



Solidarity in the Defense of the Holy Places

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Assalamu alaykum wa rahamatullahi wa barakatuhu.

A very very old Jewish story tells us that four thousand years ago, two brothers lived near each other on a hill by Jerusalem. They each had their own farm, but they shared a threshing floor. Every year they would bring in the harvest and divide it equally between them. Then they would take the grain to their farms and sell it in the market place.

One of the brothers was wealthy but had no family; the other had a family but was poor. One night after the harvest had been divided into equal measures and taken to each brother's home, the wealthy brother lay awake in this bed, thinking:

"I need just enough grain to pay for my food and servants. But my poor brother, he has so many mouths to feed. He needs the money more than I do. "

He rose up out of his bed and went down to his granary. He lifted up as many sacks as he could carry and started to walk toward his brother's farm.

Just around that time, the poor brother was lying in his bed, unable to sleep:

"I have a wife and children who will take care of me and the farm if anything happens to me. But my brother—if something happens to him, he will have to pay a lot to be cared for. He needs the money more than I do."

Quietly, so as not to disturb his wife and children, he rose up out of his bed and tiptoed down to his granary. He lifted up as many sacks as he could carry and walked toward his brother's farm.

The two brothers met midway between their farms, their arms laden with the sacks of grain they were carrying to each other. The full moon shone down upon them as they dropped their bundles and ran to embrace each other.

And God looked down and smiled.

"This," he said, "is where I shall build my Temple."

Where does holiness reside? Where does sanctity dwell?

Is it inherent to some specific place or building, or it depends on what we do, on what kind of actions we display into that specific place?

The paradigm that belongs to the story I told you suggests a concise answer: holiness came to that site only after this two brothers embodied it as their kind of relationship. Therefore, we could affirm that the sacredness of a religious place or building should be connected, at least to some extent, to the way we relate to each other, to the way we behave on God's name.

Now if we take a look to another story (in fact the opposite), one of the most famous stories of the Torah, of the Bible, which happens to be the first account of a brotherhood relationship, we'll meet again with the tragic lives of Cain and Abel. By the way, also the Holy Quran in its Sura Al-Maída evokes this tale, finishing it with this classical saying, completely shared by Muslims, Christians and Jews:

أَنَّهُ مَن قَتَلَ نَفْسًا بِغَيْرِ نَفْسٍ أَوْ فَسَادٍ فِي الْأَرْضِ فَكَأَنَّمَا قَتَلَ النَّاسَ جَمِيعًا وَمَنْ أَحْيَاهَا فَكَأَنَّمَا أَحْيَا
النَّاسَ جَمِيعًا

“annahu man qatala nafsan bi geiri nafsin au fasádin fil arDi fa ka annama qatalan nása yamí'an ua man aHiáha fa ka annama aHian nása yamí'an”

שָׁכַל הַמְּאֲבָד נִפְשׁ אַחַת מֵעֵלָה עָלְיוֹ הַכְּתוּב כְּאִלּוּ אֶבֶד עוֹלָם מְלֵא.

וְכָל הַמְּקַיֵּם נִפְשׁ אַחַת מֵעֵלָה עָלְיוֹ הַכְּתוּב כְּאִלּוּ קִיַּם עוֹלָם מְלֵא.

“whosoever killeth a human being for other than manslaughter or corruption in the earth, it shall be as if he had killed all mankind, and whoso saveth the life of one, it shall be as if he had saved the life of all mankind”

This dictum constantly needs to be endorsed by all of us in our dialogues and conversations.

Anyway, regarding the end of that biblical story, we can also appreciate that after the killing of his own brother, the LORD said to Cain, *"What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth."*

Again we are faced with the same paradigm. The Lord curses Cain or Qābīl (قابيل) because of the homicide of Abel or Hābīl (هابيل), but at the same time the ground, as a holy place, loses its blessings, as it says *"it will no longer yield its crops for you"*. Then the whole earth buries its holiness with the blood of Abel, and the spot of sanctity is nowhere to be found.

There were times and places in history that we surely could find ourselves, as religious men and women, reaching out to one another in concern and in holiness like those two brothers in the hills of Jerusalem.

But there were also, and to our own shame there still are, lots of places where we can testify that the sacredness of each and every human being is being hurt or even killed, and Cain keeps wandering around.

Once more, even when each religion has its own sacred sites, even when each religion worships them or inside them and takes care of them, that sacredness is ultimately linked, with almost no hesitation, to the way we ponder the sacredness of each other.

So, my brothers, I came from Argentina, from Latin America, to this wonderful meeting in Qatar to share with you my thoughts and feelings about the “Solidarity in the Defense of the Holy Places”, but I must tell you that in my humble opinion, this subject will not be solved until we develop between us the “Solidarity in Defense of the Holy Relationships”.

And let me be clear. This is not a matter of some utopic and childish idea. This can be done. This should be done. And as a matter of fact, this is being done.

I want to finish my presentation by telling you about one of the most touching experiences of my life, one which is precisely connected to our issue.

Two years ago there was a huge demonstration in Córdoba, the second biggest city of Argentina. It was about Women and Civil Rights, and thousands of activists took part in the national protest rally.

The meeting happened to pass by the street where the Cathedral is located, a fantastic and colossal Catholic temple, built in the 16th century.

The ladies, who were not so innocent, completely covered the walls of the building with awful and really horrendous graffiti, full of aggressions to the Catholic Church and its ministers. And believe me when I tell you that I don't want to be embarrassed about repeating the words that they spray painted.

The result: one of the five biggest holy sites in Argentina entirely desecrated.

The question: Who would assume its defense?

And the obvious answer: the Catholic Church.

But in this case, the answer was not the obvious one. There was a tiny and at the same time enormous change in the response. I personally asked my Muslim friends to join me and a group of Jews in order to repair the blemished Cathedral. And it turned out to be like that. Television networks, radio and newspaper journalists were present at the site where the Imam, the Rabbi and tens of Jews and Muslims were whitening together the Catholic offended walls.

Was it remarkable? I could say "yes".

That was "Solidarity in the Defense of the Holy Places" at its peak.

But the secret, as usual, was behind the scenes. Years of work in the interreligious dialogue field, joint projects carried out together, mutual friendship and care were the basis for that solidarity.

As we said before, where “Solidarity in Defense of the Holy Relationships” has been proved successful, there is no doubt that “Solidarity in the Defense of the Holy Places” will be reached too.

Let’s do it together! Shukran lakum!