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Ratomir Grozdanoski

Macedonian Orthodox Theological School St. Clement of Ohrid, Skopje

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FAITH: SOURCE OF PEACE OR CAUSE FOR UNREST

By **Ratomir Grozdanoski**

Dr. Ratomir Grozdanoski is an archdeacon in the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the secretary of its Holy Synod. He is also a professor of New Testament at the Macedonian Orthodox Theological School "St. Clement of Ohrid" in Skopje. He received his diploma at the Orthodox Theological School in Skopje, and subsequently his M.A. and Ph.D. from University of Skopje. He also studied at the Aristotle University in Thessalonica and University of Athens, Greece. He is the author of several books, the most important being *Biblijata vo delata na Sveti Kliment Ohridski* [Bible in the Works of St. Clement of Ohrid.]

When Christ was born¹, an angel's song was heard from the heavens: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men."² The message from the heavens is clear: mankind should glorify God in the highest, peace should reign on earth, and goodwill, understanding and love should reign among men. God has created conditions for building perfect and holy peace on Earth³. He "guides our feet into the way of peace"⁴ and calls upon us to have peace in our hearts, peace among us and to be at peace with Him.⁵

The God-man and the Giver of Peace, the "Prince of Peace,"⁶ Christ, gives us peace as a gift from the Holy Spirit, a gift for which a person should prepare in advance, to make efforts and to pray. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control..."⁷ Lord Jesus Christ is a constant way of peace even today, amidst our world, and asks us to be His companions. When we repent our sins, we show that we believe in God, that we love our neighbours, that we offer ourselves to them, and that we also participate in the way of peace of Christ the Saviour.

The Church of Christ prays constantly and wishes for every person to be a bearer of peace, so they might be filled with love and good will! It constantly calls for peace in its liturgical life, in its teaching and homilies. Every Church service, every prayer, every sacrament, every Eucharist is a source of peace, external as well as internal. "Let us pray to God in peace! ...For peace from above and salvation of our souls... For peace in the whole world..." "Peace to all!"

¹Luke 2:14; compare: Galatians 4:4; Matthew 2:1-12; John 1:14; Philippians 2:7

²Luke 2:14

³2 Timothy 2:22

⁴Luke 1:79

⁵Isaiah 27:5; Ephesians 2:14-22

⁶Isaiah 9:6

⁷Galatians 5:22-23

But, in our times love and peace on earth are scarce, and human life loses its value more and more every day. Why is it so? Because people are distancing themselves from God. These days, it seems like there is no one hearing the angels' song asking for peace on earth and goodwill towards men.⁸ The world has become a global village, but an uneasy one, a village with inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts. But, without peace there is no well-being on earth: neither for the people, nor for the nations. Peace creates conditions for collaboration and for people and nations to become closer, as well as knowledge that all people are God's children, brothers and sisters among themselves⁹, and therefore, all people in the world have a common goal: To live in peace and give glory to God! We should realise that we need each other, and that our love is hollow without the others. That is why Our Lord Jesus Christ says: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."¹⁰

We, the people of faith and representatives of different religions, do what we are called upon by God with our activities for protection of peace: to be peacemakers, and to become sons of God.¹¹ That way we fulfil the evangelical command for love towards our neighbour, as Lord Jesus Christ has said: "These things I command to you, that you love one another."¹² And every single person is our neighbour. The best illustration for this is our Lord's Jesus Christ evangelical parable about the Good Samaritan.¹³ All of Christ's Gospel is a Gospel of peace and love. The Lord meets the people through His Gospel, and asks His faithful to be meek, just, gentle, humble, and peacemakers. After worthy participation in God's Eucharist the faithful become apostles of peace in the everyday life. With the Sacrament of Repentance the confessing Christian corrects every "accidentally" disturbed relationship with their neighbours. The Holy Church teaches that we cannot commune with Christ if we have not made peace with all people, if we have not forgiven and if we are not forgiven by all.

