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Chief Rabbi of France

Dear friends, I feel quite moved to be speaking after His Holiness Bartholomew I, and first I would like to thank Thierry de Montbrial for making the dream of Psalm 133 a reality: "Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" I would also like to thank the United Arab Emirates for hosting this event celebrating diversity and fraternity. It is not just something you preach, but also practice. Spending a few days with you here is enough to make me realize that it is possible to share, to live together and to be oneself while making room for those who are different.

It was also brave of Thierry de Montbrial to give the floor to a high authority such as His Holiness Bartholomew I and to a modest rabbi, which may seem surprising in such a gathering at a time when some might think that religions sometimes sow division, war and fragmentation. The exact opposite is true. As Thierry de Montbrial explained perfectly when he introduced this official opening session, it is important to see aspirations, dreams and future prospects. All religions advocate the diversity that alone can lead to unity, which is actually the opposite of uniformity. Uniformity is an illusion, for we can never all be the same. To speak about unity, it is therefore necessary to speak about difference. Religions represent a way for everyone, each in his or her own way, to turn to the same person, to God, without wanting to get rid of others. No possibility of eliminating the faith of others has ever been imagined. There have been occasional, tragic, unbearable wars, but never a religious plan to prevent others from existing. There can be no unity without respecting and combining differences. Otherwise, the opposite is achieved although the word is rather similar: uniformity. Diversity is essential, and I was glad to hear Thierry de Montbrial say at the beginning of his talk that diversity also means including as many women as possible in the round tables. Thank you, dear Thierry de Montbrial, for recalling that, while it is sometimes hard to make dreams come true, they are always something to reach for.

In this morning's first round table, I enjoyed the interesting debate about gardens; French gardens and English gardens. Bertrand Badré even anticipated what I had intended to discuss with you: the Garden of Eden. I wanted to talk about two biblical gardens: the Garden of Eden and the garden in the Song of Solomon. The Garden of Eden is a place where there was only one human, so that throughout history, nobody could claim to have issued from a lineage that is more worthy than anyone else's. If one thinks that he or she is superior to others, just remember that we all have a common ancestor and we are all brothers and sisters in humanity. The garden is what unites us all. It belongs to every one of us. There is a wonderful story in the Talmud explaining how if someone cannot see beyond the end of their nose, it destroys everybody's dream. A group of men are in a boat when one of them starts drilling a hole in the floor under his seat. His companions say, "What are you doing? We are all going to sink!" "This is my seat," comes the reply. "I paid for it so I can do whatever I want with it." They



tell him that if he makes a hole, all of them will go under. At the end of the day, destroying something, even if it is yours, by locking yourself up in the four cubits of your world wrecks everybody's dream.

The Bible's second garden is in the Song of Solomon. "I have tended all the vines," King Solomon says, "every vine of every one of my subjects, but my own vines I have not even planted." Today we must contribute, by working on our own congregants, to what Judaism magnificently calls the repair of the world. To repair the world is to tend one's garden, but also to tend our own garden, our religion, our world, our country, our society, perhaps working to inspire others, accepting to be inspired by the work of others, but in any case to always be with each other. When I was in the room just now with my neighbor Pierre, I had a strange feeling. We saw, dear Thierry de Montbrial, how hard it was to hold this important meeting in person during the pandemic, and now we are glad that we can all be physically together again. Yet even though we are all in the room together, Pierre was looking at the screen instead of the speaker, which I thought made sense because you can see the speaker better that way. But when we only look at the screen, we only focus on the person speaking and miss the interactions between all the speakers. Sometimes we do that in everyday life. We focus on a particular thing, forgetting that we have a share in it. We concentrate on what we are doing, forgetting that others have an impact on who we are and what we do. We lose sight of the big picture that is humanity. As the Bible says, do not form clans, do not set yourselves up against each other, because you are all brethren in humanity.

I am not some kind of starry-eyed dreamer. Thierry de Montbrial rightfully recalls that this is not about being hopelessly Pollyannaish. It is about being realistic, but aiming for an ideal that lifts us up and impels us towards brighter days. When Michel Rocard went to New Caledonia to meet the leaders of the independence movement there, he brought with him high-ranking freemasons and the president of the Protestant Federation of France, a pastor who, through his knowledge of the various Protestant denominations in New Caledonia and his ability to bring people together, if only for one occasion, could move the peace process forward. In our history, in France, religions can bring people closer together because faith allows us to meet each other in trust. Trust is one of the best things religion can lead to: trust in what lifts us up and trust in others. Faith can sometimes open up possibilities.

