



In the name of God, Most Compassionate, Most Merciful

May God bless and send peace upon the Prophet Muhammad, his companions, and upon his brethren from among all God's prophets.

His Holiness, Pope Francis, guest of the United Arab Emirates, His Eminence, the Grand Shaykh of Azhar, Ahmad Tayyib, His Highness, Shaykh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Your Excellencies, respected and honored guests:

May God's peace, grace, and blessings be upon you all.

On behalf of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and my esteemed colleagues members of the Muslim Council of Elders, it gives me great pleasure to welcome our honored guest, His Holiness, along with his esteemed delegation.

We welcome you as guests on behalf of His Highness, Shaykh Muhammad Bin Zayed Al Nahyan to the abode of Zayed, which was founded by the late Shaykh Zayed Bin Sultan in the spirit of mutual respect, generosity, and kindness. This land continues to serve as a fountainhead of peacebuilding, constructive ideas, and pioneering initiatives. As a unique exemplar, it works within a legal framework that ensures its protection and perpetuity.

Today, we meet with a man who is truly among the peacemakers and lovers of righteousness. His honorable efforts to defend the persecuted and to aid the oppressed are known to all.

Your Holiness, Pope Francis, we welcome you today in a beautiful house of God, just as our Catholic brothers previously welcomed us in St. Peter's Basilica. Such visits bring to mind that, according to the teachings of Islam, houses of worship, particularly those belonging to the Abrahamic family, are sacred and inviolable. In fact, the Qur'an obliges Muslims to protect all such houses of God. God says in the Qur'an, "Had it not been for God's repelling some men by means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, wherein the name of God is oft mentioned, would assuredly have been destroyed" (22:40).

This sacred verse helped establish a legal framework for the protection of religious pluralism as well as the principle of redressing conflicts and clashes roused by religion. The verse also teaches us that our attitudes towards others should not be based upon religious identity but upon deeds and character.



For this reason, we reassert to you that Christians in the East are here to stay and were born to flourish. They form a root of the Abrahamic family tree; hence, they cannot be uprooted, regardless of the strength of the ill winds or the error of deviant emotions.

Your Holiness, Pope Francis, our gathering today represents a rejection of the idea that religions are responsible for enmity and war, an accusation that has been associated with religion to such a degree that philosophers, such as Kant, made it a principle to remove religion from the public square because they saw it as an agent of divisiveness that harmed more than benefited society.

We acknowledge that religious passion is analogous to nuclear energy: it can be a source of flourishing and stability, but it can also result in destruction and misery. However, at its foundation, religion is a source of peace, charity, and harmony. Still, the ignorant, whether from good or bad intentions, can abuse its intended purpose, resulting in breakdown and dissolution.

Our time not only demands but obliges all people of faith to return to their religious texts and traditions in order to reassert the firm foundations of mutual respect as well as to create illuminating models that instill in the hearts of their followers a renewal of their highest ideals and values, which will enable the most appropriate interpretations of religious texts for our current context and the interest of our species. Indeed, that is the very essence of what we are striving to do in the Council of Muslim Elders under the leadership of His Eminence, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Shaykh Ahmed al-Tayyib.

Your Holiness, we have many commonalities, yet they have been neglected, and in their place a fanning of the flames of provincialism has caused today's conflicts and wars. These strong common denominators that the Second Vatican Council emphasized were subsequently reasserted in the various statements emanating from al-Azhar as well as the Marrakesh Declaration and the Abu Dhabi Statements. We must correct the historical memory that limits the relationship between these two faiths to wars and conflicts around the Mediterranean Sea.

Indeed, we are the offspring of the Abrahamic family. We share an original narrative that establishes our values, virtues, and ethics that ensures peace and coexistence between our diverse peoples. We Muslims consider ourselves to be an extension of the previous religious dispensations. Our Prophet, God's peace and blessings upon him, taught us to look at all of the prophets as apotheoses of reality. The Qur'an says,



Say, “We believe in God and what He has revealed to us, and what He revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and what was given to Moses and Jesus, and what was given to the other prophets from their Lord. We do not differentiate among them; and we are surrendered to God” (2:136).

Hence, we look upon all of these religions with respect and complementarity. We neither deny nor denigrate the contributions of our religions and diverse civilizations in the establishment of our universal mores and values. Our Prophet, God’s peace and blessings upon him, saw himself as a link in the chain of prophets. He stated, “I was sent only to complete noble character.” He also confirmed that he was a cornerstone in this grand prophetic edifice. Even Nietzsche, in a moment of clarity, said in *Beyond Good and Evil* that those who established morality among humanity are few indeed: among them, he named Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad.

Our belief in these shared values provides us with an opportunity to build bridges over the differences, and thrusts upon us the responsibility of collaboration so that our shared ship of humanity doesn’t perish, nor the abode of our species ignite. Distinguished assembly members, we are firefighters and first responders. Let us then cooperate, all of us, and complement each other in our various roles, based upon the spheres of our influence so that we can contribute to the restoration of the moral consciousness of humanity. Let us call for our ethical progress to keep pace with our scientific breakthroughs. History teaches us that any materialistic civilization devoid of principled morality destroys itself.

Your Holiness, Pope Francis, surely your visit—and our hopes of serious and continued dialogue that accompany it—engender renewed promise and confirm our conviction that there will come a day when all of us reject our historical misconceptions of one another and our sentiments of animus, and that we unite with sentiments of fraternity and shared humanity and a love of goodness and friendship—that indeed will be a bright day in the history of humanity. So let us all pledge to cooperate in virtue and dutiful piety, and act according to Paul’s letter to the Romans when he said, “So let us, therefore follow after things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another” (Romans 14:19).

In conclusion, I reiterate my warm welcome, and thank you all. *Gracias*.

Shaykh Abdallah Bin Bayyah
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Abu Dhabi
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