

# The Relevance of the Abu Dhabi Document for Our Times

## **INTRODUCTION: A courageous gesture in fragile times**

On February 4, 2019, in Abu Dhabi, something truly significant occurred: a courageous gesture was made. In an era often described as “post-truth” and marked by fragmentation and fear, two major spiritual leaders, Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad al-Tayyeb, charted a path together by signing the Document on *Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*.

This gesture resonates especially in times of increasing political and social polarization and in a world scarred by violent conflicts. The Holy Land, now a crossroads of violence, hatred, and division, remains one of the places where the promise of universal peace, proclaimed by the Document on Human Fraternity, is tested daily.

The recent escalation of violence in Gaza and the divisions among peoples and faiths seem to make the dream of peaceful and fraternal coexistence ever more distant. Yet it is precisely in these contexts of open conflict that the vision of Abu Dhabi becomes even more relevant. The fraternity promoted by the Document cannot remain an abstraction; it must confront the reality of a land that experiences daily hatred fueled by political, religious, and historical differences.

The gesture made in Abu Dhabi and the document signed that day cannot be dismissed as just another joint declaration, useful but destined for the archives. It resists such reduction. Before being a text, it is a performative gesture. In the language of faith, a gesture has foundational power: it speaks through action. What this gesture accomplished was to place, at the heart of global tensions, a radical premise: *God cannot be invoked against humanity*. At a time when the name of God is too often exploited to justify divisions, exclusions, and even violence, this initial assumption is a prophetic risk. As I have emphasized many times, the Holy Land – a crossroads of faiths and wounds – is the existential “laboratory” where this statement is tested every day. If in this Holy Land, a highly symbolic place, it is impossible to live one’s faith as a wall against others, then this truth is universally valid.

The Document arises in a context of systemic “fragility”: not only the fragility of political or economic systems, but also a fragility of the human spirit,

tempted by retreat into identity. The response offered is not apologetic (a defense of religions against external attacks), but indigenous and courageous: it is an assumption of responsibility by the religions themselves, understood as communities of believers in their living history. Its primary strength, therefore, does not lie in refined theology, but in the concrete testimony of two authorities who, from their respective positions, converge on a principle of shared humanity.

It is from this founding gesture that our reflection unfolds, which we will develop around three key words, each explored in light of contemporary challenges and insights gained in vital dialogue contexts such as the Middle East: Fraternity, Dialogue, and Responsibility.

### **PART ONE: Fraternity – A Constitutive Truth and a Courageous Choice**

The concept of “fraternity” is the cornerstone of the Document. It is an ancient word, yet also “subversive” in our individualistic age. Western societies, and increasingly global ones, have elevated personal autonomy to the highest good. We speak of rights, freedom, and inclusion. Less often, we speak of bonds, constitutive ties, and of interdependence that is not a choice but an ontological given of the human condition. In the Middle East, coexistence is not a philosophical option but a historical and social fact. The question is not whether to coexist, but how.

The Document expressly states that fraternity means that the other is not an accident of history, but a constitutive part of my own humanity. “Constitutive part” is a technical, challenging term. It is not an accessory, a generous concession, or a fleeting empathetic feeling. It is as constitutive as the skeleton is to the body. The humanity of the other is structural to my own. Without it, my humanity is incomplete, amputated. This thought exposes the limitations of concepts as important as “tolerance” or “respect.” Tolerance can be distant; it can imply passive endurance of a necessary evil. Fraternity is active, positive, and relational. It recognizes that my identity – personal, cultural, religious – is also forged and clarified in the encounter with those who are different.

Here lies one of the great insights of the Document: fraternity does not call for relativism. It is not an invitation to dilute one’s convictions in an indistinct syncretism. That would betray the faiths themselves, which are rooted in revealed truths. Rather, it calls for something much more demanding and respectful of the identity of the other: never using one’s faith as a wall. This is the difference between a strong identity and a rigid identity. A strong identity is rooted and secure, and for this reason can open up and enter into relationships without fear of dissolving. A rigid identity is fragile; it needs clear boundaries

and external enemies to cohere internally. Religion, when it becomes ideology, provides the walls of this enclosure.

In a Middle East where historical wounds and violent conflicts mark every interaction, fraternity becomes not only an ideal but an urgent necessity. Particularly in the Holy Land, where divisions between Israelis and Palestinians are deep and entrenched, the invitation to see the other as part of one's own humanity cannot be underestimated.

The violence and hatred that pervade Gaza and the entire region are a sad reminder of the consequences of systematic dehumanization. The proposal of a "constitutive bond" with the other is a challenge that questions our own convictions. Brotherhood is not a matter of individual choice, but a collective responsibility, even in contexts marked by thousands of innocent victims and a war that seems endless.

