

23 September 2007

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Srgjan Kerim,
President of the 62nd Session of the General Assembly,
at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine**

Reverend Dean Kowalski,
Esteemed Members of the Clergy,
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure and honor to be among you here today in this awe-inspiring Cathedral. I would like to thank the Very Reverend Dr. James Kowalski and the congregation of Saint John the Divine, for giving me the opportunity to participate in this auspicious occasion. It is my privilege to be a part of the great tradition of United Nations Sundays, a tradition that reflects our shared ideals for peace and multicultural understanding.

The Cathedral is itself a symbol of multiculturalism -- with its seven chapels dedicated almost a hundred years ago to seven different immigrant communities that were building this great city, a city in which everyone found a new home – regardless of their ethnic, religious or cultural background.

Equality of dignity, and equality of access to rights and opportunities, should be the very cornerstone of a civilization capable of embracing humanity in all of its diversity. The creation of such a civilization is a process not unlike the building of a great Cathedral. As this very edifice in which we are gathered today exemplifies, the building of something so worthwhile can require generations. It has to be constructed with patience, one stone at a time, without ever losing sight of the goal of creating a temple of peace.

The United Nations has been and remains at the center of global endeavors to promote peace and mutual understanding. During my term in office as the President of the UN General Assembly I shall spare no effort to take these endeavors forward and to work towards the enactment of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, whose 60th anniversary is coming up. This document of humanity promotes the precept that freedom of expression is essential in any dialogue, for it protects and defends diversity – of beliefs, of interpretations, of opinions.

I was raised in a family in which my ancestors were of the Muslim faith on my father's side. On my mother's side, they were of the Eastern Orthodox Christian faith. I went to a Catholic school in Germany. And I grew up in a country where the only belief system was atheism. What I've learnt from all this is the richness that lies in diversity and the necessity of living in tolerance and understanding of cultural, religious and ethnic diversity.

It may be of interest to you to learn that my family name, Kerim, which is a Muslim name, signifies the same as Clement in the Christian tradition, meaning: the merciful. The notion of mercy is embedded in both faiths. In both faiths it calls for embracing the Other. And should we follow this simple moral imperative, we will have good grounds for understanding and respecting each other.

My personal background taught me that the borders that we humans draw -- be they state, ethnic or cultural -- are ephemeral. And that we should expend every effort to work towards what unites us. I would like to believe that my love for poetry has taught me a measure of humility in my endeavors towards this goal. This is why I associate myself with the thoughts of President Kennedy, addressed to the young generation at Amherst College back in 1963: "When power leads man toward arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the area of man's concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses, for art establishes the basic human truths which must serve as the touchstones of our judgement."

Thank you.