



**Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem
Middle Atlantic Lieutenancy**

**January 1, 2021 - Motherhood of God
World Peace Day**

Dear brothers and sisters,

The Lord give you peace!

This celebration of ours is again curtailed due to the restrictions linked to the pandemic. I hope that the New Year that begins today will be less and less marked by this tragedy that has paralyzed the life of our community for so long.

In the past year, it was really difficult to be able to have a minimum of ordinary life for the diocese. A year marked by the pandemic, as we said, but also by many other problems both at the diocesan, social and political levels.

But I am sure and I hope that soon we will return to the normality of our ecclesial life, with lively and physical celebrations, and not just via the internet. After a long pause together with the *Sede Vacante* for reasons we all know, and after an almost a total paralysis linked to the pandemic, we must now look forward with confidence and decisiveness to resume the journey of our whole Church.

Today is also the World Day of Prayer for Peace. And it is precisely on peace that I want to dedicate our first thoughts for this year. I know well that it is a subject dear to all of us, but also far from our life experience. It is difficult to speak of peace, when around us we experience the exact opposite.

But, as I said, this year I think is appropriate to pause for a moment to reflect on peace from an internal, ecclesial perspective, linked to our

diocesan life. We have uttered many words challenging the dividing wall that has caused and continues to cause so much suffering for so many of our faithful. And it is right that the Church is clear about it. But I think we can also stop and reflect on the barriers that sometimes unknowingly we erect within ourselves, between us. To have a serene and ever more fruitful ecclesial life, it is also necessary to look to our reality and ask ourselves where the Lord asks us to grow and improve.

Allow me therefore to identify some barriers that run the risk of hindering our ecclesial journey.

Clergy - Laity

It is no secret that there is a certain distance between the clergy and the laity, and this is certainly not unique in our Church. It is a common theme for many churches in the world. Pope Francis has condemned clericalism several times. In our local environment the phenomenon is however very evident. The collaboration between priests and laity is often misunderstood and ends up becoming: “simply do what the priest wants”. At each change of a pastor, the life of the community often has to start over and take the model and measure of the priest in charge, almost always very different from the predecessor. It is difficult to convince having parish councils and to be able to share ideas and initiatives. It is true that local culture does not help in encouraging a shared approach to ecclesial life. But that is true up to a certain point only. There are parishes in which parish councils work very well. Local councils too! On the other hand, it is also true that it is difficult to find formed, committed lay people willing to make a positive contribution to the community. It is a real barrier that needs to be taken into consideration, especially thinking of the future generation, which wants to be the leaders in the life of the church, and not just executors of orders and directives.

Generational gap

Another barrier, but quite natural and also common to many churches, concerns the evident gap between the generations. While in the past, generations followed one another with a certain continuity, today the generational transitions are more frequent and more radical.

On the one hand, we have those who look back with nostalgia at the past and regret a model of Church and community that today seems to no longer exist. They lament the great number of peoples that once was, the

communal participation that once was, in fact everything that once was; but forgetting to live the present with Christian serenity. On the other hand, the younger generations do not want to live in nostalgia and want to change even what may not need to be changed. They want fresh air, a new spirit, a horizon ... there is often the desire to change just for the sake of change, without having a clear awareness of the roots, of the meaning of gestures and celebrations. In short, we look to the past nostalgically or we are projected towards the future. Both reactions are escapes from the present that is sometimes frightening or that is lived uncritically. Listening to each other, young and old, patiently and serenely, grateful for what has been done up to now, open to new paths according to God's grace is what awaits us.

Local and foreign

If the gap between priests and laity and generational conflicts are a common experience of many churches, the distinction between locals and foreigners is typical of our Church. The Church of Jerusalem has always had and will always have these two dimensions, the local and the universal. The Church born in Jerusalem was born on Pentecost, when all nations were already present, and all received the Spirit. It is the beauty of our Church, which gathers in itself different languages, many religious charisms, pilgrims from all over the world, open to many different perspectives, immersed in many different activities. All, regardless of their origin, are part of the Church and have an equal right of citizenship. There are no foreigners in our Church, but all are children of the same Church.

At the same time, however, we must recognize that there is currently some distance between the local and the universal component. There is a temptation on the one hand to consider the universal component as a "guest" and not as an integral part of the Church. And on the other hand, there is a tendency to consider the local component as irrelevant, outdated or even in extinction. This phenomenon is common in all regions of the diocese, not only in Jerusalem: from Cyprus to Nazareth, from Jerusalem to Amman, we are asked to reflect on the meaning of integration, communion, participation and ask ourselves how to concretely address these attitudes in the life of our Church. The two souls of the Church must support each other, both necessary, both constitutive of the identity and history of our Church. They are part of the past and will also be part of the future.

National identities (Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Cyprus)

Another increasingly evident element concerns national identities: Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Cyprus. Ours is a diocese that covers four countries, with four histories that intersect each other, never easily, but which at the same time are increasingly independent of each other. Furthermore, national identities are also often constructed in opposition, or antithesis. It is difficult to speak of the coexistence of different identities in a context of conflict like the one we are experiencing, in particular between Israel and Palestine and in Cyprus. This phenomenon also affects the life of the Church.

This is not the place to go into details, but it is nonetheless evident that national identities are themselves a positive and necessary element and no one questions that. But just as there are national identities, there is also ecclesial identity, which goes beyond them. There are not four churches, but only one Church, which has different histories and identities within it. All the different identities combine to build a plural, multiform, open and non-monochrome identity of a Church that is not absorbed by identity conflicts.

Languages

Linked to this last distinction is that of languages. Languages are the main vehicle of their respective cultures and identities. An incredible richness, but also an obstacle to meeting and sharing. It is difficult to know which language to speak at our meetings. Although involuntary, language is objectively a barrier to meeting and sharing. We all have personal experience of it.

These are just some of the barriers. I think anyone present could suggest others or add other considerations to the existing ones. But I think I have given an idea of the phenomenon.

If we think about it, these difficulties have individualism as their common denominator, which has become central to the common mentality, even among us: I am what I desire here and now; I am what I need, here and now. As a Church, we are instead called to ask ourselves how to be a gift for one another; instead of asking what the other has to do for me, let us ask ourselves how to be a neighbor to each other (Cf Lk 10,36).

However, it is not enough just to list the problems. We must also ask ourselves what direction to take, what the way to improvement is.

Saint Paul comes to our aid:

“For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Eph. 2,14–18).

I believe this is the way. Starting from our relationship with Christ and not from our needs, placing our heart in the heart of Christ, reading our reality, even ecclesial, in the light of the Word of God.

We cannot live without love and the love from which we have to start is the love of Him who gave his life for us and our salvation. This will be the path that awaits us.

May the Blessed Virgin, Mother of God and our Mother, accompany us on our journey and keep us in her peace.

+ Pierbattista