RENEWAL

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Thank you very much. I'm very, very pleased to be here. Today we're talking about hope, and I think we're living one of the potentially most hopeful moments I've lived for a long time, and all in the wake of two terrible occurrences: first of all, the COVID-19 (pandemic), and then the horrific murder of George Floyd.

I am convinced that the world reaction to Floyd's death, which was really extraordinary, not just in the U.S. and Canada but around the world, owed something to it occurring in the midst of the pandemic. I think of COVID-19 – and this has been said over and over again – as equivalent in some ways to a war experience. Everyone feels threatened. Everyone has friends and family members who have gotten or could get the disease, so it endangers everyone. And that feeling of all being in the same boat can produce, and did produce, a sense of solidarity in almost all the countries of the world. It's quite remarkable. Countries and communities that had experienced tensions before now feel they must come together to stop the spread of the pandemic.

We have also become all too aware, as the pandemic has progressed, of the things we have neglected to do, a neglect that has made the threat of COVID-19 all the greater. The threat to our health systems that were run down, the severe lack of provisions to keep our elders safe. Things of this kind, that had been somewhat hidden from general public view beforehand, suddenly became very evident. COVID-19 revealed that we really had the wrong priorities in many ways. The production of goods for individual consumption was being accorded much too high a priority, while the production of goods for collective needs was much too low on the scale of priorities. That has really come back to haunt us.

Also, we are beginning to see with greater clarity the great inequalities that exist in our society. It is obvious that certain vulnerable populations are much more exposed, are suffering much more from COVID-19, for reasons to do with their social and economic conditions, their living and housing conditions, their lack of accessibility to health institutions, as well as racism and prejudice, among other things.

COVID-19 has created a kind of X-ray of our society, where all the gaps and deficiencies have been laid bare. And it is in this context that the murder of Georges Floyd occurred, an event that was completely traumatic for me, and, judging from the reaction around the world, traumatic on a massive scale. And it triggered reactions that are much stronger and therefore much healthier than what we usually see in the normal course of things.

The response to the murder of George Floyd came at a moment when we were ready for a movement of solidarity, as we became aware that the pandemic affected certain groups in very disproportionate ways. This was the case not only in the United States, but also in lots of other countries. So, we witnessed this tremendous movement. I'm not really astonished to see it in the States or that a reaction to it came across the frontier to Canada, but it is surprising to watch as this movement has been spreading throughout the entire world.

We might wonder exactly what it was that produced this incredible response. The motivation behind the movement is what gives us grounds for hope. Because we now witness people, lots of people, not only young people, really demanding change, demanding, first of all, that we equalize things, that we create equal conditions where great inequalities exist. Those protesting are also demanding that we break down some of the existing barriers in our societies, that we become united as we never have been before. This demand to eliminate barriers is in the very nature of solidarity, and it has spread like a groundswell across the world. It is aimed against discrimination, and inequalities, and in favour of the creation of greater channels of communication between people.

There are realities that really worry people in the present situation, some of which have suddenly become unbearable. One is that many of us in our society live under very privileged conditions, and because of the richness that our economy and technology have produced, we have lives that go way beyond those of our ancestors. You're looking at an old man and I've lived way beyond what would have been considered the normal age 50 years ago. That's just one example. But now the insight is unavoidable, particularly when we see what has occurred during the pandemic, that our privilege exists at the expense of people who don't enjoy these same advantages. We benefit from resources coming to us instead of to them. We have been made aware of the exceptional privileges we enjoy and that make our life so wonderful and at the same time of the fact that this standard of living is often achieved at the expense of others. This causes a very uncomfortable feeling, one which is hard to experience without wishing to right the imbalances. We want to make the changes necessary so that everyone has access to this wonderful life that our modernity has made possible.

That's the first goal. The second is to break down the barriers between different people and different

groups, so that we can finally recognize each other as being on an equal footing. These are two aspects of the response to the pandemic and the murder of George Floyd that are very, very powerful. Some of us are now putting pressure on our political systems and our social systems to address these obstacles.

There is also another issue, and that is the burden of hatred. There is a lot of hatred in our societies because we have been pitted against one another under false pretexts. Our societies have shown themselves to be very adept at adopting attitudes of hatred and of mobilizing against those described as other. This hate is a burden which gnaws at us from the inside and is not a good way to live. However, this burden of hatred is something that we can come to grips with, that we can throw off. The groups that have been the object of hate are our brothers, our sisters, our fellow citizens. Eliminating this hatred from our midst will ultimately create a feeling of great relief.

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I believe there’s a moment here, in the wake of the George Floyd movement, where people are becoming more aware of the need to make these changes. But that’s the problem – this is only a moment. It is a moment that can pass and be forgotten. There’s a part of us, going through these times, that is dying to get back to normal. On the other hand, some of us want to get back not to “that normal,” but to a new kind of normal. I imagine as we move forward that these two conflicting desires are going to be driven apart. We will witness political forces that will say, “Oh, we’re so indebted, we’re indebted up to our necks, we can’t possibly afford a better health system, better conditions to equalize the situations of certain populations that have been excluded”. And other voices will say: “No, on the contrary, we can’t go back to what we’ve seen before. We’ve got to go forward and address the problems that are undermining our solidarity while also taking up the challenge of global warming that is threatening us.” And I anticipate that we’re going to have a huge battle about which of these directions to take.

There’s no doubt in my mind about which one we should take, but if we take the option of getting back to the old “normal,” this wonderful moment of opportunity will have been wasted, and that would be a great tragedy. We have hope today because there are real grounds for hope, but only if we heed the call for change that we are hearing across the world right now.

Thank you very much.