We have an example to imitate. The holy Apostle Paul says: "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ."¹⁴ "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all

⁸Luke 2:14

⁹Jewish Torah, Chapter 5; Genesis 1:26-2:25; Luke 3:23-38; 1 Corinthians 15:22, 45; 1 Timothy 2:13-14; Koran 5:27-32; 17:70; 36:60

¹⁰Matthew 5:9

¹¹Matthew 5:9

¹²John 15:17

¹³See: Luke 10:25-37

¹⁴1 Corinthians 11:1

men.”¹⁵ “He who loves another has fulfilled the law. Love is the fulfilment of the law.”¹⁶ The saints are the examples to follow. They have fulfilled God's commandments, they have loved God and men with all their hearts, they have purified themselves from sinful passions, and thusly they have tasted the perfect peace.

The Interfaith and Interethnic Relations in the Republic of Macedonia

The Republic of Macedonia has gone through an armed conflict on its territory during 2001. It was the last conflict after the disintegration of the former Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia. The most obvious characteristics of the conflict was its ethnic component – it was between the ethnic Macedonian majority and the ethnic Albanian minority in the country.

In the years prior to the conflict, the interethnic relations in the country were evaluated as very tense. For the most people in Macedonia and for many people out of the country, the armed conflict was a surprise. It happened, nevertheless, and lead to the loss of at least 150 lives, and the internal displacement of 170,000 persons. The conflict has seriously disrupted the existing interethnic relations. The interfaith relations in the Republic of Macedonia were also disrupted.

The fact that, luckily, there was little loss of civilian lives, and there were no mass expulsions and running away of population because of armed activities (it happened mostly in the ethnically mixed villages), shows that the majority of the population was not ready to take arms and fight for any cause (especially not against their neighbours of different faith and nationality!) The interethnic component was accentuated in the conflict. The interfaith relations were not so prominent, but they were often used for escalating the conflict (with the attacks on churches, mosques and sacral objects). In the Republic of Macedonia most of the Macedonians are Orthodox Christians (95%), while the Albanians are mostly Muslims (98%). The communication between the churches and the religious communities in Macedonia were additionally worsened with the armed conflict, and it has dropped to a very low level. Even formal meetings between high religious officials were rare, even non-existent. During the conflict, the declarative coming together of the religious leaders was realized with the common appeal for peace.

¹⁵Romans 12, 18

¹⁶Romans 13:8; 13:10; compare: Matthew 22:40; Deuteronomy 19:18; Galatians 5, 14

When gunpowder was still in the air in Macedonia, and hatred and revenge were being instigated during and after the conflict, God sent us two peacemakers to come and help us - professors Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes. They seem to have had the same Biblical vision that the holy Apostle Paul had in Troas, when "a man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying: "Come over to Macedonia and help us". Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them"¹⁷, says the Biblical text. Similar to Apostle Paul at that time, Paul and Leonard have heard that call and came to help us now. Theirs was the International Inter-Religious Conference organized in Skopje from May 10-14, 2002, with the subject of: *Building of Confidence between Churches and Religious Communities in Macedonia through Dialogue*.¹⁸

The inter-religious conference showed that the churches and religious communities in the Republic of Macedonia know very little about each other. It was concluded that mutual familiarization and contacts are needed. Also, examples were given for improving the relations.

The Conference has resulted in several concrete suggestions:

1. Establishing of the Council for Inter-Religious Cooperation
2. Establishing of regular meetings and contacts
3. Establishing of cooperation between the educational institutions.¹⁹

The Conference concluded that, in spite of the differences, there are common things that brings religions closer to one another, and that they should be nurtured and affirmed. The realization of the second and the third point literally depends on the activities and actions of the Council.

The Council for Interreligious Cooperation

The Council for Interreligious Cooperation consists of representatives from the five

¹⁷Acts 16:8-12

¹⁸The Conference also resulted with a Collection of Lectures: *Building of Confidence between Churches and Religious Communities in Macedonia through Dialogue*, Philadelphia 2004. The Collection is bilingual: in Macedonian and Albanian.

¹⁹The Collection: *Building of Confidence between Churches and Religious Communities in Macedonia through Dialogue*, Philadelphia 2004, p. 186.

major religious communities²⁰ listed in the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia.²¹ They are the following:

- The Macedonian Orthodox Church;
- The Islamic Religious Community;
- The Roman Catholic Church;
- The Evangelical-Methodist Church;
- The Jewish community.

