

The 34th Niwano Peace Prize Presentation Ceremony
Honorary President's Address

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Today, at the 34th Niwano Peace Prize presentation ceremony, I would like to express my gratitude to Mr. Kazuo Todani, Vice Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Rev. Masanori Yoshimura, President of Japanese Association of Religious Organizations, His Excellency Archbishop Joseph CHENNOTH, Apostolic Nuncio to Japan and our many guests for being in attendance.

It is a great honor to present this year's Niwano Peace Prize to Dr. Munib A. Younan, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land and former President of the Lutheran World Federation.

As you know, Bishop Younan has done much to promote dialogue in Jerusalem, a holy land for Jews, Christians, and Muslims. In particular, he has continued to make a dedicated, unflagging effort to bring a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

This is the fourth time that the Niwano Peace Prize is being awarded to a group or an individual working for Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation, as the tenth Niwano Peace Prize was awarded to Neve Shalom / Wahat Al Salam, the eighteenth to Elias Chacour, and the twenty-third to Rabbis for Human Rights.

I think that you can understand, from this list of recipients, that the Niwano Peace Prize Committee and the Niwano Peace Foundation continues to be deeply concerned about resolving the conflict in the Middle East.

No human being is perfect, and so sometimes we disagree, come into conflict, and fight with each other. In a particularly complicated situation, usually a neutral third party is called in to act as a mediator and bring both

parties to a resolution. This is the same whether the disagreement is between individuals, peoples, or nations.

In Dr. Younan's case, he was born in 1950 to parents who were Palestinian refugees. Simply stated, he is one of the people who were driven out of their homeland when the Israeli nation was established. Therefore, it would hardly be surprising if he were unable to remain neutral regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Dr. Younan, however, places equal value on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He treats all people with love, not as enemies or allies, as he continues to make an earnest effort to enable them to walk the way of peace together.

In his message accepting the Niwano Peace Prize, Dr. Younan said that "seeing the face of God in other people" is important.

To me, these words that express Dr. Younan's spirit seem to be his very backbone.

"Other people" includes those who have viewed him as an adversary and those who have discriminated against him. And even in the case of such people, for many years Dr. Younan has been steadfast in his religious perspective of "seeing the face of God in other people."

When I first heard these words of Dr. Younan's, I was immediately reminded of the Bodhisattva Never Despise, described in the Lotus Sutra, a major Buddhist scripture.

The Bodhisattva Never Despise said to everyone he encountered, "You will become a buddha," and paid homage to them with folded hands. Some people, who found his actions peculiar, would get angry with him, beat him with sticks, or throw stones at him. Even so, he never resented those people and only continued to say, "I dare not slight you. For you will definitely become buddhas," and pay homage to them with folded hands.

This Bodhisattva Never Despise was a bodhisattva who embodied the true spirit of Shakyamuni and he is said to have been Shakyamuni himself in a past lifetime.

The story of the Bodhisattva Never Despise teaches us, symbolically, that by recognizing and revering the buddha-nature that resides in every human being, paying homage to the buddha-nature in each other, and helping one other, we can realize a world of peace.

After all, our lives are supported by—we are caused to live by—our infinite connections with all things. In Buddhism, this principle is called “dependent origination,” which teaches us to transcend looking at things from the perspective of our own individual lives and to see that everything is an expression of one great life-force. This principle also teaches us that “our selves and others are one,” as essentially, we are all brothers and sisters.

At the same time, each of us represents one person in this world with a precious life that cannot be replaced by any other. And right now, in this moment, each of us is living to the fullest the precious life we have received from God and the Buddha.

I have the greatest respect and profound admiration for Dr. Younan’s words, “seeing the face of God in other people,” which from a Buddhist perspective, have a common foundation with the Buddhist point-of-view I have just described.

As all of you already know, Dr. Younan has a very gentle face. I think that his kindly expression does not change, no matter who he is facing, whatever the situation may be.

Dr. Younan himself says, “Always keep your temper.” However, I think that by “temper,” what Dr. Younan means is different from merely keeping calm in our actions and words. I think that Dr. Younan’s “temper” is a profound kindness and inner spiritual calm like that of the Bodhisattva Never Despise, who I mentioned earlier. Never Despise persevered, no matter how difficult the situation, and continued to pay homage, with folded hands, to everyone he encountered. Put differently, isn’t such calm born from a spirit of true tolerance?

In trying circumstances, to be unswayed by the position of either side,

to respect both parties, and to continue to shower all people with love is, in fact, quite difficult to do and requires real courage.

Not only in the Middle East, but in Japan as well, we have various problems with neighboring countries. One group that responds emotionally is of the opinion that we should take a hardline stance. I think that at such a time, Dr. Younan's calm spirit and approach provide we Japanese with a valuable suggestion about how best to proceed.

I would like to conclude this address by expressing my hope that today's presentation ceremony will serve as an opportunity for many more people to share Dr. Younan's wish and his perspective, and with my heartfelt prayers that he will continue, in good health, with his important work.

Thank you very much.