

ONCE UPON A COUNTRY¹

SARI NUSSEIBEH

Presidente della Al Quds University

I want to, first of all, say that I am grateful to be invited here, to this very important event.

The second thing I want to say is that I have almost reached the age of 62, oh no, I've already reached the age of 62, I've passed it. And throughout these years I've been having a dialogue with myself, mostly. But the questions that have sprung in my mind, that have been generated, have actually been on the increase: I have less and less answers and more and more questions. For instance, earlier this evening, this afternoon, as this event started, we all heard the songs that appealed to us about peace, about love, care, compassion. And every time we listen to such songs, poems, declarations we are attracted. Tears almost come to our eyes. Yet, while we feel so attracted by these emotions we look around us and see that, even so, politics, real life is full of violence, violence that human beings do to one another. And this is a question that is in my mind and continues to grow in my mind: Why is it that while, on the one hand, we are so soft, we feel softly towards compassion, and love and care, on the other hand, as human beings, we practice, and continue to practice, violence? Why? And where will it end? Where will it go? I don't have an answer. As I said, the questions that are in my mind keep increasing year after year and I keep thinking about them.

As I came here yesterday, and as I arrived today, more questions came into my mind: questions concerning signs. I don't know if you believe in signs, but I'm also soft towards signs. Take this building here: the Institute of Innocents. I think to myself: Are we not all of us innocents? Are we not all of us, human beings, abandoned? Needing guidance like young children

¹ Testo trascritto dall'originale, non rivisto dall'autore.

are given guidance? Who born and left at the doors in of this monastery, or convent are we not all, human beings, also in need of guidance? Guidance to take us away from the path of violence and towards the path of love and forgiveness. One sign is being here.

Another sign: today happens to be the 15th of May. The 15th of May is the day, for Palestinians, which is regarded as the day of catastrophe: Naqba in 1948. And if you had look at the news, you would have seen the expressions of the anger, by Palestinians in different parts around the borders with Israel, but also within Israel and within Palestine. Anger expressed at what happened in 1948. May 1948 on one side of the coin is the catastrophe of the Palestinians, on the other side, is the Israeli independence. The same coin: one side, catastrophe, the other side, Israeli joy and independence. How can we understand this coin, which has two faces? Can one peel one side and leave the other? Or is it possible that this coin is so united that one cannot really separate between one side and the other? It's a question.

So 15th of May, this Hall of Innocents, of the abandoned children... and finally a manuscript I read yesterday: a very strange manuscript by an Israeli who send it to me to read, on having read something I've written recently, asking the question: What are Palestinian? What are States for? What is a Palestinian State for? What do we need a State for? What is it: we want a State for? What the human beings seek, as they seek to establish a State? Human relations, care, compassion, services...? What is it that we want? and Are, those things that we want, are they only achievable in the context of a State? Can we not achieve them in different ways? In other ways? Are States really the best way to achieve them? Is the history of States, say in Europe, a history that one can be proud of? Is the history of European States a history that one can be proud of? I see people are not sure. But the person who wrote me, who send me this manuscript, basically argued that the history of States, of European States is not a history that one can be proud of. And he sent me a manuscript in which said: What is it, that we want a Jewish State for? My book, my recent book was What is it a Palestinian State for? He wrote back saying, this manuscript: What is a Jewish State for? What do we want a Jewish State for? This man is a devote believer, he's not secular, on the contrary, he has deep faith in Jewish values. And he feels that the concept of Zionism, as he has expressed it in this manuscript, makes sense if the State that is to be created is a State in which there is care and compassion between human beings. If it is not,

an exclusivist State... He writes that if in the past, Jews carried the main message to the world, of Monotheism – God as we heard earlier today is one for all – the real message that Jews today should carry to the world is the message that «the all» is also one. This is the other side of the same coin: that God is one for all, the other side being that the all are also one: Muslims, Christians, Jews, other religious believers. This is humanity. This is global humanism. If the past needed the message that we have one God, the real message that needs to be known, propagated, is that human beings, humanity, is all one. If Jews can create in Israel, if Zionism can take this manifestation, this form of being an open system, then he thinks, Zionism would have really brought about the success of Jewish identity, expressing what it has deeply ingrained inside it. That otherwise, if Jews do not come up with this kind of message, if Jews do not create this kind of State, then Jews will have only succeeded in creating a State which is a copy of the failed - and he looks upon them as failed - States of Europe; States that above all are guilty of such horrendous crime as the holocaust.

I want to tell you something. I read this yesterday, this manuscript and this is the first time, when I read it, that I felt sympathy for this Jewish cry out of the heart, this attempt to articulate a Zionism which is humane. I have been involved in politics for many years, I have been involved in dialogue for many years, but frankly, honestly, I've done this, so far, and until now, only because I thought this was the way to achieve peace, not because I felt I had to sympathise with my enemy. But reading this manuscript yesterday, for the first time, made me sympathize. And I sympathized – I decided later as I came to think about this - because he has come to redefine himself to me. And I think - in addition to what we heard earlier today about the need for forgiveness, for mercy - I think, in order to answer the question: How do we move towards a world of peace?. We also need to work on ourselves, redefine ourselves. Redefine ourselves, open up ourselves to the other, allow ourselves to be able to see different aspects of the other and keep the faith: faith for those of us that believe in God, but for those of us who believe in humanity, also faith: faith that through this process of understanding, of asking questions, of dialoguing with oneself all the time, and also with the other, that through this process we can achieve peace. Thank you very much.