

Presentation at the Forum “The Cry for Peace: the Voice of the Martyrs” at the 2023
Sant’ Egidio International Meeting for Peace – Religions and Cultures in Dialogue:
“The Audacity of Peace”

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Ambassador ret. Dr Alfons M Kloss,
President of PRO ORIENTE Foundation (Vienna)

- In a time, when armed conflicts and violent clashes are again so widely spread on our globe, when not far from here a war of aggression is raging against the Ukraine, in a time where the cry for peace of so many victims worldwide remains unheard, it is such an important initiative of the Community of Sant’Egidio to dedicate this year’s meeting explicitly to the topic of the “Cry for Peace”. Yes, let us join our forces and prayers to this one and urgent goal, in all its audacity!
- When I prepared for this Forum which is focusing on the voice of the martyrs, I felt a bit reluctant as there are other representatives here on this panel who can speak up on this topic with much more authority or direct involvement. But then I realized that there is an important bridge between the theme of this afternoon and the work of Pro Oriente. Our Foundation has been active for nearly 60 years in the field of ecumenism: trying to bring closer the Churches of the East and the Catholic Church, walking together on the path towards the goal of unity. And being on this path, the joint witness for our common gospel ties us together, day for day, wherever we are.

- „Martyria“, „giving witness“ as the Greek expression stands for, is indeed at the center of our faith, and our particular respect and veneration is dedicated to those, who have given their lives, witnessing their fidelity to our Lord through their personal suffering. In his Encyclical Letter “Ut unum sint” on Ecumenism, published in 1995, Saint Pope John Paul II underlined the Ecumenical dimension of such *martyria*, by stating that all Christian Communities have martyrs for the Christian faith. This refers not only to early Christianity or the martyrdom of past centuries, but also to the very recent past and even to our present time, to many geographical areas of the world, and to different social contexts where violence is afflicted onto Christians of all denominations, threatening or in some cases taking their lives as martyrs.
- As an ecumenical Foundation we have followed with particular attention when Pope Francis spoke on various occasions of the “ecumenism of suffering”, or the “ecumenism of blood”, or the “ecumenism of martyrdom”; e.g., when receiving the Coptic Orthodox Pope, Patriarch Tawadros, in Rome, on 10 May 2013; or when praying with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomaios in front of the Tomb of Christ in Jerusalem, on 25 May 2014, or when receiving in Rome the Armenian Patriarch Catholicos Karekin II, on 8 May 2014, saying:

“.... the sufferings endured by Christians in these last decades have made a unique and invaluable contribution to the unity of Christ’s disciples. As in the ancient Church, the blood of the martyrs became the seed of new Christians. So too in our time the blood of innumerable Christians has become a seed of unity. The ecumenism of suffering and of the martyrdom of blood are a powerful summons to walk the long path of reconciliation between the Churches, by courageously and decisively abandoning ourselves to the working of the Holy Spirit. We feel the duty to follow this fraternal path also out of the debt of gratitude we owe to the suffering [of] so many of our brothers and sisters, which is salvific because it is united to the Passion of Christ.”

- When we reflect in our ecumenical endeavors on possible progress, and sometimes become frustrated because we don’t seem to move forward, the example of the martyrs could be an important inspiration to lead our efforts. Martyrs who have died for their Christian faith have not been asked whether they are orthodox, protestant or catholic. They stand for their faith as Christians. In all purity and essence. Should this not let us feel a bit guilty, that we lose ourselves in details and contrasting opinions between our churches, that we have not achieved more results regarding sacramental sharing or common celebrations between our Churches?

Should the call of the martyrs not encourage us to not limit ourselves to the study of the dogmatic and canonical obstacles that hinder unity, but opt for a new ecumenism, a dynamic ecumenism, an ecumenism of life, along the lines of Pope Francis, when he writes: “Walking together we can learn so much from one another!” (EG 246). In this context I am convinced that ecumenical institutions – like mine – should look more in depth to the concrete fate and witness of particular martyrs, so that they can accompany us in our daily work and help us divided Christians to become more generous and open to each other, linked to the essential truth of “Martyria”, our common witness to the Lord.

- We will approach unity, reconciliation and peace only, when we try to walk together, in humility, with all our brothers and sisters, created in the Lord’s image, as we are gathered here in Berlin these days, in deep gratitude to the martyrs of the different traditions, for their example of perfect communion that we are eagerly striving for.
- Let me mention as a personal note how impressed I was when I encountered in Rome the activities of Sant’Egidio commemorating Christian martyrs of the 20th century and more recently, in the Church of San Bartolomeo. What a deep impact it leaves on visitors when they can study the traces and life stories of the various personalities and their so different contexts! I would like to mention two of the personalities there, who stand for martyrdom as

ultimate cry for peace in times of war: Franz Jägerstätter, who based on his deep faith became a conscientious objector during the second World War and was sentenced to death, and Sister Restituta Kafka, who in the same period insisted in her social work in Vienna on transmitting the good news of the Gospel of our Lord and equally lost her life being executed in 1942. Thank you, community of Sant'Egidio, to keep alive the memory of the martyrs. Let them guide us, let them strengthen our faith and our readiness to work together more closely as Christians, based on the Gospel which we all share!