

VISIT OF THE HOLY FATHER TO BARI  
FOR THE MEETING OF REFLECTION AND SPIRITUALITY,  
"MEDITERRANEAN: FRONTIER OF PEACE"  
**MEETING WITH BISHOPS OF THE MEDITERRANEAN**  
**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS**

Basilica of Saint Nicholas (Bari)  
Sunday, 23 February 2020

[Link](#)

*Dear Brothers,*

I am pleased that we can meet you and I am grateful that each of you has accepted the invitation of the Italian Episcopal Conference to take part in this meeting, which assembles the Churches of the Mediterranean. In looking around this Church [the Basilica of St. Nicholas, I think of another meeting, our meeting with the Heads of the Christian Churches, both Orthodox and Catholic, here in Bari. This is the second time in a few months that we have made a gesture of unity of this kind. That earlier meeting was the first time after the great schism that all of us were together, and this is the first meeting of bishops from around the Mediterranean. I think we could call Bari the capital of unity, of the unity of the Church – if Archbishop Cacucci will let us! Thank you for your welcome, Excellency, thank you.

When Cardinal Bassetti presented the idea to me, I readily accepted it, seeing it as an opportunity to begin a process of listening and discussion aimed at helping to build peace in this crucial part of the world. For that reason, I wanted to be present and testify to the importance of the new model of fraternity and collegiality that you represent. I like the word that you joined to dialogue: *conviviality*.

I find it significant that this meeting takes place in Bari, since this city is so important for its links with the Middle East and Africa; it is an eloquent sign of the deeply rooted relationships between different peoples and traditions. The Diocese of Bari has always fostered ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, working tirelessly to create bonds of mutual esteem and fraternity. I purposely chose Bari a year and a half ago, as I said, to meet leaders of Christian communities in the Middle East for an important moment of discussion and fellowship meant to help our sister Churches to journey together and feel closer to one another.

You have come together in this particular context to reflect on the vocation and future of the Mediterranean, on the transmission of the faith and the promotion of peace. The *Mare nostrum* is the physical and spiritual locus where our civilization took shape as a result of the encounter of diverse peoples. By its very

configuration, this sea forces surrounding peoples and cultures to constant interact, to recall what they have in common, and to realize that only by living in concord can they enjoy the opportunities this region offers, thanks to its resources, its natural beauty and its varied human traditions.

In our own day, the importance of this area has not decreased in the wake of the process of globalization; on the contrary, globalization has highlighted the role of the Mediterranean as a crossroads of interests and important social, political, religious and economic currents. The Mediterranean remains a strategic region whose equilibrium has an impact on the other parts of the world.

It could be said that the size of the Mediterranean is inversely proportional to its importance, to see it more as a lake than an ocean, as Giorgio La Pira once said. Defining it as "the great Sea of Galilee", he drew an analogy between Jesus' time and our own, between his milieu and that of the peoples of our time. Just as Jesus lived and worked in a context of differing cultures and beliefs, so we find ourselves in a multifaceted environment scarred by divisions and forms of inequality that lead to instability. Amid deep fault lines and economic, religious, confessional and political conflicts, we are called to offer our witness to unity and peace. We do so prompted by our faith and membership in the Church, seeking to understand the contribution that we, as disciples of the Lord, can make to all the men and women of the Mediterranean region.

The transmission of the faith necessarily draws upon the heritage of the Mediterranean region. That heritage has been fostered, preserved and kept alive by Christian communities through catechesis and the celebration of the sacraments, the formation of consciences, and individual and communal hearing of the Lord's word. Specifically, thanks to popular piety, the Christian experience has taken on a form both meaningful and enduring: popular devotion is for the most part the expression of straightforward and authentic faith. Here I often like to cite that gem which is No. 48 of the Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* on popular piety, where Saint Paul VI prefers, in place of "religiosity", to speak of "popular piety", pointing out both its richness and its shortcomings. That passage should guide us in our proclamation of the Gospel to the peoples.

In this region, one deposit of remarkable potential is its art, which combines the content of the faith with cultural treasures and beautiful artworks. This heritage continues to attract millions of visitors from every part of the world and must be carefully preserved as a precious legacy received "on loan", to be handed on to future generations.

In the light of all this, the preaching of the Gospel cannot be detached from commitment to the common good; it impels us to act tirelessly as peacemakers. The Mediterranean region is currently threatened by outbreaks of instability and conflict, both in the Middle East and different countries of North Africa, as well as between various ethnic, religious or confessional groups. Nor can we overlook the still unresolved conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, with the danger of inequitable solutions and, hence, a prelude to new crises.

