

INTOLERANCE: AN EVIL THAT MUST BE ERADICATED

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This Is the text of the message of His Holiness Aram I addresses to the International conference of United Nations, on racism which will take place from 28-7th September 2001 Durban, South Africa.

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Intolerance has become the mark of many contemporary societies. The causes for intolerance are economic, religious, social and political. Intolerance is evil; it is a source of violence, hatred and division, and it manifests itself through racism, discrimination, xenophobia, and violation of human rights. Therefore, it must be eradicated in the life of human societies. Religions, actors of civil societies and states can together play a pivotal role in combating violence in all its forms and expressions. I consider such a partnership of crucial importance in this globalized world; a partnership that maintains the particularities of each partner, uplifts the specific vocation of each, and strengthens collaboration for common action. In this perspective, I would like to make a few observations and share with you a few experiences from my own Armenian background, and global ecumenical experience:

Speaking of tolerance or intolerance means basically speaking of *diversities*. In fact, the creation of the universe and humanity by God is characterized by diversities. Creation is not a monolithic reality; diversity is a salient feature of it. In the story of creation told in the book of Genesis, diversity is a dominant reality. However, along with the emphasis on diversity, the book of Genesis also speaks of coherence, harmony, interaction and unity as inherent qualities of creation. These two aspects show that in the context of God's creation diversity is a source of enrichment that acquires its true meaning and value through unity. In fact, the creation of the universe and humanity is in its essence a concrete manifestation of unity in diversity and diversity in unity. Diversity is a gift of God that must be preserved for the integrity and sustainability of creation. This basic affirmation of Christian theology is common in all living faiths.

As diversity is a gift of God, it is also the commandment by God and a basic necessity for the preservation of the integrity and unity of the creation, and a *conditio sinne qua non* for the survival of the creation and humanity. This commandment by God is a call to humanity to live together, and live out differences through dialogical interaction. Intolerance hinders interaction, destroys coexistence and jeopardizes the future of the world. It is a sin against the Creator. We must, therefore, combat intolerance with its far-reaching consequences. We must initiate action-oriented processes and set efficient

programs that transform intolerance to tolerance and isolation to co-existence. In this context I would propose some specific ways through which we could achieve this goal:

1) **Educating people.** We should not always react and condemn intolerance. We must become pro-active and promote mutual understanding, mutual respect and trust among peoples and between communities. We should design education programs for people of all ages. Programs that will help them to live together as neighbors, as men and women and children in communities. Programs that will inculcate in the minds of people that in spite of their difference, as communities they are part of one big world community, the same humanity, and one creation. Programs that will enhance the sense of mutual responsibility and accountability. Diversities and differences should not become a hindrance to peaceful and harmonious coexistence among people, religions and cultures. They are integral to the fabric of human society.

2) **Promoting human rights.** Violation of human rights is another form of intolerance. Human rights are not discoveries of human beings. They are gifts of God and hence inviolable. Violation of human rights is a sin against God and the denial of other's rights to live in justice, peace and dignity. The challenge to eradicate intolerance comes to us in the form of the following questions: How can religions with other players of civil society work for the promotion of values of human rights? How can, all of us together, stop the continuing violations of human rights? It is evident that unless the rights of all peoples and nations for freedom, homeland, equal opportunity, participation and community are fully respected, intolerance will increase and generate more hatred and violence.

3) **Community building.** Intolerance implies exclusion from community or rejection of community. Intolerance is a concrete expression of exclusion and marginalization. Where there is community, there should also be equality, diversity and participation. Where there is community, there can be no intolerance. Community-building is essentially tolerance-building; it is a process of generating mutual confidence and understanding among people of different race, religious belonging, cultural identity and ethnic backgrounds. We must, therefore, aim at building communities that safeguard diversities, where identity and unity interact and where rights and obligations of all are fully respected.

For all people of faith eradication of intolerance is a continual affirmation of their own beliefs and religious values. For Christians it is a response to the will of God. As the Spiritual Head of the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia, and the Moderator of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches, I pray that the growing partnership between the United Nations, world religions and Civil Society will become real, and that this effort to work together will deepen collaboration on issues arising from intolerance and give shape to relevant forms of action in concrete situations. It is also my hope that the forthcoming Durban World Conference will wrestle with the question of intolerance seriously and responsibly, that its message will touch the conscience of all those who perpetrate human rights violations, and commit all people of good faith to go beyond

statements and make a difference. I hope and pray for all these to happen not for our own glory but for the Glory of the Creator and the integrity of His creation.