Fraternity, therefore, is transformed from an abstract concept into a profound spiritual choice. It is the choice to see believers of other religions not primarily as "Muslims," "Christians," or "Jews" to be categorized, but as "brothers and sisters in humanity." This change in perspective is decisive. In the Holy Land, it is well known that relationships are often "contractual," governed by balances of power and rights to be negotiated. Fraternity, on the other hand, introduces a different logic, that of gift and gratuitousness. I do not negotiate with you because I have to, but I recognize you because you are you. This does not erase asymmetries, injustices, or conflicts, but it provides the human ground on which to address them. Fraternity is the antidote to the dehumanization of the adversary, the first step toward overcoming any form of violence.

We have seen where the dehumanization of the other, sometimes supported by radical religious views, has led in recent years: to one of the bloodiest and harshest conflicts in recent history, both the result and cause of identity-based hatred that will not be easy to dismantle quickly, and which will require enormous spiritual and moral energy to overcome.

## **PART TWO: Dialogue – From Theory to Life: A Non-Negotiable Necessity**

The second key word is "dialogue." The Abu Dhabi Document makes a necessary shift here: it moves interreligious dialogue from the realm of experts to that of daily life. For too long, it has been considered a "luxury" for theologians – a specialized and reserved activity that often produced excellent documents but remained confined to institutional libraries.

The Document, however, strongly affirms that today, dialogue is not optional; it is a historical necessity. The reason is sociologically clear: our societies are

pluralistic. The question is no longer whether we want to engage in dialogue, but how we want to live in this shared space. We can choose coexistence as “ignorant parallelism,” where different communities live side by side without ever meeting, fueling suspicion and stereotypes. Or we can choose coexistence as a “relational fabric.”

Regarding dialogue in the life of the Church in the Middle East, we must distinguish between different levels, all of which are necessary: the dialogue of life (daily interaction), the dialogue of works (collaboration for the common good), theological dialogue, and the dialogue of spiritual experience. The Abu Dhabi Document, while not going into technical detail, strongly emphasizes the first level, that of “life,” as the indispensable foundation for all the others. It “arises from shared daily life”: from children playing together, parents waiting outside school, work colleagues, and neighbors. It is in these micro-contexts that our common humanity manifests itself first and foremost, beyond religious labels. Here, we experience that others have the same joys, fears, hopes, and ambitions for their children as we do.

However, the Document is realistic. It is not naive. It does not ignore the “wounds of history,” the mistrust and fears that are often the legacy of centuries-old conflicts. It does not promise an idyllic ease. But, with clarity, it outlines the only two alternatives to authentic dialogue: the violence of open conflict or silent segregation (physical or mental). Both are forms of social and spiritual death. Segregation, in particular, is an insidious evil: it allows for apparent peace but poisons the roots of society, creating parallel communities that ignore or despise each other. The risk in the Middle East, and now also in Europe, is that religious communities become “golden ghettos,” closed in defense of their own identity, which they perceive as threatened, and therefore unable to contribute to the good of society as a whole.

The Document, therefore, while starting from the grassroots, does not stop there. It calls on religious leaders to play a crucial and courageous role: that of “facilitators of encounter.” Religious leaders must not only administer their communities but also educate them to engage with others. They must help the faithful “cross the threshold,” leave their comfort zone of identity, and face the complexity of reality. This requires internal work: purifying memory, deconstructing stereotypes, and educating people to a mature and fearless faith. It also means not leaving the field of “narrative”—the way of interpreting reality and history—in the hands of extremists, who fuel fear and justify hatred. Authentic dialogue requires leaders who can truly tell stories of encounter, collaboration, and lived fraternity, offering alternative models to those of conflict.

Today, more than ever, interreligious and intercultural dialogue in the Holy Land is not a luxury or an activity for a few experts, but a historical necessity. The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, fueled by political, economic, and religious factors, requires an approach that goes beyond mere tolerance and opens the door to true coexistence.

The violence that has engulfed Gaza and the risk that other regions of the Middle East may suffer the same fate make dialogue an urgent necessity. Religions, in particular, are called to promote a culture of peace that not only tolerates differences but embraces them as part of humanity's richness. This kind of dialogue must challenge radical ideologies and worldviews that justify the use of violence in the name of God.

### **PART THREE: Responsibility – The Purification of Religions and Service to the World**

The third key word, “responsibility,” gives the Document its most radical and self-critical character. It does not merely invite religions to act for the world; it calls them first and foremost to an examination of conscience before history.

