

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Beneficent,

Good afternoon everyone,

I am delighted and honored to attend such an inspiring social, educational, and religious gathering alongside these esteemed panelists, in particular His Eminence Archbishop Christophe Pierre. I would like to thank the organizers, especially Angelo Sala, for inviting me to speak; I feel privileged to be in such hallowed company.

Today, I will present to you Islam's view on our common and distinct identities from the Abrahamic perspective. I hope you enjoy it, and in case you have any questions or comments, I will be available and at your service afterward.

Allow me to begin with an example. A recent study confirmed that all citrus trees on Earth today originate from a single common ancestor; these citrus trees occur in three main branches, the oranges, limes, and lemons. This remarkable diversity, which began in one part of the world and spread to almost every corner, is an example of "**impossible**" unity through the "**I**".

So in fact, those three main branches were born from one tree. Almighty God used the word "**tree**" in a fabulous example in the Holy Quran. He states: "*Consider how God compares the blessed word to that of a blessed tree which has firm roots and branches rising-up into the sky. And yields fruits in every season by the permission of its Lord! God sets forth parables for people so that they may take heed*"<sup>1</sup>. I would like to use this parable from the Holy Quran as a symbol of the Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This seemingly "**impossible**" unity is a part of us, as in the words of Father Luigi Giussani: "*Without Abraham, if Abraham had never been, then we would not be here now*"<sup>2</sup>.

Hence, what is our **common responsibility** in helping such an Abrahamic tree to be fruitful? Remember, the trunk of the tree obviously needs: water, sunlight, and fertile soil.

To answer this important question, we need to first acknowledge **the elements that we all share**. As Abrahamic religions, just like the branches of a citrus tree, we share many common roots, such as:

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<sup>1</sup> The Holy Quran, Abraham - chapter 14: Verses 24-25

<sup>2</sup> [ABRAHAM AND THE BIRTH OF THE "I", by Fr. Luigi Giussani, January 2001]

1. **Fundamental creed:** belief in the oneness of God, prophethood, and the Hereafter
2. **Lofty moral values:** mercy, generosity, self-sacrifice, dignity, compassion, patience, and most of all **Love**
3. **Noble purposes** – in both worlds:
  - In this world: submitting to the will of God, and striving for *justice and peace*.
  - For the hereafter: earning God’s satisfaction and pleasure.

Thus, we must adhere to unity bearing in mind and fully accepting that we are unique and distinct in our religious identities! If we agree on these tenets, then each of us will have **two duties** that need to be continuously fulfilled, otherwise the bond that binds us together will progressively wither away. These are (1) the duty among the Abrahamic religions (i.e. towards each other), and (2) the duty upon us towards our fellow human beings of the non-Abrahamic communities.

#### The duty of the Abrahamic religions towards each other

1. **Examine and understand the commonalities, differences, and disagreements:** This will help each of us to foster dialogue and cooperation while maintaining our religious identity. We live in a very complicated world that mixes-up different rainbow colors of cultures, ideas, beliefs, diversity, and so on. In fact, even in such circumstances we have no more than two choices: either being a distinct and identifiable part of a salad bowl, or an unrecognizable component of a *true* melting-pot. The former is the right choice according to the Holy Quran when God states: *“O mankind! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes that you may identify yourselves with one another. Indeed the noblest of you in the sight of God is the most Godwary [pious] among you. Indeed God is all-knowing, all-aware”*<sup>3</sup>, but with the caveat that those who are distinguished *“...in the sight of God is/are the most Godwary [pious] among you”*. If we neglect to learn about each other and foster a culture of inclusiveness, then we will be opening the door for those with heinous motives to hijack our religions and divert the discourse towards hatred and intolerance. Then, extremism, stereotypes, and narrowmindedness will dictate our perceptions of each other and how we interact.
2. **Maintain the sanctity of religion:** Our religions are founded on pure and noble goals such as relationship with God, spirituality, respecting the rights of others, and fulfilling obligations to maintain justice and fairness. These lofty values must remain unsullied by avoiding political influences, private interests, ethnocentrism, and tribalism of any kind.

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<sup>3</sup> The Holy Quran, al-Hujurat 49: Verse 13.

The Holy Quran says about our ancestor father “*Verily, Abraham was a nation, obedient to God, upright, and he joined not [any associates] with God*”<sup>4</sup>. In these polarizing times, we must NOT compromise the sanctity of religion and Godly morals for anything, and although it is the essence of everything in our lives, we must consciously preserve it from becoming embroiled in divisive matters.