War, by allocating resources to the acquisition of weapons and military power, diverts those resources from vital social needs, such as the support of families, health care and education. As Saint John XXIII teaches, it is contrary to reason

(cf. *Pacem in Terris*, 114; 127). In other words, it is madness; it is madness to destroy houses, bridges, factories and hospitals, to kill people and annihilate resources, instead of building human and economic relationships. It is a kind of folly to which we cannot resign ourselves: war can never be considered normal, or accepted as an inevitable means of settling differences and conflicts of interest. Never.

The ultimate goal of every human society is peace; indeed, we can affirm once more that "in spite of everything, there is no real alternative to peacemaking" (*Meeting with Heads of Churches and Christian Communities in the Middle East*, Bari, 7 July 2018). There is no reasonable alternative to peace, because every attempt at exploitation or supremacy demeans both its author and its target. It shows a myopic grasp of reality, since it can offer no future to either of the two. War is thus the failure of every plan, human and divine. One need only visit a countryside or city that has been a theatre of war to realize how, as a result of hatred, a garden turns into a desolate and inhospitable landscape, how the earthly paradise turns into hell. Here I would also mention the grave sin of hypocrisy, when at international meetings many countries talk about peace and then sell weapons to countries at war. This can be called hypocrisy on a grand scale.

Peace, which the Church and every civic institution must always consider their first priority, has justice as its indispensable condition. Justice is trampled underfoot when the needs of individuals are ignored and where partisan economic interests prevail over the rights of individuals and communities. Moreover, justice is blocked by a throwaway culture that treats persons as if they were things, generating and promoting inequality. So much so that on the shores of this very sea there are some societies of immense wealth and others in which many people struggle simply to survive.

A decisive contribution to combating this culture is made by the countless charitable and educational works carried out by Christian communities. Whenever dioceses, parishes, associations, volunteer organizations – one of the great treasures of Italian pastoral care – or individuals strive to support those abandoned or in need, the Gospel becomes all the more powerful and attractive. In the pursuit of the common good – another name for peace – we should employ the criterion pointed out by La Pira: to let ourselves be guided by the "expectations of the poor" ("Le attese della povera gente", in *Cronache sociali* 1/1950). This principle, which can never be set aside for calculation or convenience, if taken seriously, enables a radical anthropological shift that makes everyone more human.

What use is a society of constant technological progress, if it becomes increasingly indifferent to its members in need? In preaching the Gospel, we hand on a way of thinking that respects each person by our unremitting effort to make the Church, the Churches, a sign of special care for the vulnerable and the poor. For "the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable" (1 Cor 12:22) and "if one member suffers, all suffer together" (1 Cor 12:26).

In the Mediterranean region, these include all who are fleeing war or who have left their homelands in search of a humanly dignified life. The number of these brothers and sisters – forced to abandon their loved ones and their lands, and to face conditions of extreme insecurity – has risen as a result of spreading conflicts and increasingly dramatic environmental and climatic conditions. It is easy to anticipate that this phenomenon, with its momentous developments, will have an effect on the Mediterranean, for which states and religious communities must not be found unprepared. While countries experiencing this flow of migrants and countries to which they travel are affected by this, so too are the governments and Churches of the migrants' countries of origin, which, with the departure of so many young people, witness the impoverishment of their own future.

We are aware that, in different social contexts, there is a growing attitude of indifference and even rejection that reflects the mentality, condemned in many of the Gospel parables, of those who, caught up in their own wealth and freedom, are blind to others who, by speaking out or by the very fact of their poverty, are pleading for help. Fear is leading to a sense that we need to defend ourselves against what is depicted in demagogic terms as an invasion. The rhetoric of the clash of civilizations merely serves to justify violence and to nurture hatred. The failure or, in any case, the weakness of politics, and factionalism are leading to forms of radicalism and terrorism. The international community has been content with military interventions, whereas it should have built institutions that can guarantee equal opportunities and enable citizens to assume their responsibility for the common good.

For our part, brothers, let us speak out to demand that government leaders protect minorities and religious freedom. The persecution experienced above all – but not only – by Christian communities is a heart-rending fact that cannot leave us indifferent.

In the meantime, we can never resign ourselves to the fact that someone who seeks hope by way of the sea can die without receiving help, or that someone from afar can fall prey to sexual exploitation, be underpaid or recruited by gangs.