The text takes an unequivocal stance against any violent use of religion. Its depth lies in not stopping at condemning terrorism (a necessary act), but in going to the theological and historical root of evil: it denounces the “confusion between religion and power.” This confusion is the perennial temptation of every religious institution: to transform faith, which is a free relationship with God and openness to one's neighbor, into an instrument of power. When this happens, faith becomes a rigid identity to be wielded, a frontier to be defended, a moral justification for exercising coercion – physical, psychological, or social.

The document affirms the opposite principle: authentic faith liberates, not imprisons. It opens, not closes. It empowers the person toward the common good, not disempowers them. Here we hear a powerful echo of the distinction, dear to Christian theology and also present in other traditions, between religion as a system and faith as a living personal and communal adherence. When religion shifts from prophecy, which questions authority and stands for justice, to ideology serving only a group, it loses its spirit and abandons its true purpose.

This purification of memory and self-understanding is not an academic exercise. It is the condition for exercising credible historical responsibility in the face of the epochal challenges of our time: abysmal inequalities, forced migration (often caused by wars and injustices), “piecemeal wars” (fragmented but no less destructive), and the ecological crisis that affects the poorest. Faced with this,

religions cannot take refuge in a “sacred enclosure,” concerned only with their own rituals and internal issues. That would be a form of betrayal.

Responsibility has two essential dimensions:

1. Internal: Religions are called to educate their believers in active citizenship, respect for others, care for creation, and the pursuit of justice. They must form consciences that are critical of all forms of idolatry – of money, power, and absolutized national identity.
2. External: Religions are called to collaborate with each other and with all people of good will to build the common good. This is a crucial step. It is a humble and concrete service. In the Middle East, this translates into Christian schools and hospitals open to all, development projects shared with Muslim communities, and the common defense of human dignity against all abuse. It is testimony that different faiths are not factors of division, but potential allies in humanizing an often inhuman world.

The responsibility that the Abu Dhabi Document asks of religions is not only to defend the faith from external threats, but to confront their own history of complicity with power and violence. In the Holy Land, where religion has often been manipulated as a tool to legitimize violence and oppression, the role of religions must be to purify themselves and rediscover their prophetic mission.

Religions are called to denounce all forms of violence, especially those justified by the use of faith. In a region such as the Holy Land, where the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians claims new victims every day, the courage to bear witness to peace and justice becomes an act of purification and spiritual renewal.

Silence, closure, or worse, complicity with unjust power structures make religions, despite themselves, complicit in the wounds of the world.

The Document shakes us out of this torpor, inviting us to return to our prophetic source.

### **CONCLUSION: An Open Question**

Years after its signing, we can assess the impact of the Document. Has it resolved conflicts? Has it ended extremism? The clear answer is no. Political and social polarization has, in fact, worsened in many contexts. So why does this text remain decisive and relevant?

Precisely because it was not a technical solution or a magic wand. It was, and remains, something more precious and rarer: a guide pointing toward a direction. It is a moral compass in a time of confusion. It reminds us that the

geopolitics of peace begins with the “micro-politics” of hearts. Fraternity is not just a sentiment for sensitive souls, but a social architecture to be built through concrete choices. Dialogue is not a waste of time, but the only sensible investment for our common future. Religions face a historic choice: to be part of the problem or architects of healing.

Ultimately, the Document does not provide ready-made answers. It entrusts to the freedom of every man and woman, and especially to every believer, an uncomfortable and challenging question. It is the question with which we conclude this reflection, a question that sums up the prophetic legacy of Abu Dhabi:

*Are we willing, today, to let ourselves be judged— to measure the truth and vitality of our faith— not by the strength with which we defend the boundaries of our identity, but by its capacity to generate real, concrete, visible fraternity around us? Does our faith build bridges or raise barriers? Does it create spaces for encounter or fortify enclaves?*

This question challenges every form of religious self-referentiality. It calls for a conversion of our gaze: from obsession with ourselves to care for others as part of ourselves. It calls for a conversion of the heart: from fear that separates to trust that brings us closer. It calls for a conversion of our hands: from gestures of closure to those of welcome and shared work.

The “fragile times” mentioned at the beginning require, more than rock-solid certainties, this tenacious faith in human bonds. The gesture of Abu Dhabi, in its sober grandeur, has planted a seed in this furrow. It is up to us, in our communities, in our cities, and in our daily relationships, to water that seed with the patience of dialogue, the courage of fraternity, and the responsibility to serve a humanity that, deep down, still longs to recognize itself as one family.

The question left to us by the Abu Dhabi Document is even more urgent today, as Gaza and other regions of the Holy Land remind us daily how difficult but essential the path to peace is. The fraternity asked of us is not an unattainable dream, but a challenge that requires courage, dialogue, and a radical spiritual responsibility, even in the most dramatic situations.