

**Faith Committee
Character Council of Hamburg**

**Spiritual Reflection on the March 2006 Virtue of
“Tolerance”**

Tolerance is recognizing and respecting the opinions and practices of those who may be different or unfamiliar to you. Seek to understand and appreciate diversity.

In 1995, the member states of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) proclaimed and signed the “Declaration of Principles on Tolerance.” They defined “tolerance” as: “respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human. It is fostered by knowledge, openness, communication, and freedom of thought, conscience and belief. Tolerance is harmony in difference. It is not only a moral duty, it is also a political and legal requirement. Tolerance, the virtue that makes peace possible, contributes to the replacement of the culture of war by a culture of peace.”

Long before the UNESCO Declaration, Jesus said: “Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment” (John 7:24). He was calling on people to stop judging according to what they see or think they see on the outside. Jesus did not do so, nor should we. He did not pay attention to hearsay evidence or rumors, nor should we. Jesus, filled with the Spirit of God, dealt with individuals on the basis of true knowledge and understanding. We, too, should seek the knowledge to better understand that which is different to us. For John 2:9 says: “Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the dark.”

Besides defining what tolerance *is*, the proclamation by UNESCO was also clear to point out what tolerance *is not*. “Tolerance is not concession, condescension or indulgence.” Further: “Consistent with respect for human rights, the practice of tolerance does not mean toleration of social injustice or the abandonment or weakening of one's convictions.” There are those in the world who commit evil deeds, atrocities to humankind. Their actions are definitely not acceptable. But what can we, ordinary citizens, do regarding those evildoers, those “in the dark”? We need to pray that their hearts may be softened; that they may find the “light” to love others as children of God.

Tolerance, according to UNESCO, “means accepting the fact that human beings, naturally diverse in their appearance, situation, speech, behaviour and values, have the right to live in peace.” As the poet, Edna St. Vincent Millay, wrote: “Let us forget such words and all they mean, as Hatred, Bitterness and Rancor, Greed, Intolerance, Bigotry. Let us renew our faith and pledge to Man, his right to be Himself, and free.” Amen.

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