



PC.DEL/372/13
22 May 2013

ENGLISH only

**STATEMENT OF THE HOLY SEE
AS DELIVERED BY H.E. MSGR. MARIO TOSO, SDB
AT THE HIGH-LEVEL CONFERENCE ON
TOLERANCE AND NON-DISCRIMINATION
(INCLUDING HUMAN RIGHTS YOUTH EDUCATION)**

Tirana, Albania
21 – 22 May 2013

**Plenary session 2: Combating intolerance and discrimination against Christians
and members of other religions**

Mr. Chairman,

At the last High-Level Conference on tolerance and non-discrimination, held three years ago in Astana, the participating States committed, *inter alia*, to counter prejudice, discrimination, intolerance, and violence against Christians and members of other religions, including minority religions, which continue to be present in the OSCE region. They were also called to address the denial of rights, exclusion and marginalization of Christians and members of other religions in our societies.

Unfortunately, examples of intolerance and discrimination against Christians have not diminished, but rather increased in various parts of the OSCE region despite a number of meetings and conferences on the subject organized also by the OSCE and ODIHR.

Mr. Chairman,

This year we celebrate 1700 years of the Edict of Milan, issued in 313 A .D. by Emperor Constantine, one of the most important documents in history related to freedom of religion. With this decree the persecution of Christians finally ended, Christianity was legalized and religious freedom was granted and guaranteed for all throughout the Roman Empire.

It is regretful, therefore, to note that across the OSCE region a sharp dividing line has been drawn between religious *belief* and religious *practice*, so that Christians are frequently reminded in public discourse (and increasingly even in the courts), that they can believe whatever they like in their own homes or heads, and largely worship as they wish in their own private churches, but they simply cannot act on those beliefs in public. This is a

deliberate twisting and limiting of what religious freedom actually means, and it is not the freedom that was enshrined in international documents, including those of the OSCE beginning with the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, stretching through the 1989 Final Vienna Document and the 1990 Copenhagen Document, and including the 2010 Astana Summit Commemorative Declaration.

There are many areas where intolerance against Christians can clearly be seen, but two stand out as being particularly relevant at present.

The first is intolerance against Christian speech. In recent years there has been a significant increase in incidents involving Christians who have been arrested and even prosecuted, for speaking on Christian issues. Religious leaders are threatened with police action after preaching about sinful behaviour and some are even sentenced to prison for preaching on the biblical teaching against sexual immorality. Even private conversations between citizens, including expression of opinions on social network, can become the grounds of a criminal complaint, or at least intolerance, in many European countries.

The second area where intolerance against Christians can clearly be seen is in regard to Christian conscience, particularly in the workplace. Throughout Europe there have been numerous instances of Christians being removed from the workplace simply for seeking to act according to their conscience. Some of them are well known since they have come even before the European Court of Human Rights.

It is remarkable that after centuries of struggling for freedom of conscience, some citizens of the OSCE region in the 21st century are now being forced to choose between two impossible scenarios: they can abandon their faith and act against their conscience, or resist and face losing their livelihood. Participating OSCE States must therefore guarantee that intolerance and discrimination against Christians is ended, enabling Christians to speak freely on issues that the government or others may find disagreeable, and act on their consciences in the workplace and elsewhere. Discrimination against Christians – even where they are a majority – must be faced as a serious threat to the whole of society – and therefore should be fought, as it is done, and rightly so, in the case of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.

Particular attention should be also paid to the widespread vandalism targeting churches and Christian cemeteries. Insulting or mocking graffiti, broken windows, burnt down, desecrated or devastated places of prayer and worship, damaged or smashed tombstones, in particular tombstone crosses, have been noted throughout the OSCE region. All these acts are not just harmless incidents committed by irresponsible teenagers or mentally disordered persons, as it is often claimed, but rather a result of a premeditated plan and should be therefore treated as a clear hate message and hate crime against Christians who are represented by, and who identify with, those symbols of their faith.

Mr. Chairman,

Intolerance in the name of “tolerance” must be named for what it is and publically condemned. To deny religiously informed moral argument a place in the public square is

intolerant and anti-democratic. Or to put it another way, where there might be a clash of rights, religious freedom must never be regarded as inferior. On the other hand, the issue of religious freedom cannot and should not be incorporated into that of tolerance. If, in fact, this was the supreme human and civilian value, then any authentically truthful conviction, that excludes the other, would be tantamount to intolerance. Moreover, if every conviction was as good as another, you could end up being accommodating even towards aberrations.

As for the prevention and response to intolerance, discrimination and hate crimes against Christians, my Delegation believes that it should be seen in close connection with the promotion of religious freedom. The right to believe in God and to practice that belief is a fundamental human right, one that is central to the OSCE commitments.

In conclusion, I just wish to express the Holy See's confidence that this High-Level Conference will contribute to the development of concrete and effective proposals to fight intolerance and discrimination, as well as hate crimes and incidents against Christians.

Thank you, Mister Chairman!