To be sure, acceptance and a dignified integration are stages in a process that is not easy. Yet it is unthinkable that we can address the problem by putting up walls. I grow fearful when I hear certain speeches by some leaders of the new forms of populism; it reminds me of speeches that disseminated fear and hatred back in the thirties of the last century. As I said, it is unthinkable that this process of acceptance and dignified integration can be accomplished by building walls. When we do so, we cut ourselves off from the richness brought by others, which always represents an opportunity for growth. When we reject the desire for fellowship present deep within the human heart and is part of the history of peoples, we stand in the way of the unification of the human family, which despite many challenges, continues to advance. Last week, an artist from Turin sent me a little wood-burned picture of the flight to Egypt with Saint Joseph, not the peaceful Saint Joseph we are used to seeing on holy cards, but Saint Joseph in the guise of a Syrian refugee bearing a child on his shoulders. It portrayed the

pain and the bitter tragedy of the Child Jesus on the flight to Egypt. The same thing that is happening today.

The Mediterranean has a unique vocation in this regard: it is the sea of intermingling, "culturally always open to encounter, dialogue and mutual inculturation" (*Meeting with Heads of Churches and Christian Communities in the Middle East*, Bari, 7 July 2018). Notions of racial purity have no future. The message of intermingling has much to tell us. To be part of the Mediterranean region is a source extraordinary potential: may we not allow a spirit of nationalism to spread the opposite view, namely, that those states less accessible and geographically more isolated should be privileged. Dialogue alone enables us to come together, to overcome prejudices and stereotypes, to tell our stories and to come to know ourselves better. Dialogue is the word I heard today: *conviviality*.

Young people, too, represent a special opportunity. When they are provided the resources and possibilities they need to take charge of their own future, they show that they are capable of generating a promising and hope-filled future. This will only happen as the result of an acceptance that is not superficial but heartfelt and benevolent, practised by everyone at all levels, both the everyday level of interpersonal relationships and the political and institutional levels, and fostered by those who shape culture and bear greater responsibility in the area of public opinion.

For those who believe in the Gospel, dialogue is advantageous not only from an anthropological but also from a theological standpoint. Listening to our brothers and sisters is not only an act of charity but also a way of listening to the Spirit of God who surely works in others and whose voice transcends the limits in which we are often tempted to constrain the truth. Let us come to know the value of hospitality: "for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (*Heb 13:1*).

We need to develop a theology of acceptance and of dialogue leading to a renewed understanding and proclamation of the teaching of Scripture. This can only happen if we make every effort to take the first step and not exclude the seeds of truth also possessed by others. In this way, the discussion of our various religious convictions can concern not only the truths we believe, but also specific themes that can become defining points of our teaching as a whole.

All too often, history has known conflicts and struggles based on the distorted notion that we are defending God by opposing anyone who does not share our set of beliefs. Indeed, extremism and fundamentalism deny the dignity of the human person and his or her religious freedom, and thus lead to moral decline and the spread of an antagonistic view of human relationships. This too shows us the urgent need of a more vital encounter between different religious confessions, one motivated by sincere respect and a desire for peace.

This encounter is spurred by the awareness, set forth in the *Document on Human Fraternity* signed at Abu Dhabi, that "the authentic teachings of religions invite us to remain rooted in the values of peace; to defend the values of mutual understanding, human fraternity and harmonious coexistence". Religious groups and different communities can cooperate more actively in helping the poor and welcoming immigrants, in such a way that our relationships are motivated by

common goals and accompanied by active commitment. Those who together dirty their hands in building peace and fraternal acceptance will no longer be able to fight over matters of faith, but will pursue the paths of respectful discussion, mutual solidarity, and the quest for unity. Its opposite is what I felt when I went to Lampedusa, that air of indifference: on the island there was acceptance and welcome, but then, in the world, the culture of indifference.

Dear brothers, these are the hopes I wanted to share with you at the conclusion of our fruitful and consoling encounter in these days. I entrust you to the intercession of the Apostle Paul who was the first to cross the Mediterranean, facing dangers and hardships of every kind, in order to bring the Gospel of Christ to everyone. May his example show you the paths to pursue in the joyful and liberating task of handing on the faith in our own time.

I leave you with the words of the Prophet Isaiah, in the hope that they will provide you and your respective communities with hope and strength. Witnessing the destruction of Jerusalem after the exile, the prophet did not fail to look forward to a future of peace and prosperity: "They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations" (*Is* 61:4). This is the work the Lord entrusts to you on behalf of this beloved Mediterranean region: to restore relationships that have been broken, to rebuild cities destroyed by violence, to make a garden flourish in what is now a desert, to instil hope in the hopeless, and to encourage those caught up in themselves not to fear their brothers or sisters. And to look upon this [sea], which has already become a cemetery, as a place of future resurrection for the entire area. May the Lord accompany your steps and bless your work of reconciliation and peace. Thank you.