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INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR HERMENEUTICS
INSTITUT INTERNATIONAL D'HERMÉNEUTIQUE

Prof. Dr. Dr. Andrzej Wiercinski
University of Warsaw, Poland
<http://www.pedagog.uw.edu.pl/cgi/pracownicy.php?id=324#wizytowka>
President of the International Institute for Hermeneutics
<http://www.iihermeneutics.org>
e-mail: andrew.wiercinski@gmail.com

Prof. Dr. Ali Tareq AbdulHasan
Kerbala University
College of Dentistry
Iraq

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Dear Ali;

I write to you as the President of the International Institute for Hermeneutics to express on behalf of my friends and colleagues our sympathy with you in the days of great distress and escalation of conflicts in the Near East. We are profoundly troubled by hearing that people are killing people and are proud of eradicating the Other from the face of the earth. Paul Ricoeur tirelessly reminded us that as *l'homme capable* we are *l'homme agissant* and *l'homme souffrant*. It is difficult enough to comprehend that as acting beings we inflict suffering on others. To see that we kill others and are happy with ourselves for doing this shows how haughty, arrogant, and disdainful we can be. The old perturbing question who are you to kill your brother still reverberates in our ears. And here, we do not reduce the killing to the fact of the physical murder. Everyone needs to ask themselves the Biblical question. There are so many ways of killing the Other. We cannot exculpate ourselves from existential responsibility as if it were a mere bagatelle and reside contentedly within the horizon of reckless and imprudent self-satisfaction. As Gen 4: 8 portrays it, there was a kind of con-versation among the brothers, Cain and Abel. What kind of turning toward your brother can make you kill him? We do not know what the brothers were talking about, but we know that Cain was addressing his brother. We realize that, unfortunately, con-versation does not necessarily bring with itself a con-version, the trans-formative change of our hearts (μετάνοια). Hans-Georg Gadamer has tirelessly encouraged us to see our openness to conversation (*auf den Anderen hören*) as the basis for human solidarity. It is with great sadness that we realize that often we do not permit ourselves to be addressed by the Face of the Other, who begs us, please do not kill me! We may indeed choose to become essentially insensitive to the plea of the Other, or we may never want to have a chance to develop our listening to the Other. Overall, it definitely makes a difference if we recognize and acknowledge our guilt and comprehend that it is greater than we

can bear. (Gen 4: 14) However, we can stay where we stand flesh and bone immune and impervious to the damage we cause by our misdeeds, while being more worried about the extent of any prospective contempt and punishment. Getting lost in possible linguistic translations of the Biblical message will not necessarily help us. Yet as fugitives and wanderers on the earth, we can turn our face toward the Face of the Other instead of inflicting death on the Other as a result of our sick righteousness or being frightened of real proximity to the Other, and wanting to be God.

In the Christian Tradition we just celebrated the Epiphany of the Lord, who was *in* the beginning and *is* our beginning: Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ Λόγος. (Jn 1: 1) This Divine Logos, God with us, Emmanuel, did not come to condemn the world, but to save what was lost. (οὐ γὰρ ἀπέστειλεν ὁ Θεὸς τὸν Υἱὸν εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἵνα κρίνη τὸν κόσμον, ἀλλ' ἵνα σωθῇ ὁ κόσμος δι' αὐτοῦ, Jn 3:17) In our hermeneutic reading of the Epiphany, we recognize our wounds and welcome the saving that has been offered to us not as *something* that can possibly cure us (φάρμακον), but as *somebody* who can fundamentally trans-form our lives. We need the theopoetic imagination, which can in-spire us to re-configure our lives (Θεοποίησις, being made into a god, St Clement of Alexandria).

As human beings, we are in need of culture (Bildung). This need of culture requires careful consideration, since we can, unfortunately, build ourselves up toward goals that do not in fact support the culture of life. Bildung, as the way we live our lives in the world, is not something that is naturally given and achieved, but the life-long task of thinking and practicing our re-sponsibility in the sense of providing an answer to the call of life. And we discover solidarity, in our response, in the common task of thinking and making choices for ourselves and others. This response means also an engagement with the Other (*auf den Anderen einzugehen*), which cannot be imposed and formally regulated, but needs to be dis-covered and wanted. What needs to be learned is not this or that particular capability, but what it means to be a human being. It is this insatiable longing for self-understanding which brings us together, since without the recognition of the Other we cannot find ourselves at home in the world. To understand ourselves always in-between home-coming and homelessness helps us to discover the sense of existential, intellectual, and moral orientation. To be focused on the common good means to build the culture of peace. And with St Francis of Assisi, we can pray that we will be the instruments of peace. Peace is not just a mere freedom from war, although we realize that peace is missing even at this fundamental level, but it gestures desperately toward an awareness that, as fragile human beings, we are called to cultivate our being human beings. How will we know that this is happening? St Paul helps us to recognize it without error: The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance. (ὁ δὲ καρπὸς τοῦ Πνεύματός ἐστιν ἀγάπη, χαρὰ, εἰρήνη, μακροθυμία, χρηστότης, ἀγαθωσύνη, πίστις, πραΰτης, ἐγκράτεια, Gal 5: 22-23)

Dear Ali! Please be assured that our thoughts and prayers are with you and your people! As finite, limited, and corruptible human beings, we are promised that we will inherit life everlasting. We are called to be compassionate with each other, yet we must not fail to be sensitive toward reality by *not* mistaking perpetrators for victims, and vice versa. As narrative identity, we can never be satisfied with the mere telling of our stories, but must always believe that what brings us together is the understanding that there is still so much that can, and needs to be told. It is exactly this *untold* and *unsaid* that transgresses us and makes us into participants of the conversation, which is not led

by us but leads us. It helps us to understand that *we* are the people in need of understanding, and that, by respecting the Other as an Other, we can engage with each other and learn from one another.

In 1937, Pope Pius the XI, facing the painful trials that were going to irrupt on the world and the Church and fearing the unavoidability of war, wrote the Encyclical, *Mit brennender Sorge*. It is a similar anxiety, a growing anguish, and an indescribable bewilderment that makes me write to you. I ask for the awakening (ξυπνώ) of our hearts and minds to walk in truth (έν τῇ ἀληθείᾳ περιπατοῦντα, 3 Jn 1: 4). We know well that what we are talking about is the hermeneutic truth, and it is, as such, the permanent call to interpret the interplay of concealment and unconcealment of ἀ-λήθεια. To learn to walk (περιπατέω) in truth (έν τῇ ἀληθείᾳ) and exercise our freedom not only *from* but also *to*, means to learn to conduct our lives, and to face what comes our way. This is, *par excellence*, the task of education.

Much love from all of us ‘in destitute times’ (Hölderlin’s *dürftige Zeit*),



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