

## MERCY – THE HEART OF PEACE

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**+Ioan Casian of Vicina**

*auxiliary-bishop*

### I. Introduction

Dear All,

I will start my talk of this night by greeting you with our liturgical salutation:

*Christ in our midst!*

*He is and He shall be!*

I am grateful to H.E. Bishop Robert Barber S.J. and to the San'Egidio Community for this opportunity to be part of an event that stretches well beyond the common events.

The beginning of the new millennium is an incredible rich time with many new possibilities in technical and human domains; this is also a time of severe trials at many levels – wars, famines, violence, terrorist attacks, social injustice – and the list could continue for a while. This situation reveals the fragility of our personal and societal fabric, but also shows us that the cultivation of such values as *sacrifice, self-containment (askesis), humility, courage, and love*, often associated with our religious and spiritual traditions, is more necessary than ever.

### II. *Mercy and peace* - initial remarks

The topic of tonight '*Mercy – heart of Peace*' is important because it allows us to focus on values fundamental for both the human person's inner and outer spiritual, cultural and social identity.

In my own Christian Orthodox tradition, '*Mercy*' means the compassionate, steadfast love of God for sinners. Christians reflect the *mercy* of God by caring for others. The most frequent prayer in Orthodox worship is '*Lord have mercy.*' (Mt 5:7; Eph 2:4-7).

Again, in my own tradition, 'Peace' means tranquility, harmony with God, self, and the other people, and is made possible through Christ, who unites the faithful to God and to each other (Rom 14:17; Gal 5:22; Eph 2:13-16; Php 4:6, 7).

Then *mercy* and *peace* are virtues containing a strong relational element at various level – God, self, other.

### III. **God sets the example - The Scripture proclaims a merciful and peaceful God**

The two virtues - *mercy* and *peace* – are presented as attributes of God all over the Bible.

*[...] Love your enemies, do good and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil. Therefore, be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful. (Luke 6: 35 – 36)*

*Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. (John 14: 27)*

*Mercy* and *peace*, from the above-mentioned texts of the Scripture, are attributes of God which will overflow upon the humankind.

### IV. **The image of God the premise for a human *mercy* and *peace***

According to the Scripture the human being was created in *the image of God* and *according to His likeness*:

*Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; [...] So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (Genesis 1: 26 – 27)*

The *image of God* declares that in virtue of *everyone's primordial relation to God* the dignity of every person is non-negotiable: each one has a unique gift to give, each one owes respect and patience and freedom.<sup>1</sup> This means also that all human

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<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams. *Faith in the public square*. Bloomsbury: London 2015. 306

persons are born as sons and daughters of the same great God equal in dignity regardless of race, faith, fortune, culture or geography.

The teaching of the Church because of its indifference to popular success or official legitimation, promotes – a non-competitive and a non-violent order.<sup>2</sup> There are no classes or subgroups of humanity who are entitled to less of God's love or to lower levels of human respect, compassion and service.<sup>3</sup>

#### **V. Peace – a consequence of God's mercy**

St. Silouane the Athonite, a contemporary saint and ascetic, gives us a possible answer on how to achieve peace:

*Everyone who renounces his own will before God and other people will always be at peace in his soul; but the man who likes to have his own way will never know the peace.*<sup>4</sup>

The human person by renouncing her own will (bad will) will allow for the image of God present within to unveil its authentic potentialities undisturbed. In the ascetic tradition the bad personal will is seen as a wall against growing authentically in conformity with the will of God, with one's genuine will and with those of other people. There is solidarity in the development of various vocations of the human persons during their lifetime.

The obedience to God strengthens and stabilizes the human person. The creation of the human persons in the image of God is a premise of opting always for good.

There are two more things needed according to St. Silouane to reach the peace: (1) contemplating always God's law; (2) the awareness that finally the peace is a gift of God and a result of our love for each other.

*The soul cannot know peace if she does not explore God's law day and night, for this law was written by the Spirit of God [...]. The man who carries the peace of the Holy Spirit in his heart spreads peace around him [...].*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* 307

<sup>4</sup> Archimandrite Sophrony. *Saint Silouan the Athonite*. St Vladimir's Seminary Press: New York 1998, 312

Human effort is noble, praiseworthy and highly needed but the peace is the fruit of God' Spirit filling and transforming the human person.

*Peace in our souls - continues St Silouane - is impossible unless we beg the Lord with all our hearts to give us love for all men. [...] if we love our enemies, peace will dwell in us day and night.*<sup>6</sup>

A peaceful person pays attention to God, to others and sacrifices him or herself in favor of all. If each one of us will proceed in this way with an attitude of self-sacrifice, self-containment and love towards each other, there will be amongst us only the will of God manifested in its magnanimity.

## VI. **A new consistent and coherent human relationship oriented towards God and the fellow person**

This profound transformation will recreate a new *relationship man - God* as relationship between *man - person* and *God - person*<sup>7</sup> on both – vertical and horizontal axes.

*“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”* (Matthew 22: 35 – 40)

Only a non-confrontational reassessment of our inner structural identity poured into the outer fabric of the societal relationships will bring the desired peace; peace inside and outside ourselves. Both of these dimensions will create a space for dialogue with God and with the neighbor. Each person in our present society – whether belonging to Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism or other religion, should contribute to the transformation of the fabric of our society.

Religion should not be afraid of the secularism. Instead, religions should attempt to reassert their proper place in our society, a place where they can

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<sup>5</sup> Sophrony 316 - 317

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* 318

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* 126 - 127

contribute meaningfully to peace and harmony, not to war. We have many resources in our religions that can promote peace.

**VII. Possible contribution to a perfectible democracy and a more just society**

The religious traditions should play an active role in refining qualitatively the fundamental structures of our modern democracies. Adjusting the will of a majority to the purposes intended by God will secure a solid and trustful basis for our society, and it is our duty as religious leaders to promote God as the way to an everlasting peace.

The diverse communities, agreeing on their mutual attitudes, could build a 'civil' common environment governed by law in which strangers could become partners by accepting the same context of duty and entitlement in the common project of constructing their social world.<sup>8</sup> The presence of the religious groups in a society will allow religion to have a voice in the decision-making processes of the society with a potentially important contribution to a genuinely interactive social harmony and a sense of moral accountability within the social order.<sup>9</sup>

Thank you.

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<sup>8</sup> Williams 300

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* 301