

Together in brotherhood and sisterhood

(Textversion)

Matthew Hassan Kukah, Catholic Bishop Diocese of Sokoto, Nigeria, Peace Prayer, St. Nicolas Church Leipzig, October 7, 2024

On June 12th, 1987, the then US President, Ronald Reagan stood beside the Berlin Wall which had encircled West Berlin since 1962 and called on the then Secretary General of the Communist Party, Mikhail Gorbachev in the following words: If you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union, if you seek liberalization, come here to this gate, Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall. Reagan was knocking at a door that was only closed, but not locked, and two years later the wall did really come tumbling down, because on the other side Mikhail Gorbachev was a man of dialogue, mediation, and stood firm for peace diplomacy.

The analyst Francis Fukuyama, then of the Rand Corporation, greeted the world excitedly calling this the end of History. The end of history theory imagined the next phase of history within the context of a Hegelian dialectical view of history and argued that western liberal democracy and the free market economies would now rule the world. His fellow American, Samuel Huntington of Harvard University, argued on the other hand that what lay before the world was an apocalyptic potential of the clash of civilizations. However, later developments in our globally interconnected world would prove to be far more nuanced and it was clear that the world would never be the same again, the old power orders and blocks were over. Were they really?

In Africa, these developments were gleefully dubbed, a second liberation for the continent. A rash of Sovereign National Conferences greeted the prospects of a new world. But these developments were not linear. For example, there had been scenes of ecstatic celebrations over the release of Mandela from prison in 1990. The subsequent euphoria over his emergence as the first black President in 1994 and the official end of apartheid were soon

interrupted by the long, dark shadow of the genocide that erupted in Rwanda the same year. Within three months, a long pall of darkness hung over the country as over a million people had been slaughtered in the worst civil war on the continent. And the United Nations looked really bad in Rwanda. Elsewhere, the drums of wars raged.

Over the last three decades after the end of the Cold War millions of citizens lost their lives in wars that were often externally generated - from the streets of Iran, Iraq, Congo, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Burundi, Sierra Leone, to Eritrea, Serbia or Kosovo. A globalized world had brought us together, but it had also threatened to turn the world into an inferno as cross border wars intensified, including the spread of terrorist groups around the world. 9/11 was the beginning of the "War on Terror". Refugees and migrants in unbelievable numbers became a new tribe of mankind. Terrorism with its borderless violence as a weapon of choice saw the emergence and growth of murderous groups like Al-Qaeda. From Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, ISIS and many other groups mutated over time. Were Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, and the illegal drone war causes or consequences of endless hatred and death? What we do know for certain is that all of that left us with haunting nightmares.

Looking back, we are forced to ask, how did our dreams of a better world turn into a nightmare? Every day, the fears of another world war seem to be on the horizon. Couldn't we foresee the Russian-Ukrainian war? Couldn't we foresee the murderous orgies in Sudan, Gaza and Israel? Why cant we come together in a truthful and authentic way with all our differences? In who's interest is all that? Who profits? Are we really forced to recall the words of the renowned anthropologist, Margaret Mead, who posed the question: Is war a human invention or a biological necessity? There may really not be any prescriptions of how to end wars, but one seems to be clear: world history shows that the human instincts for power and greed have no limits. But however, we have to think about how to contain destructive power and greed and to reduce the spread of conflicts and wars in every single case.

I am a priest and so I find that I am more persuaded by what the Scriptures say rather than human history and war experts. The words of St. James in my view sum up whatever it is that we might need to say about war. He posed the questions: What causes these quarrels

and wars among you. It is that your passions are at war within you. You desire something and you cannot get it and so you are prepared to murder. You covet and you cannot obtain so you fight and quarrel [Jas 4: 1-2].

In my view, the words above provide us a proper context for understanding wars, whether they are between communities, countries or nations. I want what you have, I want to dominate you, I know it better, I am superior. If you won't give me by negotiation, supplication or pleading, I will take it by force. And I will deploy all the weapons of power at my disposal.

