

“Chances and Problems of Coexistence between Different Cultures and Religions in Berlin – a New Sense for community?”

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Panel 10 on 19th September 2016, 4.30 - 6.00 pm, Teatro Metastasio

Anniversary meeting on the occasion of 30 years of World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi

“Thirst for Peace: Religions and Cultures in Dialogue”

Promoted by the community of Sant Egidio, 18th to 20th September 2016

I.

Dear brothers and sisters,

first I would like to thank the community of Sant Egidio for inviting me to the international meeting “Thirst for Peace” to Assisi, to the place Pope John Paul II chose to celebrate the first World Day of Prayer for Peace with all religions 30 years ago. In these times, we do need nothing more urgently than common prayer for peace since there is great thirst for peace. Mankind suffers from hatred, violence and terror, people fear for their lives, they are forced to flee their homelands and drown when attempting to escape to freedom by sea.

I come from Germany, from the capital city of Berlin. Berlin is the city experiencing the fall of the Wall nearly 27 years ago, a wall separating two irreconcilable political systems. We know barbed wire and death strips, watchdogs and border guards firing at refugees. Therefore, we are grateful that the Brandenburg Gate has been open since then. It has become a symbol of freedom attracting people from all over the world. In Berlin, people originating from many cultures and religions live together.

Most Berliners are proud that “the world is at home” with our city, as we say. Since last year, there has been great readiness to help refugees that have come to our country. This helpfulness has continued so far. But as in many European

countries, there are people who want to limit the number of foreign people coming in, want to close the borders and want to strengthen nationalism.

Which chances and problems of coexistence between people originating from different cultures and religions do I see in the metropolis of Berlin? Is there a new sense of a community that is based on respectful relations between all people and on esteem for the respective religions and cultures?

II.

I believe that Germany is well prepared to develop such a sense of community. There is our constitution particularly protecting human dignity. It includes two fundamental rights.

Firstly: “The dignity of man is unimpeachable. It has to be respected and protected by all governmental authorities” (Article 1,1). This dignity applies to all people, not only to those whose parents and grandparents have lived in Germany; not only to those belonging to the majority religion, whether it is the Catholic or the Protestant faith.

Secondly: “Politically persecuted persons enjoy the right of asylum” (Article 16a).

These fundamental rights are based on our historical experience. During the period of National Socialism, people were discriminated, expelled and murdered in a cruel manner since they did not belong to the “national community”.

Today, we in Germany have to defend these rights quite clearly and decisively against right-wing extremism creating fear of the foreign, trying to promote social acceptability of mindsets and terms originating in National Socialism and overemphasizing nationalism.

III.

We have to overcome nationalist tendencies by stressing the chances of coexistence between people originating from different cultures and religions. And there are obvious chances:

- In Berlin, we experience young and creative people coming to our city: musicians, artists and young entrepreneurs developing new ideas, founding start-up companies and, as a matter of course, living and working together though coming from around the world and representing different cultures, religions and views.
- We are pleased that the Jewish congregation grows and that there has recently been academic rabbi training in Potsdam near Berlin for the first time in the history of our country.
- Humboldt University of Berlin plans to provide a home to Islamic theology in order to train Muslim teachers and imams.
- We experience that many Christian churches originating from other cultures or languages are founded in Berlin. In fact, there are 14 Protestant Korean congregations in Berlin now.
- Many of these foreign-language congregations have been united in an ecumenical council, the ecumenical council Berlin-Brandenburg.
- We maintain the interreligious dialogue with Muslim mosque communities. By showing their faith far more openly in society than we the Christians do, Muslims have initiated a discussion how strongly religion can and shall be present in public in our country. Indeed, this challenges us Christians to come out of our shell and communicate our faith. Furthermore, it challenges the government to allow both the Christian churches and the Muslim communities and associations to contribute to social life, assuming all rights and duties imposed on them.
- Last Saturday, on September 17, the “Long Night of the Religions” took place in Berlin for the fifth consecutive time. Almost 90 religious groups

with their respective denominations as well as spiritual groups and inter-religious initiatives opened the doors of their mosques, churches, synagogues, temples and parish halls and invited people to visit them.

All this demonstrates us that there actually is a new sense of a respectful coexistence of different cultures and religions in Berlin.

IV.

However, there are serious problems causing concern to us.

- We have to deal with a fear sensed by our population that refugees and immigrants involve terrorist forces entering our country and that they endanger our prosperity.
- We feel that this fear is deliberately promoted, even in places where there seems to be no reason for concern at all. A new right-wing conservative party, the *Alternative für Deutschland* got around 20 % of the votes in the last election of one of the 16 federal German states, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, although this state has sheltered just a small number of refugees that could be integrated without any problems.
- We notice that conflicts of other countries have been carried to our land, for example, the confrontation between the current Turkish government and the movement of the preacher Gülen. We as the Evangelical Church in Berlin maintain the dialogue with both the Turkish, government-related imams and the association related to the Gülen movement - and we want to keep the door open for dialog and discussion.

V.

In order to maintain the new sense of coexistence, the Catholic Archbishop of Berlin and me, the Protestant Social Service Agency and the Catholic Caritas Association as well as the Federation of German Trade Unions in Berlin presen-

ted an “Alliance for an open-minded and Tolerant Berlin” to the public last Thursday. All welfare and social organizations, unions, religious groups, associations and societies of our city now are invited to contribute to this project. The alliance advocates the following programme:

“Berlin is a cosmopolitan and tolerant city. People of different origin, culture and religion live together here. Berlin traditionally grows by the influx of people that are welcomed and integrated and also by large numbers of refugees coming to us. However, we notice that populist messages replace arguments. We are seriously concerned about the fact that extreme right-wing groups take advantage of the topics of expulsion and migration at the moment in order to incite hostility and to question our democratic-constitutional order.

As an alliance for an open-minded and tolerant Berlin, we vehemently reject all forms of hatred, violence, racism, xenophobia and insult.

Representatives of civil society join together in this alliance. ... What unites us: We live an open-minded attitude and tolerance on the streets and squares, in the classrooms and companies, in the houses of God, on the sports fields and in the shops of our city. We are united by a clear statement against xenophobic, racist, anti-Semitic, nationalist and inhuman attitudes in our city.”

By forging this alliance, we want to motivate civil society to actively dedicate itself to a cosmopolitan and tolerant coexistence.

VI.

Finally, I would like to introduce a very special project to you: In Berlin, we have a vision for a dialogue of the religions: We want to build a *House of One*, a house for three religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. We do not want to mix these religions in the house. There will be separate rooms for services and prayers for each religion. Nevertheless, there will be a room in the centre of the

building serving the purpose of offering the chance to meet, talk to and teach each other. An international architecture competition that had achieved much attention was finished. The winner is definite. We have already aroused interest and found partners in Georgia and Jerusalem, in Rwanda and the Central African Republic, in Vienna, London, Stockholm, Zurich and Paris. Now, we need partners and supporters, in particular from the Muslim world, that are inspired by this vision.

We want to give the dialogue in *the* city a home – the very place that experienced the fall of the Berlin Wall having separated hostile systems before. The walls that separate people belonging to different religions and cultures and that turn them into enemies have to fall as well. We need strength, commitment and persistence! Especially devout people of all religions who believe in a good and merciful god who bears in mind the welfare of his human beings are called to give hope to the world by creating a new sense of coexistence.

Thank you for your attention.