year-old extraordinary emeritus archbishop of Bangkok. In our half hour meeting that extended to two and a half hours of reminiscing, I was humbled by the Cardinal's updates on all that this small minority of faith-filled people has accomplished in this beautiful Buddhist country. Scattered prominently amidst all of the magnificent and ancient pagodas, there are Catholic hospitals, schools and orphanages which give simple, but effective witness to God's love. And the Cardinal hasn't stopped. He regaled me with his most recent agricultural innovations that have resulted in a doubled rice crop. And he confessed that he was currently "working on a more resilient banana."

To move to more recent days, my good friends such as Ambassador Rojas can speak more eloquently than I of our time together as diplomats at the United Nations during which at negotiations amongst literally every nation and culture, an essential contribution to the UN's history consisted of the consensus language which we obtained—Ambassador Rojas from Venezuela together with a coalition of diplomats from many countries of disparate faiths and cultures, including many Islamic countries together with the Holy See.

This language negotiated with I must say, very significant effort, at the Rio Summit and maintained for each successive world summit/world conference, managed to enshrine as foundational principles both respect

[5] Ibid.

for religious traditions and the recognition that human beings rather than states are the center of concerns for the U.N.'s and member states' diplomatic and field action. These are the principles that must not be allowed to languish or be forgotten in a seemingly ever more secularized world.

Currently, in my role as President of the International Catholic Migration Commission, ICMC's work belies its appellation since the name almost would imply that we deal primarily with Catholic migrants. I am proud to say that in the 61 year history of ICMC since its founding by Pope Pius XII, ICMC has cared for over 1,000,000 refugees it has helped to bring to the United States, regardless of their religion or lack thereof. Currently it is responsible for processing half of all Iraqi refugees coming to the United States, and its programs for vulnerable refugees are located largely in the Muslim Middle East, including in currently war-torn Syria.

I am particularly proud of ICMC's historical and nascent efforts aimed not only at the care of victims of trafficking, but at the prevention of trafficking itself including the dedication of ICMC's Vatican office to become a global anti-trafficking networking center. We are confident that an issue that is as cross cutting humanly, culturally and religiously as the tragedy of modern slavery can continue to assist in building bridges between all people of good will to work together for the estimated 27 million victims of trafficking.

To bring my remarks to a conclusion: As I mentioned, I was privileged to have recently been in Rome in St. Peter's Square at the moment of White Smoke—and the anxious moments before the *Habbaemus Papam* announcement from the balcony of St. Peter's were filled with hope but to be honest, also with fretful anticipation in the wake of Pope Benedict's unprecedented resignation.

There had been a light rain falling in the Piazza San Pietro that abated following the white puffs from the Sistine Chapel chimney at around 7 in the evening, and the sea of umbrellas began to fold. The joyful announcement was met with a hush and then the question "*Chi*"? "Who"?

While we are still learning daily more and more of who Pope Francis is, this ironically "Jesuit Franciscan" is the embodiment of Pope Benedict's guiding principles regarding religious dialogue.

When the unknown new Pope stepped onto the balcony my honest reaction was that he really didn't know what he was doing. That he probably was going to need some Public Relations training as his arms fell limply at his side and he peered in silent amazement at the hundreds of thousands of his new flock gathered to greet him. He was not even fully dressed as a pontiff—had he forgotten the scarlet red mozzetta cape and the stole? He spoke haltingly and simply. As he bowed to ask for the prayers of the assembled multitude and requested silence, the only sound was of the Bernini fountains continuing to refresh the gigantic piazza.

His message was as clear as the silence he called for: he has been called from the ends of the earth—he is himself a migrant from immigrant parents who is calling for a poor church to serve the poor. In this he is prioritizing what is probably the most important papal title: "Servant of the Servants of God."

His outreach is universal to those of good will. At his installation Francis immediately called for religious dialogue. Making reference to another ancient papal title, that of the "Supreme Pontiff", or The Bridge Builder, the Pope told the visiting religious dignitaries:

> My wish is that the dialogue between us should help to build bridges connecting all people, in such a way that everyone can see in the other not an enemy, not a rival, but a brother or sister to be welcomed and embraced. [6]

Pope Francis, in his humility, would not presume to speak for all religions, but his voice is an important one in its call and recognition, very much in line with Pope Benedict's only a few months ago, that concrete action towards justice and peace is the first building block of religious dialogue. Francis' exhortation to the world and religious leaders gathered for the initiation of his ministry as Bishop of Rome implicitly underlines our commonality as very human pilgrims sharing a journey from and back to God:

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[6] *Address of Pope Francis to the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See*, Sala Regia, Vatican City, 22 March 2013

> As you know, my family is of Italian origin; and so this dialogue between places and cultures a great distance apart matters greatly to me, this dialogue between one end of the world and the other, which today are growing ever closer, more interdependent, more in need of opportunities to meet and to create real spaces of authentic fraternity…Fighting poverty, both material and spiritual, building peace and constructing bridges: these, as it were, are the reference points for a journey that I want to invite each of the countries here represented to take up." [7]

In closing, may I express my sincerest thank you for all that you do as fellow pilgrims from a panoply of cultures and religious traditions to build upon a common culture of dialogue, respect and love.

May God the Almighty and the All Merciful continue to bless your endeavors from generation to generation and grant us His peace as we go forward from this crossroad in our lives.

[7] Ibid.