



THE HOLY SEE
Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
Working Session 14: Fundamental freedoms II:
Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief
Wednesday, October 1, 2014

Mr Moderator,

Freedom of religion or belief lies at the heart of fundamental human rights. This is a well established constant in the OSCE documents, stretching from the Helsinki Final Act over the Astana Summit Commemorative Declaration to the Kiev Ministerial Decision adopted last December. Numerous other international documents also recognize and uphold that the spiritual dimension of life is a vital part of human existence.

Unfortunately, in recent times, there is a constant increase of incidents, discrimination and acts of violence against persons and communities of faith and desecration of places of worship in the OSCE region that denies in practice the commitments both legally-binding or political ones. A recent sociological study also confirms this alarming trend. Harassment or intimidation of specific religious groups occurred in 166 countries in 2012 while overall, across the six years of this study (2007-2012), religious groups were harassed in a total of 185 countries at one time or another which is over 90 % of all countries in the world (cf. Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *Religious Hostilities Reach Six-Year High*, Washington, DC, January 2014). Furthermore, according to the study, Europe had the biggest increase in the median level of government restrictions on religion in 2012.

Mr Moderator,

Religions should not be seen just as sets of norms or teachings but also as live communities based on faith or belief, and their freedom guarantees a contribution of moral values without which the freedom of everyone is not possible. They are not a foreign body within the society, but rather they represent its vital parts. Therefore, it must be underlined that the recognition of the freedom of religious individuals or communities does not reduce freedom of others. On the contrary, the acceptance of the religious freedom of other persons and groups is the cornerstone of dialogue and

cooperation and guarantee of all other freedoms, including freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and association. If freedom of religion is not respected, inevitably many other freedoms will be violated as well. It should be said loudly and clearly that the restraint of the public role of religion creates a society which is unjust since it would fail to take into account the true nature of the human person and would repress the growth of authentic and lasting peace for the whole human family.

In this regard let me share with you the words of Pope Francis which he pronounced during his recent trip to Albania:

“When, in the name of an ideology, there is an attempt to remove God from society, it ends up adoring idols, and very soon men and women lose their way, their dignity is trampled and their rights violated. You know well how much pain comes from the denial of freedom of conscience and of religious freedom, and how from such a wound comes a humanity that is impoverished because it lacks hope and ideals to guide it” (*Address of Pope Francis at the Meeting with the Leaders of other Religions and other Christian Denominations*, Catholic University of “Our Lady of Good Counsel”, Tirana, Sunday, 21 September 2014).

Mr Moderator,

The adoption of the last year’s Ministerial Decision reveals that the rights associated with religion are all the more in need of protection especially if they are considered to clash with a strong secular ideology or with majority religious positions of an exclusive nature. Respect and dialogue require reciprocity in all spheres, especially in that which concerns basic freedoms, and more particularly, religious freedom.

We will not get tired of repeating that the full guarantee of religious freedom cannot be limited to the free exercise of worship; it must also give due consideration to the public dimension of religion and, hence, to the possibility of believers exercising their responsibility in building the social order. Every violation of religious freedom, whether explicit or subtle, does fundamental damage to the cause of peace and security. Recognition of the religious freedom which is the basic guarantee of every other expression of freedom must be strengthened if we are to create the conditions for peace, development, cooperation, and guarantee human rights for future generations.

Thank you, Mr Moderator!