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Papal Address to Interreligious Dialogue Organizers

We See the Possibility of a Unity Which Is Not Dependent Upon Uniformity

JERUSALEM, MAY 11, 2009 (Zenit.org).- Here is the text of the address Benedict XVI gave today at the Notre Dame Center in Jerusalem in a meeting with organizations involved in interreligious dialogue. * * *

Dear Brother Bishops,

Distinguished Religious Leaders,

Dear Friends,

It is a source of great joy for me to meet with you this evening. I wish to thank His Beatitude Patriarch Fouad Twal for his kind words of welcome spoken on behalf of everyone present. I reciprocate the warm sentiments expressed and gladly greet all of you and the members of the groups and organizations you represent.

"God said to Abram, 'Go from your country, your kindred and your father's house for a land I shall show you' ... so Abram went ... and took his wife Sarah with him" (Gen 12:1-5). God's irruptive call, which marks the beginning of the history of our faith traditions, was heard in the midst of man's ordinary daily existence. And the history that ensued was shaped, not in isolation, but through the encounter with Egyptian, Hittite, Sumerian, Babylonian, Persian, and Greek cultures.

Faith is always lived within a culture. The history of religion shows that a community of believers proceeds by degrees of faithfulness to God, drawing from and shaping the culture it meets. This same dynamic is found in individual believers from the great monotheistic traditions: attuned to the voice of God, like Abraham, we respond to his call and set out seeking the fulfillment of his promises, striving to obey his will, forging a path in our own particular culture.

Today, nearly four thousand years after Abraham, the encounter of religions with culture occurs not simply on a geographical plane. Certain aspects of globalization and in particular the world of the internet have created a vast virtual culture, the worth of which is as varied as its countless manifestations. Undoubtedly much has been achieved to create a sense of closeness and unity within the world-wide human family. Yet, at the same

time, the boundless array of portals through which people so readily access undifferentiated sources of information can easily become an instrument of increasing fragmentation: the unity of knowledge is shattered and the complex skills of critique, discernment and discrimination learned through academic and ethical traditions are at times bypassed or neglected.

The question naturally arises then as to what contribution religion makes to the cultures of the world against the backdrop of rapid globalization. Since many are quick to point out the readily apparent differences between religions, as believers or religious persons we are presented with the challenge to proclaim with clarity what we share in common.

Abraham's first step in faith, and our steps to or from the synagogue, church, mosque or temple, tread the path of our single human history, unfolding along the way, we might say, to the eternal Jerusalem (cf. Rev 21:23). Similarly, every culture with its inner capacity to give and receive gives expression to the one human nature. Yet, the individual is never fully expressed through his or her own culture, but transcends it in the constant search for something beyond. From this perspective, dear friends, we see the possibility of a unity which is not dependent upon uniformity. While the differences we explore in inter-religious dialogue may at times appear as barriers, they need not overshadow the common sense of awe and respect for the universal, for the absolute and for truth, which impel religious peoples to converse with one another in the first place. Indeed it is the shared conviction that these transcendent realities have their source in -- and bear traces of -- the Almighty that believers uphold before each other, our organizations, our society, our world. In this way not only do we enrich culture but we shape it: lives of religious fidelity echo God's irruptive presence and so form a culture not defined by boundaries of time or place but fundamentally shaped by the principles and actions that stem from belief.

Religious belief presupposes truth. The one who believes is the one who seeks truth and lives by it. Although the medium by which we understand the discovery and communication of truth differs in part from religion to religion, we should not be deterred in our efforts to bear witness to truth's power. Together we can proclaim that God exists and can be known, that the earth is his creation, that we are his creatures, and that he calls every man and woman to a way of life that respects his design for the world. Friends, if we believe we have a criterion of judgment and discernment which is divine in origin and intended for all humanity, then we cannot tire of bringing that knowledge to bear on civic life. Truth should be offered to all; it serves all members of society. It sheds light on the foundation of morality and ethics, and suffuses reason with the strength to reach beyond its own limitations in order to give expression to our deepest common aspirations. Far from threatening the tolerance of differences or cultural

plurality, truth makes consensus possible and keeps public debate rational, honest and accountable, and opens the gateway to peace. Fostering the will to be obedient to the truth in fact broadens our concept of reason and its scope of application, and makes possible the genuine dialogue of cultures and religions so urgently needed today.

Each one of us here also knows, however, that God's voice is heard less clearly today, and reason itself has in so many instances become deaf to the divine. Yet that "void" is not one of silence. Indeed, it is the din of egotistical demands, empty promises and false hopes that so often invades the very space in which God seeks us. Can we then make spaces -- oases of peace and profound reflection -- where God's voice can be heard anew, where his truth can be discovered within the universality of reason, where every individual, regardless of dwelling, or ethnic group, or political hue, or religious belief, can be respected as a person, as a fellow human being? In an age of instant access to information and social tendencies which engender a kind of monoculture, deep reflection against the backdrop of God's presence will embolden reason, stimulate creative genius, facilitate critical appreciation of cultural practices and uphold the universal value of religious belief.

Friends, the institutions and groups that you represent engage in inter-religious dialogue and the promotion of cultural initiatives at a wide range of levels. From academic institutions -- and here I wish to make special mention of the outstanding achievements of Bethlehem University -- to bereaved parents groups, from initiatives through music and the arts to the courageous example of ordinary mothers and fathers, from formal dialogue groups to charitable organizations, you daily demonstrate your belief that our duty before God is expressed not only in our worship but also in our love and concern for society, for culture, for our world and for all who live in this land. Some would have us believe that our differences are necessarily a cause of division and thus at most to be tolerated. A few even maintain that our voices should simply be silenced. But we know that our differences need never be misrepresented as an inevitable source of friction or tension either between ourselves or in society at large. Rather, they provide a wonderful opportunity for people of different religions to live together in profound respect, esteem and appreciation, encouraging one another in the ways of God. Prompted by the Almighty and enlightened by his truth, may you continue to step forward with courage, respecting all that differentiates us and promoting all that unites us as creatures blessed with the desire to bring hope to our communities and world. May God guide us along this path!