The first two are the biggest. They represent 90% of the population in Macedonia²². They also have educational institutions - Theological Faculties and Seminaries.

The Council for Interreligious Cooperation, having in mind the general population of the Republic of Macedonia, guides its activities towards development of better cooperation between the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Religious Community in the first place, as well as between the other religious communities in Macedonia. Its activities are focused on the students of the educational institutions: the Orthodox Faculty of Theology in Skopje and the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in Kondovo, as well as on the students of the Seminaries.

The Theological Faculties and the Seminaries are crucial for the success of the activities of the Council for Inter-Religious Cooperation, and for establishing and development of better interreligious relations in the Republic of Macedonia. The educational institutions are places where new initiatives may arise, and where things may move away from the isolated and non-cooperative behaviour between the religious communities. The students have already shown initiative regarding this issue, and are participating actively. Some small activities have made a significant improvement for the mutual relations and understanding. Those activities were taken through: mutual visits of students²³ and professors

²⁰There are 24 religious communities registered in Macedonia.

²¹This listing of the five religious communities in the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia was inserted with the Amendments made after the Ohrid Framework Agreement. Now Article 19 of the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia states: "The Macedonian Orthodox Church, as well as the Islamic Religious Community in Macedonia, the Roman Catholic Church, the Evangelist-Methodist Church, the Jewish community and the other religious communities and religious groups...". Before that, it read like this: "the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the other religious communities and religious groups" (Article 19 of the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia).

²²67% Orthodox Christians and 23% Muslims.

²³Students and professors from the Orthodox Faculty of Theology visited the Faculty of Islamic Sciences on March 22nd 2004, while students and professors from the Faculty of Islamic Sciences visited the Orthodox Faculty of Theology on March 29th 2004.

(lecturers)²⁴ between the theological Faculties, as well as through visits of important objects of the religious communities.²⁵ The lectures given by the deans of the Theological Faculties²⁶ (both the Orthodox and the Islamic) at the other faculties (which happened for the first time), represent an inspiration for an attempt to find an appropriate model for further contacts and cooperation between different religious communities.

Judging by foreign experiences, we believe that some other types and ways of communication between the religious communities could also be useful, and they could be open for the general public. For example, organizing common public appearances for mutual goals, such as the introduction of religious lessons in schools, etc. The openness will broaden the people's perspectives and the understanding for the others. The people of different religions should meet and exchange experiences. It is also needed for the practical activists: the priests and the *hojas*. For example, they could cooperate very well for the development of charitable activities, working with elder and feeble persons, with the sick in hospitals and homes, even for building of general attitude towards people in the spirit of God's truth that we are children of God and brothers/sisters. Certainly, they can also cooperate for finding of possible solutions for the differences and problems arising in everyday life, as they arise. That way, the capacities of the religious communities for charitable and social-humanitarian activities may be strengthened. This could be achieved through building of capacities, such as: a) Technical assistance (equipping offices at the two Faculties and at the regional offices of the religious communities with Internet access); b). Training in the area of interfaith dialogue. The trainees would be mainly students and professors from the Seminaries and the Theological Faculties, as well as activists from the religious communities in Macedonia; c) Research travel and workshops.

For the realization of this, at least at the beginning, the burden should fall on the

²⁴Professors from the Orthodox Faculty of Theology have held lectures at the Faculty of Islamic Sciences twice, on April 21st 2004 (Petko Zlateski, MA), and in May 2004 (Gjoko Gjorgjevski, PhD) (*Bulletin of MCIC* No. 2, Skopje 2004, 1), Professors from the Islamic faculty (Metin Izeti, PhD) have also held lectures at the Orthodox Faculty of Theology on April 1st 2004 and in May 2004 (Ahmet Xherif, PhD). (*Bulletin of MCIC* No. 2, Skopje 2004).

