Ways to Help Avoid a Clash Between the West and Islam
World Peace Day Message (Jan. 1, 2001) Outlines Strategies

NEW YORK, SEPT. 29, 2001 (Zenit.org).- Are the terrorist attacks in the United States an example of the clash of civilizations feared by some analysts?

The actions of extremist groups cannot be taken as a valid expression of general opinion. However, as a number of recent press articles have pointed out, in many Middle Eastern countries there was not a little rejoicing to see how America was humiliated.

The Oct. 1 issue of Business Week dedicated a two-page article to examining "Why so many people hate America." Its authors contend there are "vast segments" in the Middle East affected by hatred for the United States and in other places where people are "switching loyalties to an Islamic belief system."

America's role as the most powerful Western nation has made it the principal target of hostility. Added to this is the cultural tension resulting from the increasing globalization during the last decade.

The strength of Western market capitalism and liberal democracy after its victory over communism in the Cold War has led some states and cultures to feel threatened by the pressure to conform. Not a few in Muslim countries have expressed hostility toward what they see as arrogance, irresponsible individuals, and permissive cultural and sexual behaviors.

Western civilization is more than just the United States, of course. While Europe doesn't attract the same degree of overt hostility, it too faces a severe test in its relations with the Muslim world....

The Pope's message

Well before the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, John Paul II addressed the need to seek cooperation between cultures in his World Peace Day Message for Jan. 1, 2001. In this text, titled "Dialogue between cultures for a civilization of love and peace," the Pope recognized how difficult it is to maintain peace between people who have to live together, while coming from differing cultures. Moreover, the message spoke of the possibility of dangers due to migration leading to many people from different cultures and civilizations living close together.

The Pope's message offers a number of pointers to help avoid conflicts between cultures.

--Value of culture

To start with, John Paul II noted the importance of culture in forming a personal identity. Being rooted in a specific culture is necessary in order to avoid vulnerability to conflicting forces that can prevent a balanced personal development. In turn, cultural values such as love for one's country are "to be fostered, without narrow-mindedness but with love for the whole human family and with an effort to avoid those pathological manifestations which occur when the sense of belonging turns into self-exaltation, the rejection of diversity, and forms of nationalism, racism and xenophobia" (No. 6).

--Common elements

A certain balance is needed so that, while appreciating the positive aspects of our own culture, we also recognize that it has limitations. To prevent belonging to a particular culture from turning into isolation, John Paul II recommended the study of other cultures, in order to appreciate the common elements that are beneath the outward variations.
--Mutual respect

The message points out how cultural differences have been the cause of wars and that even now "we are witnessing with growing alarm the aggressive claims of some cultures against others" (No. 8). To avoid conflict, people must examine the underlying ethical principles of a culture and be aware that its authenticity and validity can be measured in the degree that human dignity is promoted.

--Danger of secularization

Another threat comes from a "slavish conformity" to a cultural model of the Western world that has left behind its Christian origins. The resulting secularism, practical atheism and radical individualism are promoted by powerful media campaigns. But the Pope warns that with Western cultural models, "there is growing evidence of their deepening human, spiritual and moral impoverishment." A culture that seeks to secure the good of humanity by eliminating God "loses its soul and loses its way, becoming a culture of death" (No. 9).

--Dialogue between cultures

A constructive dialogue between cultures, based on the protection of the distinctiveness and the recognition of an underlying unity, is needed. This does not mean uniformity or an enforced homogenization, explains the Pope, but is "the convergence of a multiform variety, and is therefore a sign of richness and a promise of growth" (No. 10).

--The challenge of migration

What attitude should be take faced with immigrants from different cultures? First, John Paul II recommends that "immigrants must always be treated with the respect due to the dignity of every human person" (No. 13). Cultural practices of immigrants should be respected, as long as they do not contravene universal ethical values or fundamental human rights.

When customs of immigrants are not readily compatible with the practices of the majority, the Pope calls for "a realistic evaluation of the common good at any given time in history and in any given place and social context" (No. 14). This should be done in a genuine dialogue, without giving way to indifferentism about values.

--Guiding principles

The last part of the message puts forward a number of principles to guide the dialogue between cultures. First come solidarity and justice. People must recognize "the common destiny of the entire human family" (No. 17), pleads the Pope. And at the heart of a true culture of solidarity is the promotion of justice, explains the message. Justice will help those who are excluded or marginalized.

Next comes the promotion of peace and understanding between peoples, which the Pope calls to be a primary objective of all societies. And a part of peace is respect for the value of life, because, "It is not possible to invoke peace and despise life" (No 19).

Another fundamental means of promoting dialogue is education, in which understanding of others and respect for diversity is learnt. Finally, the barriers of the past must be overcome by means of forgiveness and reconciliation.
Certainly the application of these principles will not be easy, but it is the best way to achieve true peace.

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