



THE HOLY SEE
2011 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
Working Session 12: Tolerance and non-discrimination I.
National minorities
Msgr. Florian Kolfhaus
Tuesday, October 4, 2011

Mister Chairman,

1. The Holy See follows with great interest the work of the High Commissioner on National Minorities in his all-important task of “*providing early warning and, as appropriate, early action in regard to tensions involving national minority issues*”. In fact, the question of national minorities continues to assume a notable importance. Consequently, it constitutes a matter for careful reflection on the part of political and religious leaders and all men and women of good will.

2. As communities which take their origin from different religious, racial and ethnic stock, national minority groups exist in almost all societies today. Some go very far back in time, others are of recent origin. The situations in which they live are so diverse that it is almost impossible to draw up a complete picture of them. On the one hand there are groups, even very small ones, which are able to preserve and affirm their own identity and are well integrated within the societies to which they belong. In some cases, such minority groups even succeed in exercising a strong influence on the majority in public life. On the other hand one sees national minorities which exert no influence and do not fully enjoy their rights, but rather find themselves in situations of suffering and distress. This can lead them either to passive resignation or to unrest and even rebellion. Yet, neither passivity nor violence represents the proper path for creating conditions of true peace.

3. In this context, my Delegation would like to highlight briefly two considerations that we consider indispensable in any consideration of national minorities. First, the inalienable dignity of every human person, irrespective of racial, ethnic, cultural or national origin, or religious belief. Individuals do not exist for themselves alone, but achieve their full identity in relation to others. The same can be said about groups of people. They indeed have a right to a collective identity that must be safeguarded, in accordance with the dignity of each member. Such a right remains intact even in cases in which part of the group, or one of its members, acts illegitimately. In such situations, the alleged abuse must be addressed by the competent authorities, without the whole group being condemned, since that would be

against justice. At the same time, the members of national minority groups have the duty to treat others with the same respect and sense of dignity.

Secondly, the right to religious freedom. This right applies to all religious communities, as well as to individuals, and includes the free manifestation of religious beliefs, both individually and collectively. Consequently, religious minorities must be able to worship as a community, according to their own rites. They must also be in a position to provide religious education through appropriate teaching programmes and to utilize the necessary means to this end. Moreover, it is very important that the State should effectively ensure and promote the observance of religious freedom, especially when, alongside the great majority who follow one religion, there exist one or more minority groups of another faith.

Mister Chairman,

4. The increased awareness which is found today at every level regarding the situation of national minority groups constitutes for our own times a hopeful sign for the coming generations and for the aspirations of national minority groups themselves. Indeed, in a sense, respect for national minorities is to be considered the touchstone of social harmony and the index of the civic maturity attained by a country and its institutions. In a truly democratic society, to guarantee the participation of national minorities in political life is a sign of a highly developed civilization, and it brings honour upon those nations in which all citizens are guaranteed a share in national life in a climate of true freedom.

5. The Catholic Church would like to assure those members of national minorities who are suffering of her spiritual closeness. The Church shares their moments of pain and their reasons for legitimate pride. My Delegation is confident that, through the commitments of the OSCE and the “quiet diplomacy” of its High Commissioner on National Minorities, their trials may soon cease and that all national minorities may be secure in the enjoyment of their rights.

Thank you, Mister Chairman.