3. **Cooperate, collaborate, and support each other** through a variety of human and religious services and projects. For example:
- a. Interfaith dialogue: not just related to theology, but community service, unity of purpose, peace and fighting against extremism. Pope Francis said: “I wished to emphasize once more the great importance of dialogue and cooperation among believers, in particular, Christians and Muslims, and the need for it to be enhanced”<sup>5</sup>
  - b. Mutual human empathy: Like solving society’s problems together, hand-in-hand easing people’s suffering, and repairing social deficits for those who have been neglected. Giving a smile and special care for those who are in despair. Let’s pay attention to the following two great examples: “During his homily and foot-washing ritual, Pope Francis washed the feet of *two* women and *two* Muslims, Hindu, Catholic and Coptic Christians, [who were migrants and refugees] from Mali, Eritrea, Syria, and Pakistan.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Shia Muslim religious authority, Grand Ayatullah Sayyid Ali al-Sistani, welcomed and *served thousands* of Christian refugees from Mosul and northern areas of Iraq who had been terrorized and displaced due to ISIS in 2014.
  - c. Attending each other’s gatherings, and seeking harmony and solidarity: I would like to point out two amazing examples from across the world: (1) A group of Muslims who attended a Church to show their solidarity with Christians in France when a Christian priest was killed by an extremist. (2) Hundreds of Christians, shoulder-to-shoulder with Muslims, commemorated the anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, when around 20 million people visited him in Karbala. I recommend you experience it at least once because it is an unparalleled experience.
  - d. Visiting and meeting community leaders and clergy for the sake of social and community cohesion.

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<sup>4</sup> The Holy Quran, al-Nahl 16: Verse 120

<sup>5</sup> MESSAGE OF POPE FRANCIS TO MUSLIMS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD, July 10, 2013, www.vatican.va

<sup>6</sup> The Washington Post, March 25, 2016

4. **Focus on family:** We must emphasize the importance and the benefits of family, and the foundation of learning, integrity, and citizenship that it provides to a person. Our religious authorities advise the following:
  - a. Pope Paul VI: “The well-being of the individual person and of human and Christian society is intimately linked with the healthy condition of that community produced by marriage and family”<sup>7</sup>
  - b. Grand Ayatullah al-Sistani says: “Give importance to starting a family by getting married and having children... Having a family is a source of pleasure and affability, a motive for hard work, a cause for sobriety and being responsible, an investment of energy for the future, and a defense against forbidden and lowly deeds”<sup>8</sup>
  
5. **Focus on our youth and the new generations:** There is no doubt that most parents have concerns about their children. Our youth today are tomorrow’s future. Let us pay attention to the advice of two of the greatest worldwide religious authorities in this regard:
  - a. Pope Francis: “Have you thought about the talents that God has given you? Do not bury your talents! Set your stakes on great ideals, the ideals that enlarge the heart..., Life is not given to us to be jealously guarded for ourselves, but is given to us so that we may give it in turn. Dear young people, have a deep spirit!”<sup>9</sup>
  - b. Grand Ayatullah al-Sistani: “[Dear youth] try to learn a professional trade and acquire a specialty, and exert yourself and work hard in its pursuit. This is a blessed endeavor because it allows you to occupy a portion of your free time, support yourself and your family, benefit society, perform good deeds using the money you earn, sharpen your mind, and broaden your experience.”

Our duty towards the non-Abrahamic religions – our fellow brothers and sisters in humanity

We the followers of Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon them) have a particular duty given the serious challenges we are facing today. It is highly important for us to work on them:

1. **Imperative efforts to address worrying social trends:** Our world is at a crucial crossroads where readily available information, sometimes from questionable sources,

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<sup>7</sup> PASTORAL CONSTITUTION ON THE CHURCH IN THE MODERN WORLD, Part II, Chapter 1, [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)

<sup>8</sup> Advice to youth, page 15, the fifth advice

<sup>9</sup> General Message, April 24, 2013, [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)

and ease of access are molding the way people think. Therefore, our duty as the followers of Abraham is to:

- a. Address and counter the growing atheist and agnostic sentiments in our country by spreading the love of the Supreme God.
  - b. Repel the corrupting effects of materialism, greed, lust, and hunger for power.
  - c. Educate people about the true meaning of *humanism* under God's code and not as a license to be hedonistic.
  - d. Ensure that the voices of Jews, Christians, and Muslims are heard equally, and with complete fidelity to the religions and their true messages.
2. **Incentivize ourselves to present the Abrahamic religions** as noble schools that offer joy, contentment, love, harmony, family beyond one's kin, and a means to a fulfilled life. Data show clearly that the percentage of people with depression, anxiety, divorce, drug use, and many other painful and negative issues across the world *is less* among the faithful. This is due to the belief in God and the values that emanate from it being firmly rooted in a believer's heart. We have to be compassionate and wise in relating these blessed values to others so that they may grasp the lifeline of God and ultimately find salvation.

Dear brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, if we consider ourselves true proponents of our respective religions, then we have to **cooperate and support each other** in all Godly matters and adopt the qualities of mercy, generosity, justice and compassion which He is infinitely known for. Then, we can say that the "**impossible**" unity which began from the Abrahamic "**I**"-tree will actually be **possible** and tangible, and we will see the fruit from all three branches. Once again, as God said: "*Consider how God compares the blessed Word to that of a blessed tree which has firm roots and branches rising-up into the sky. And, yields fruits in every season by the permission of its Lord! God sets forth parables for people so that they may take heed*"<sup>10</sup>

Thank you, and God bless you all.

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<sup>10</sup> The Holy Quran, Abraham 14: Verses 24-25