²⁵Students from the Faculty of Islamic Sciences visited the Cathedral Church of "St. Clement of Ohrid" in Skopje on May 26th 2004. While students from the Orthodox Faculty of Theology visited the Mustapha-Pasha mosque, on June 9th 2004 (*Bulletin of MCIC* No. 3).

²⁶The Dean of the Faculty of Islamic Sciences held a lecture on the Orthodox Faculty of Theology on March 11th 2004, while the Dean of the Orthodox Faculty of Theology held a lecture at the Faculty of Islamic Sciences on March 15th 2004. (*Bulletin of MCIC* No. 2, Skopje 2004, 1). On May 19th 2004 the Deans of the Theological Faculties had a common press conference, at which they talked about the cooperation between the Orthodox Faculty of Theology and the Faculty of Islamic Sciences (*Bulletin* No. 3).

educational theological institutions. The educational centers and the education is an important factor in everything, and in these activities as well! However, an intensive communication and cooperation is needed for the achievement of actual results. Therefore, an Information Office and Dialogue Centre should be opened in Skopje.

The goal of the Council, except helping the mutual understanding between the churches and the religious communities, is also helping the Macedonian public to have an understanding for them. We accentuate the last point because there is still a great deal of misconceptions and bad attitude towards the churches and the religious communities with the general public in the Republic of Macedonia. It is the result of the 50 year long atheization of our society during the communist anti-theistic system. The people were educated and nurtured in that spirit, they were even forced to distance themselves from the faith and the Church, they were forbidden to attend services, under the threat to be expelled from the Communist Party, which meant losing their jobs and public offices.²⁷

The churches and the religious communities were considered unnecessary remnants from the capitalist system, and their property and objects were being seized with the purpose of their impoverishment and eventual dying out. The monasteries and more significant churches were also confiscated and turned into dead cultural-historical monuments, where even the priests had to pay entrance fee, and no public prayers and services were allowed in them. The faith was supposed to become historical past, with no future in that society, being considered the “opium for the masses”.

The people educated in this spirit are the generation of mature persons in our country. They are also university professors, state officials, politicians, etc. Their attitude towards faith, the churches and the religious communities is hard to change, and their attitude is sometimes very hypocritical. In spite of everything, even during this ‘lack of spirituality period’, there were persons who had learned religious lessons in their childhood, and have educated themselves in the faith, so there was a certain extent of respect for God and the Church in them, and many of them were secretly religious. But this generation, which was made atheistic systematically, is now in power, and that's the main reason for the Republic of Macedonia being the last country in Europe where religious lessons are forbidden and

²⁷ And everything was state owned, there was nothing private, because private property was confiscated, it being considered capitalistic wealth, while the “capitalists” (the artisans and merchants) were often imprisoned as anti-social elements and anti-communist activists!

punishable by Law²⁸. Such retrograde legislation is still in effect only in the Republic of Albania.

Hence, it is clear what are the relations like in the Republic of Macedonia, not only between the churches and the religious communities, but also the attitude of the general public towards them. Lately, to our great joy, things are changing for the better and the people are returning to the faith, but it is not allowed for us to publicly hold religious lessons or to preach before the media, although the state media are financed by the people with a broadcast tax, charged through the electricity bills. Then, why don't those state media satisfy the religious needs of the viewers who are financing them with their programs? It is the same as if you have paid for your lunch in a restaurant, and no one asks you what would you like to eat, but they bring you only what they like to cook!

If we ask for something, the state officials tell us that, according to the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, the Church and the religious communities are separated from the state and that we are building a secular state. All right, let it be so, but don't we build democracy and freedom most and foremost? Then, what kind of democracy and freedom is it when people do not have the right to a free choice - they cannot choose between faith and agnosticism, religious lessons and atheism? It would be just if both things are offered and provided, so anyone may choose what they want. Someone might not want to learn music, art, chemistry or something else, and wants to learn about religion, but it is forbidden, even punishable. Those who want to attend religious lessons also pay for the professors and the study books, same as those who don't want to watch horror or action films, but religious shows and programs, pay for the television and the radio. And last, but not the least, it should not be forgotten that secularisation does not mean atheization, and secular society does not mean atheist society! In order to understand and overcome this, we will need time and help from friends with good intentions, and I mean not only declarative, but also active friends. So, that is the reason why the beneficial activities of the Council for Interreligious Cooperation have come to pass. It is good that there is an awareness of the great need for improvement of the mutual understanding between the churches and the religious communities, and also the understanding for them in the Macedonian public.

