To Build Bridges Through Dialogue and Encounter

Alois Kölbl, Graz

When Pope Leo XIV, in his very first address after his election, invited us "*to build bridges through dialogue and encounter*", he offered us more than an inspiring image. He gave us a pastoral task and a very practical challenge. As a university chaplain, this leads me to ask: What can university pastoral ministry contribute to a world increasingly marked by war, political polarisation, religious tensions and the tendency to regard others as a threat?

In my brief statement, I would like to approach this question not primarily from a theoretical perspective, but through my experiences as a Catholic university chaplain in Graz, Austria. Graz is a university city in south-eastern Austria, not far from Slovenia and the Western Balkans. Its geographical location has always shaped its cultural identity. The histories of Central and South-Eastern Europe meet here, with all their richness, but also their painful memories. Many of our students come from countries of the former Yugoslavia. Some have grown up with the consequences of the wars of the 1990s. For others, these conflicts are part of their family history, collective memory or the political reality of their home countries. In this context, peace is not merely an abstract concept. It is connected to personal stories, identities, religious traditions, memories and sometimes unhealed wounds.

The Catholic University Chaplaincy in Graz was founded immediately after the Second World War and celebrates its eightieth anniversary this year. In 2013, we joined forces with our diocese's so-called Afro-Asian Institute, founded in 1964 to support international students from Africa, Asia and Latin America. Since then, we have been working together at a shared location known as "Quartier Leech**"**. When this complex of student residences and communal facilities was redesigned, we described our vision as creating *a place where intercultural coexistence can succeed*. We wanted to do more than simply provide accommodation for students from different countries. Our aim was to create a living environment in which cultural and religious diversity would become part of everyday life. Today, "Quartier Leech" accommodates around 240 students. It offers spaces for studying, cooking, celebrating, discussing and praying. There is a Catholic chapel as well as a Muslim prayer room, meeting rooms, communal spaces, cultural facilities and Café Global, a restaurant with an international atmosphere. For us, university pastoral ministry is not only about providing religious services for Catholic students. It is about building relationships, cultivating trust and helping young people discover that diversity can be an enrichment rather than a threat. Sometimes this happens through organised events and discussions. But very often, it happens in ordinary situations: preparing food together, sharing a table, organising a celebration or simply spending time together. These experiences may seem

insignificant compared with the great political efforts of international diplomacy. But I am convinced that they are not insignificant at all. Peace is also learned in the kitchen, at the dinner table, through shared responsibilities and in the everyday challenges of living together. Living together requires patience, a willingness to listen, the ability to accept different habits and sometimes the courage to address conflicts rather than avoid them. Our experience has taught us that peaceful coexistence does not mean the absence of conflict. It means learning to deal with differences without turning them into hostility. In this sense, “Quartier Leech” is a modest but very concrete laboratory for peace.

Our location in Graz also gives us a particular connection to South-Eastern Europe. The Western Balkans are not simply a neighbouring region. They are part of the personal histories of many people living and studying in our city.This is why we regularly organise study trips and encounters in countries of the region. Their main purpose is to meet people and better understand the often difficult historical circumstances that shape their lives. Let me share one experience that illustrates what I mean.

Over the years, I have travelled to Kosovo several times with different groups of international students. During these journeys, we regularly visited the Dečani Monastery, a place of particular importance to the Serbian Orthodox Church. Its magnificent medieval church survived the armed conflicts without serious damage, but the monastery still requires protection by international KFOR troops. Over time, we developed a friendly relationship with the monks living there. However, we had never managed to convince a student from Serbia to join one of our trips. Travelling to Kosovo is still widely regarded in Serbia as unpredictable and dangerous. Eventually, a Serbian student decided to come along. He was particularly keen to visit the Serbian community in northern Kosovska Mitrovica. At first, I was reluctant to go there, because the media had recently reported unrest and violent confrontations in the area. But in the end, we decided to go. We arrived in Mitrovica in the early evening. The city is divided by the river Ibar. The southern part is predominantly inhabited by Muslim Albanians, while the northern part has a predominantly Orthodox Christian Serbian population. The main bridge across the river has been closed to regular traffic for more than twenty-five years. Only pedestrians are currently allowed to cross. After a pleasant conversation with some Italian KFOR soldiers, who were delighted to speak to someone in their native language, we decided to cross the bridge and explore the Albanian part of the city. I had read in our guidebook that there was a recently renovated mosque nearby. So I asked the students whether any of them had ever been inside a mosque. To my surprise, none of them had. So we decided to visit it. On our way there, a student from Nigeria told me a remarkable story about his family. His grandfather had been a muezzin, but he had allowed his Catholic daughter to have her children baptised and raised as Christians. One of those children was now walking

