

**REMEMBERING CHERNOBYL: 1986-2006**

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**Contribution to a Panel Discussion**

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Distinguished guests, dear friends,

During my trip to Belarus two years ago, I visited the “House of Mercy” and saw for myself many children with varying degrees of deformity as a result of exposure to radiation. In a very specific way the enormity of the danger caused by a nuclear plant accident became a living reality for me. That is why I am deeply moved by the presence tonight of representatives of the three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) and of the younger generation united in prayer. I am grateful that the decision by the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church and the initiative by Green Cross International have brought us together to commemorate the victims of the Chernobyl disaster.

The accident at the nuclear power plant of Chernobyl 20 years ago today reminds all of us that many things might separate us from each other; but there are important challenges that require us to co-operate and force us to recognize that despite all our differences, we belong to one human race. We share a common calling as much as we share a common vulnerability.

Theologically, the accident reminds us of our own responsibility towards each other and towards the earth. It was not God who was at the origins of this accident, but a series of human failures. We need to acknowledge that technological progress has also increased the possible risks to the survival of humankind and life on earth as we know it. Three Mile Island in the USA and Chernobyl are the two names that immediately come to mind when we think of the threat posed by nuclear energy production. But we also know all too well that the thirst for energy of the highly industrialised and fast industrialising societies drives leaders to undertake projects that could threaten both peace and the future of life.

While we remember the thousands of victims in the past and many others who will continue to suffer the consequences of the accident in many years to come, especially in the most affected countries of Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, we also remember the overwhelming solidarity and support given in response to the accident 20 years ago. Many of the initiatives that were taken then have been sustained to date. These provide the badly needed respite to many children who, though born many years after the accident, do suffer from leukaemia and other diseases because of the exposure to radiation. Their plight continues to challenge people’s hearts and minds.

The WCC archives for Chernobyl-related files contain numerous reports on projects which, since 1986, have provided direct support to the affected areas in the former Soviet Union; on partnership projects with churches in other European countries; and also on team visits to the affected areas. Such reports testify to the readiness of many people around the world to help the victims, a gesture which is greatly appreciated.

However, the character of the accident itself and the present global context require that we do not get stuck in a self-congratulatory mood, but that we be very concerned about the growing energy hunger of expanding economies

and the increasing number of calls not only for new nuclear power plants, but also for new generations of nuclear weapons. All of us ought to be deeply concerned about the prospects of the possible use of nuclear weapons during our life-time.

Our opinions concerning the peaceful and responsible use of nuclear energy might be divided. But there should be no ambiguity and no doubts whatsoever when it comes to the rejection of a first strike with nuclear weapons. There is no such thing as a clean mini-nuke. From the smallest ammunition with depleted uranium up to the most recent nuclear warheads of strategic missiles, these weapons constitute a threat to all forms of life on planet earth, our fragile common home.

I am glad that this event gives me the opportunity to say this as clearly as possible: From the moral point of view, there is no justification at all for the use of nuclear weapons. Member churches of the WCC have stated this conviction again and again. The WCC was born at the same time as the atomic bomb and when the nuclear arms race started. The concern for a nuclear war and the dedication to nuclear disarmament has been following the Council throughout the years. This concern has gained greater currency at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in view of the renewed debate over the right or otherwise of nations to develop nuclear weapons.

This evening shows that the three Abrahamic religions must not serve as the backdrop to the predicted "clash of civilizations", but, rather, they contribute to a new and vital "dialogue of civilizations and cultures". I would like to suggest that from here we take these two messages home:

1. We share a common calling as much as we share a common vulnerability.
2. We will not consent to the misuse of religion for the justification of hatred and war, but we will commit ourselves to inter-religious dialogue and co-operation for justice, peace and the future of life on our planet earth.

If not for anything else, let us commit ourselves to these noble goals as a fitting tribute to the victims of the Chernobyl nuclear plant accident.

Thank you.