Not much has changed from the point of view of intent and execution of the power and greed that drive men and women to war since the times of the Old Testament. Remember, just about 140 years ago, the superpowers of the time gathered in Berlin, just two hours' drive from here in Leipzig. They gathered to partition Africa and commence the project of colonialism. The race towards one of the worst forms of man's inhumanity to man - slavery – had already been going on for centuries. But the appropriation of resources and minerals from Africa was going on full scale, flanked by propaganda about the uncivilized, uneducated, wild, poor and lazy Africans. King Leopold, for instance, went for the resources of what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo. He set up his empire of cruelty in the Congo basin: over 10 million people lost limbs and lives to water his and his followers ambitions and greed. Some decades later Hitler and his guards wanted to dominate the whole world with an Aryan race: six million Jews and 26 million Soviet people and all the other millions paid the price, dying in a senseless war. And many power greedy criminals followed: Pol Pot in Cambodia, Idi Amin in Uganda, Mobutu Sese Sekou in Zaire, Charles Taylor in Liberia, and also Tony Blair and his friends in high places lied all the way to the disastrous Iraq war, where millions of civilians died.

Wars have never justified the reasons for their execution. The result of wars very often has been that afterwards the world realizes with much regret that going to war is always a tragedy.

From the ashes however, the world often has learned also a few new lessons. For example, the First World War saw the setting up of the League of Nations while the Second World War

saw the emergence of the United Nations. It might be plausible to ask whether the UN has lived up to the vision of a more peaceful world built on the culture of human rights. Well, another question might be, would the world have been better off without the UN? Whatever may have been its weaknesses, the United Nations today remains the best hope and offers the world a symbolic tent in which all nations share some level of symbolic equality and a common brother/sisterhood. The annual rituals and ceremonies around the United Nations' General Assembly, do fill some emotional gaps and create a sense of common humanity around the world with some semblance of equality of nations. But we must for sure progress and work on reforms because the times are changing, some call that multipolar world.

The murder of six million Jews has left us with the solemn oath "Never again!" which echoes in memorials around the world. But has mankind really learned from it? Look at the wars in Ukraine, Palestine, Israel and Lebanon, and Sudan, to name a few. These conflicts are ongoing, taking place in our present, leaving us in grief and distress.

However difficult the situations are, it is important to acknowledge the individuals and groups who have helped the world to appreciate that in the end, we all want the same things: freedom, justice, equity and a right to our dignity as human beings. Leaders like Vaclav Havel, the play writer, set a movement in motion that led to the fall of the 41-year-old suppressive government. In the Philippines, Jaime Cardinal Sin became a rallying point for the disparate groups that came together to overthrow the regime of Ferdinand Marcos who had brutally held power for over thirty years. Pope John Paul II despite not being on the ground in his home country of Poland, provided the intellectual support for the Solidarnosc movement which finally overthrew the socialist party in Poland.

And I also want to remind us to the story of Mahatma Gandhi. This great lawyer and statesman is far better remembered than any of his fellow countrymen and women despite the fact that he never really sought a role in party politics nor did he hold any political position in his country. His teachings and deployment of the philosophy of Satyagraha, non-violence civil resistance, inspired his countrymen and contributed significantly to ending British rule in India. One of his major achievements was organizing the salt protest in which

he led hundreds of thousands of Indians on a journey of 385 kilometers to the Arabian sea coast! Gandhi is remembered for his total abhorrence of violence. He is the father of non-violence as a weapon in the struggle for justice, freedom and peace.

And I also want to remember Rev. Martin Luther King. The Rev. King found inspiration from the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi's non-violence. He deployed the moral force of non-violence to confront the racism that had become entrenched and scarred American society. Rev. King realized the weight of moral authority of non-violence and so he set in motion a movement that would gradually push the American state to a compromise. King invoked the American Constitution to provide a mirror for the state to examine its own contradictions. Nowhere was this better illustrated than in his, I have a Dream speech. Rev. King confronted the American state with its own avowed Constitutional obligations which were in sharp contrast to the lives of African-Americans. The Declaration of Independence had assured its citizens that it was committed to the proposition that, all men are created equal... it also had promised all citizens, unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Rev. King said: It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of colour are concerned. Instead of honouring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked insufficient funds. The American state has proved to be a liar! And Martin Luther King got killed for his clear and peaceful stand.