beside me. He had become a Catholic priest and had come to Graz to pursue his doctoral studies. He told me that back home in Nigeria, he would never dare even to approach a mosque. As a Catholic priest, he would consider it far too dangerous. So when we arrived at the mosque, we felt rather uncertain. But what happened next was quite unexpected. We were immediately welcomed with great warmth and friendliness. Evening prayers were about to begin. More and more people were arriving, and several approached us with genuine curiosity. They wanted to know who we were and where we had come from. Almost spontaneously, a number of brief but very friendly conversations developed. There was no hostility or suspicion. We experienced genuine hospitality and felt truly welcome. Later that evening, after crossing the bridge back to the northern, predominantly Serbian part of the city, our Serbian student began talking to a group of young people. Afterwards, he told us something that surprised and moved us. The young people had explained that they also had friends on the other side of the river. For them, this was perfectly normal. And perhaps this was the most important lesson of that evening. We had come to a city famous for its divisions. We had crossed a bridge that had become an international symbol of ethnic separation and political conflict. And yet, on both sides of that bridge, we encountered people whose everyday lives told a different story. Muslims who welcomed a group of Christian students into their mosque. A Nigerian Catholic priest whose own family history was marked by interreligious respect, and who discovered unexpected hospitality in a place he had approached with apprehension. And young Serbs who spoke quite naturally about their friendships with people living across the river. These encounters do not resolve political conflicts or erase painful memories of war and violence. But they remind us that human relationships are often richer, more complex and more hopeful than the divisions we see in the headlines. Sometimes, the bridges that politicians struggle to build already exist in the ordinary relationships between people.

I do not want to romanticise this experience. A brief visit cannot overcome the trauma of war or resolve the political tensions that remain. Nevertheless, such encounters can change the way we see others. And this is one of the most important lessons I have learned: There is a fundamental difference between speaking about a conflict and listening to people who have experienced it. From a distance, political and religious conflicts often seem relatively easy to explain. We tend to divide the world into opposing nationalities, religions or political positions. But when we meet people personally, the situation becomes more complex. We encounter suffering and fear, but also generosity, hospitality, humour and genuine efforts towards reconciliation. We discover that people cannot be reduced to the political positions attributed to their communities. For university pastoral ministry, this is a crucial educational experience. Personal encounters can challenge stereotypes in ways that even the best academic

lecture cannot. We cannot solve international conflicts. But we can help educate people who are less willing to dehumanise those with whom they disagree.

So, what does all this mean for university pastoral ministry? Let me draw three brief conclusions.

First: **Peacebuilding needs places.** We need physical and social spaces where encounters can happen naturally and repeatedly. A single interreligious or intercultural event may be inspiring, but lasting trust usually develops over time. Universities and student residences offer a unique opportunity because young people spend an important period of their lives together. We should understand these environments not merely as infrastructure, but as places of human formation.

Second: **Peacebuilding needs relationships.** Peace is not only a subject for academic reflection. It is also a way of relating to others. It involves simple but demanding attitudes: listening before judging, resisting stereotypes, acknowledging painful memories, sharing responsibility and learning to deal constructively with disagreement.

Third: **Peacebuilding needs spiritual depth and intellectual honesty.** Christian peace is not simply harmony or the avoidance of conflict. It is inseparable from truth, justice, freedom and respect for human dignity. Our task is therefore not to produce superficial agreement, but to foster the maturity required for genuine dialogue.

University pastoral ministry stands at a particularly fruitful intersection of faith and reason, spirituality and academic inquiry, personal encounter and social responsibility. We need young people who are intellectually capable of understanding complex conflicts and spiritually mature enough to resist hatred. We need Christians who do not see religious identity as a fortress, but as a source of responsibility for others. And we need universities that prepare students not only for professional success, but also for their role as citizens in an interconnected and fragile world.

Let me return to the words of Pope Leo XIV in his first address after his election: *"Help us, one and all, to build bridges through dialogue and encounter, joining together as one people, always at peace."* A bridge is not an end in itself. Its purpose is to connect places, and people, that would otherwise remain separated. Peace is not a finished condition that we can establish once and for all. It is a practice that must be learned, renewed and cultivated every day. And that is where university pastoral ministry can make a difference.