²⁸ According to the provisions of Article 13 of the Law on Primary Education in the Republic of Macedonia and Article 7 of the Law on Secondary Education (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia No. 44/95): "Any religious organising or religious activities in the primary and secondary education is forbidden." While the Law on Religious Communities in the Republic of Macedonia provides for penalties for holding religious lessons.

Even more because the population in Macedonia is mixed a great deal, so there are people of the same faith, but different nationality: there are Christian Macedonians and Albanians²⁹ - Orthodox Macedonians and Christian Albanians (Orthodox or Roman Catholics); but there are also people of same nationality, but with different confession: there are Macedonians that are Orthodox, Muslim, Roman Catholic or Protestant. Therefore, in Macedonia, like almost nowhere else, you can see not only different religious objects in the same city (churches and mosques), but there are also specific examples of people sharing the same object for different religious needs: both for Orthodox and for Muslims. Such is the example of the monastery “Most Holy *Bogorodica*” (Mother of God) near Kičevo. There, in the monastery church, there is a special place for prayer for Muslims. Other churches and monasteries in Macedonia are also respected and visited by Muslims. For example, the monasteries “Most Holy *Bogorodica*” in Kališta near Struga, and “St. Naum of Ohrid” near Ohrid. This traditions is centuries long, and that's why those Orthodox churches are built with separate places for Muslims to pray. They also come to those places to pray: they either ask for God's help, or give thanks for the help of God they received, after which they established a permanent spiritual connection with the sanctuary. That's the tradition that exists in our country, and it brings people together and develops a pious attitude towards the sanctuaries and religious objects, at the same time nurturing the people's sense of morality. It means that in Macedonia, during the centuries, although there are different nations and faiths, the people have lived together, even prayed together! They can do the same in the future, too! This gives us a reason to believe that the interethnic relations are not completely destroyed, and there are possibilities for their improvement through interreligious activities, for building and improvement of mutual trust.

Nevertheless, we can still notice the lack of communication and cooperation between the religious communities, especially between the two most dominant (the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Religious Community). The contacts are established mainly at the highest level, between the religious leaders, and mostly formally, when the meetings are organized by the state authorities (meetings with the President of the country³⁰), or by

²⁹Mother Theresa was also from Macedonia, she was born in Skopje, an Albanian Roman Catholic. There are also Orthodox Albanians in Macedonia.

³⁰Contacts and meetings of this type are always held for the New Year, on the so called New Years Day Reception with the President of the Republic of Macedonia. But, on October 14th 2004, the President of the Republic of Macedonia Mr. Branko Crvenkovski organised a working meeting with the representatives of the churches and the religious communities. The meeting was held at the presidential villa “Biljana” in Ohrid. It was agreed that meetings like that should be held regularly, and the hosts should be the five churches and religious communities in succession.

international factors. Other than that, the Head of the Macedonian Orthodox Church kir kir Stefan made a good start for direct communication with his visit to the Islamic Religious Community for the festival of *Ramazan Bairam* in 2004.

It is a proof that the Council for Interreligious Cooperation is needed in the Republic of Macedonia, and that it can contribute for the improvement of the relations. Its main activities should be focused on the following: mutual visits and exchange of lecturers and students; student summer camps; travelling together; training on the subject of interreligious dialogue, scientific visits, workshops; information (a Bulletin; a Year Book; Calendars); comparative studies; an Information Office and a Dialogue Centre. Only part of this is realized, and most of it, alas, still remains as planned projects of the Council, for example: Information Office and a Dialogue Centre, Bulletin, Year Book, calendars, comparative studies, and summer camps and travel. This is only our good will, and it awaits assistance from our friends who are not economically impoverished like our country, the Republic of Macedonia.

Every meeting should consider one particular subject which is a common interest for all.