Fighting for justice, for dignity and rights of citizens is aimed at claiming the promissory notes of states and power structures. Civil society and faith groups must all rally to confront them which issues bad checks. Those structures of injustice which issue bad cheques and create the conditions for the banks to get away with handling this bad checks must be dismantled all around the world, my dear friends here in Leipzig. This is what Jesus meant when He said, he had come to set the captives free (Lk. 4: 8).

The struggle for a just and fair world will not be won by one generation because one generation's dreams easily become another generation's nightmare if the tree of freedom and justice is not watered and cared of by constant sacrifice. Dreams are not static. Every generation dreams its own dreams, fears its own fears. And this race is often not for the

faint hearted. The world history is a history of wars, friendships, often more wars and more friendships. The human spirit has the capacity for renewal. But let us not allow the drums of war, the fears of the gathering storms to distract us. The rise of the far right in parts of Europe, the threats of terrorism and the drums of war of the arms industry and powerful and reckless governments, are the symptoms of the disease. They merely represent the need for an urgency of now on our part, the need for us to stand together in solidarity. The far left is not an answer to the far right. The answer is dialog, mediation, peace diplomacy. More and more moral voices need to stand up, beyond the boundaries of religion, ethnicity, social stratification and so on. World history has shown that in the face of injustice, human instincts for love and sacrifice come together. We are social beings. That makes us strong. We saw this in the world's reaction to slavery, apartheid, racism and human trafficking, debt relief, gender-based violence and the mistreatment of human rights. We must unite to celebrate our common humanity.

Dear sisters and brothers here in Leipzig: My home country Nigeria has faced numerous challenges and hardships. A colonial legacy left us with arbitrary borders, and we have endured religious tensions, political instability, a harsh history of military rule, and corruption. Nigeria is home to more than 250 distinct ethnic groups and 220 million people, and despite all the struggles, it is a country I deeply love. God has called me to serve as Bishop in the northern parts of Nigeria, where Sharia law prevails and where the relationship between Christians and Muslims can often be fragile and volatile. However, as Christians, we are called to the path of peace, rejecting militarization and escalation. The commandment "Thou shall not kill" leaves no room for ambiguity. We have amassed a wealth of both positive and challenging experiences in mediating conflicts, wars, and unrest in Nigeria, we learned how to act as peace diplomats in even the most complex situations. Believe me, dialogue and building bridges is the way. And we are eager to share our knowledge and know-how. That's why I am grateful that we signed a Memorandum of Understanding with "Leipzig bleibt friedlich!" yesterday. Together, we are committed to working on the concept of the "World Peace Place."

What you achieved here in Leipzig in 1989 is nothing short of remarkable - it is truly world history. The role played by ordinary citizens and the Church in the Peaceful Revolution of

Leipzig and East Germany remains awe-inspiring. I firmly believe that by sharing and reflecting on our experiences, we can strengthen each other. As the Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Sokoto, I know how invaluable it is to build bridges between communities. I am grateful that Dr. Mücke and I met in Nigeria. Thank you to him and his team for this initiative. We now have a new bridge connecting Nigeria and Germany, and I look forward to the journey ahead.

Our collaboration is also encouraged by how Pope Francis has continued to help to provide a moral pathway by rallying men and women of good will. He has also taken up the challenge of dialogue with Islam, a path that is necessary if we are to roll back the dark forces of religious extremism. His usage of Friendship and brotherhood/sisterhood as metaphors for peaceful co-existence have resonated. His Encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti* offers a most elaborate vision. He reached out to the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Mosque in Egypt and together they signed a document titled, *Human Fraternity and Living Together* on February 2019. Happily, two years ago, the United Nations, in appreciation of this gesture, has declared February 4, Human Fraternity Day. His recent visit to Indonesia and meeting with Nusaruddin Umar, the grand Imam of Jakarta, in which they both agreed to work on curbing religious extremism and work to protect the environment, all show positive signs for the future.

My dear friends, the world is fractured and, in some cases, broken. However, we have the capacity to rebuild what we have destroyed. To do so, we must renew our belief in the resilience of the human spirit. We must stand together in brotherhood and sisterhood to make a better world. It is a duty we urgently owe those who are coming after us. We can do it. If we want to, we as a human race can indeed “invent forms of behavior which will make war obsolete”. The time is now and the place to start is here. Thank you very much.