Opening up possibilities means affirming that, like other stakeholders, we have a responsibility for the world. It means first of all protecting the dignity of all. That is our duty with what is happening in Ukraine. Not accepting the attack, not accepting the breaking of the law, not accepting lies. I want to tell you about a personal experience that may not seem like much in the greater scheme of things, but, in my opinion, was tremendously important to many people. French military personnel were sent to Krakow to pick up Ukrainian refugees there. After their Transall cargo planes landed, I was called about a dire situation. The soldiers had received no instructions on what to do about pets. Some of the refugees had lost everything, had left everything behind, and in their flight, had protected their families and pets. For some, pets were their only links with their former lives. The Consul General in Krakow called me saying she did not know what to do, that the soldiers had no instructions and would not let the pets on the plane. I immediately alerted the Air Force general staff and was told that of course they could come, so the soldiers let them aboard. I am sharing this story just to say that sometimes when systems are too stiff, too standardized, it is important to see the big picture and what

you want to achieve. What do we want to produce? Connection. At one point or another, religions find this calling in any situation. Their essence lies in the very word, which is derived from the Latin *religere*, to bind or tie together.

The first duty, then, is to protect everyone's dignity. The second is to help and support, what all religions are doing for Ukraine by welcoming refugees to every country. Some have done more than others. Poland has been extraordinary with all its churches and religions. When the rabbi of Warsaw was a guest speaker at the French rabbinical congress, he told us about everything he had done and we helped him welcome the flood of refugees, some of whom were passing through Poland on the way to other countries.

The last point is to offer everyone hope, transcendence and possibilities. In his superb opening address, Thierry de Montbrial asked us to strive "towards a reasonably open world, far from the two extremes: on the one hand, the return to two blocs divided by ideology; on the other, the flat world of Fukuyama". From my perspective, exactly the same can be said about religion. As Thucydides wrote, "Virtue has two opposites: vice and the excess of virtue". For the religious world, virtue is dialogue, exchange and respect. Vice is the rejection of dialogue and the excess of virtue would be a form of syncretism, a way of saying that everything is equal, a rejection of diversity, a return to a kind of uniformization and syncretism that is actually another form of relativism. If everything is the same, then nothing is important. That is wrong. The aspirations of all, the faith of all and the hope of all are essential. They are the building blocks of our societies. Each breath of thought is vital to keep the world in balance, and if only one of them is missing, the whole world goes awry.

The Hebrew word for France is *Tzarfat*. A *tzarfat* is a crucible in which goldsmiths melt down different metals to obtain a unique alloy. If just one of them is missing, the alloy is not the same. All of the world's religions, diverse societies and philosophical and spiritual contributions are essential and vital, for without just one of them, it would cease to be the same. It would be out of balance. We must therefore foster a form of mutual enrichment, teaching each other not with the idea of conversion in the back of our minds, but simply to move forward and produce collective intelligence.

Dear friends, today, December 9, is an important date in France. It is the 117th anniversary of the law on the separation of Church and State. Separation is not the same thing as repudiation. It is what we do with our children. We bring them up so that they can make it on their own. When they at last venture out into the world, do they break off their ties with us? Do we turn our backs on them? Of course not. We transcend and transform the relationship. This is why religions must learn to act in the world with other stakeholders, with those who think, who produce the collective intelligence I spoke about, not in opposing reason and science – His Holiness Bartholomew I was right about this in his talk – but in exchanging with them.

This may be the idea behind the Tower of Babel story, which begins in chapter 11 of Genesis, the first book of the Bible: "And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech." The story is not about mixing languages, which happens later. It is primarily about handling a single mindset, a tempo and words, that powers want to impose on others. I believe that the original intention of the World Policy Conference was to foster a different way of thinking about the world, without letting anyone impose anything with a one-size-fits-all language, as some would like to do. In Genesis, the whole world spoke the same language, which led to



uniformity but not unity. So God created various tongues that people had to learn in order to cooperate with each other, overcome their differences and find ways to achieve things together. To change the way the world thinks is necessarily to change something in our world, too. Now, as a Frenchman, I like revolution, but experience has taught me that sometimes a better way is evolution, slow transformation, adapting to new situations, being flexible about the world's demands, needs and expectations, which religions do marvelously well if they can count on women and men like you, who also think about religion in the world, in the balance of the world and in the general economy of the world. We also share this future.

In conclusion, dear friends, I would like to spare a thought for the Ukrainian people and recall that time is of the essence. In his moving poem "The Convict", Jules Supervielle wrote: "In the forest without hours, a tall tree is cut down, a vertical void trembles in the shape of a shaft near the stretched-out trunk. Seek, seek birds, the place of your nests, in this high memory, while it still whispers." Let us not wait until it is too late for the Ukrainian people's urgent cry to be heard.