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“The Power of the Heart. Researchers of truth.”

Conference with Fr. Pierbattista Pizzaballa - Custodian of the Holy Land

Rimini, August 24, 2014 – If there is anyone qualified to talk about the Holy Land – aware of all its spiritual, historical, geographical, political, and ecumenical issues – that person is Fr. Pierbattista Pizzaballa. He was born in Cologno al Serio (Bergamo province) and has been the Custodian of the Holy Land since 2004. This is his third time at the Rimini Meeting, after attending the Meeting in 2007 and 2011. Today at 3 pm he spoke about “The Power of the Heart. Researchers of truth.” with Emilia Guarnieri, President of the Meeting for Friendship Amongst Peoples Foundation, introduced by Monica Maggioni, Director of *Rainews24*.

Before addressing the heart of the issue, Guarnieri read the message sent by Giorgio Napolitano, the Italian President of the Republic (see relevant press release), as a token of his esteem for the Rimini Meeting, which he visited in 2011.

“The heart and truth are the topics opening the Rimini Meeting this year,” Monica Maggioni said. “Our heart is powerful, because it’s free,” continues Guarnieri. “Each new beginning is possible only for people desiring this freedom, first and foremost. This type of freedom is what we witnessed dominating Pope Francis’ recent visit to the Holy Land, and it’s the same type of freedom that moved us during the prayer meeting held in the Vatican Gardens a few days later. It’s for this reason that I thank Fr. Pizzaballa with great affection, because by accepting our invitation again this year, he allows us to begin this Meeting rooted in the strength of an experience and a witness.” Several rounds of warm applause confirmed the truth of his words, as a demonstration of the extent to which the Meeting attendees appreciate Fr. Pizzaballa and his precious work in the Holy Land.

“It’s not an easy task, in such a short time, to talk about such a broad and complex topic, like the Middle East today, characterized by such turmoil and radical transformation” begins Fr. Pizzaballa. “It’s even more difficult to connect such a tragic time with the topic of this conference: ‘the power of the heart’. What can man’s heart do for the humanitarian drama the media have been showing us in the past months? One would think that there’s the need for something more than good words and fuzzy feelings. I believe, though, that it’s a mistake to limit oneself to a professional political, social and historical analysis of what is happening, without also applying a religious and already redeemed approach, that could help realistically read and interpret all the events, without being overwhelmed by them”. Experts are necessary to make us understand the continuous political, economic and social changes, but what’s needed is first and foremost a religious gaze and an approach that can free us from fears and an inferiority complex. Fr. Pizzaballa recounts that he has been receiving many requests from church movements and associations that want to save Christianity and its cultural heritage in the Middle East, but he feels that in such requests there is a “lack of faith, possible only to those who trust their own technical capabilities and strength, but who ultimately entrust their lives to Another.”

The Middle East - born from the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire and remaining stable for several years - is over, and a new era is beginning: an era which is not entirely clear. The “place for coexistence,” where each religion was not just a faith, but it also implied a cultural approach to daily life and social belonging, no longer exists. “Each person, once born, is registered with an ID number, next to which his or



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her religious belonging is recorded through an acronym. Such belonging thus identifies his or her civil identity: each person is well defined and known as Christian, Jew or Muslim, whether or not he or she is practicing.” An example of this is the rite of marriage: it’s always celebrated with a religious ceremony (and never only a civil one).

Such peaceful religious coexistence has been interrupted by Islamic extremist movements. “The so called ‘religious cleansing’ is shameful,” declared Fr. Pizzaballa. “What’s needed is that each religious community raise their voice against this infamy. Lately, the Islamic world has begun to move at last, but honestly we have to say that their act of condemnation sounded pretty shy and unconvincing. Furthermore, this kind of fanaticism obviously needs to be stopped, if necessary, with force and with necessary protections. However, the use of force without a plan for reconstruction won’t resolve anything. Force blocks and destroys. If then the rebuilding process doesn’t occur, the vacuum created by the use of force will incite an even more dangerous extremism. This is because there’s always someone purer and more just than you...”: and this is applicable also to the Israel-Palestine crisis.

Fr. Pizzaballa recounted his recent trip to Aleppo, a city now reduced to ruins, lacking water, but where some gestures of solidarity were born amongst Christians and Muslims to face the emergency and help people with meal distribution. His visit comforted people “more than from what we brought to them, they were comforted by our presence.”

At the end of the conference Fr. Pizzaballa said: “I’m not a naive do-gooder. I don’t deny the existing dramatic problems, the betrayals and cruelty provoking our consciences. Such issues question the Islamic world and ask us to be firm and clear in asking them to take a similarly firm and clear stand against all this evil. However, stopping here is not enough. What’s necessary is to always have a clear vision: to rebuild life. To denounce is not enough: we also need to indicate a clear vision to pursue and a road to follow. The evil that’s in front of us challenges us as Christians and requires us to live our faith more fully, to the core. It’s precisely in such circumstances that we are called to live out our Christian vocation in a complete way, without escaping and without fears. “Evil shouldn’t scare Christians.” He then added: “Let’s not forget the episode of the Gospel of the ship shaken by the waves: how the disciples panicked and Christ’s reproach: ‘Why are you so scared? Do you still have no faith?’”.

Fr. Pizzaballa concluded by recalling the meeting between Pope Francis and the Orthodox Pope Bartholomew in the St. Sepulcher Basilica, as well as the prayer meeting in the Vatican Gardens, with the presidents of Israel and Palestine. The first meeting speaks about the way in which the relationship between Orthodox and Catholics have changed profoundly. “The images of death we’ve watched so far, bombings, missiles, but most of all the deep hatred fed by all this violence, shouldn’t be separated from the images of the two presidents praying together for peace. Such images show us that this is possible. They help us to raise our gaze, they warm our heart: the Middle East is represented also by these images. We need everything in the Middle East: financial, military, political support, mediation, help... But, most of all, we need to believe that it’s still possible to love one another. Witnesses tell us that, despite everything, this strength is still alive.”

At the end of the conference, time was reserved for some answers to questions asked by Marina Maggioni. As a summary, here is one: “Pope Francis, during his visit to the Holy Land, acted in total freedom, ignoring diplomatic petty analysis and affirming his desire to meet the people.”

(A.B., F.R.)

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