



INTERVENTION OF THE DELEGATION OF THE HOLY SEE AT THE OSCE CHAIRMANSHIP CONFERENCE ON INTOLERANCE AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST MUSLIMS

Cordoba, 9 October 2007

First Plenary Session

“Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims: Old prejudices and new targets”

Mr. Chairman,

1. In my capacity as Secretary of the Holy See’s Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, I am glad to participate to this OSCE Chairmanship Conference on Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims and I wish to join the previous speakers in thanking the Spanish Chairmanship for having organized it in this emblematic city of Cordoba. The OSCE continues its struggle against intolerance and discrimination, and it has to build upon the *acquis* of the 2005 Cordoba and the 2007 Bucharest Conferences. In this spirit, the Holy See appreciates the desire to reflect and give a proper follow up to initiatives already underway and decisions already adopted.

2. At first, I would also like to stress the esteem and the respect that Catholics have for Muslim believers, by calling to mind the words of the Second Vatican Council’s Document *Nostra aetate*, the Declaration on the Church’s Relations with non-Christian Religions: “*The Church looks upon Muslims with respect. They worship the one God, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to humanity and to whose decrees, even the hidden ones, they seek to submit themselves wholeheartedly, just as Abraham, to whom the Islamic faith readily relates itself, submitted to God*” (n. 3).

Today there is an urgent need for dialogue, understanding and cooperation between the world's great religions, especially Christianity and Islam. Religion is in fact called by its very nature to build bridges between individuals, peoples and cultures, to be a sign of hope for humanity. The strengthening of bridges of friendship is a priority for the Catholic Church. As Pope Benedict XVI underlined in 2005 in Cologne, in a Meeting with Representatives of Some Muslim Communities: *“Interreligious and intercultural dialogue between Christians and Muslims cannot be reduced to an optional extra. It is, in fact, a vital necessity, on which in large measure our future depends.”* In this spirit, the Holy See has repeatedly emphasized its commitment to developing further a sincere and respectful dialogue, based on ever more authentic reciprocal knowledge which recognizes the religious values that we have in common and, with loyalty, respects the differences.

3. Through dialogue, Christians and Muslims can also learn to work together in order to guard against all forms of disrespect and to oppose all manifestations of violence. As Pope Benedict XVI stated in his Address to the Members of the Office of the President for Religious Affairs in Turkey: *“Christians and Muslims, following their respective religions, point to the truth of the sacred character and dignity of the person. This is the basis of our mutual respect and esteem, this is the basis for cooperation in the service of peace between nations and peoples, the dearest wish of all believers and all people of good will”*.

The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, the Holy See's Dicastery for promoting positive and constructive relation between Catholics and followers of other religions, especially Muslims, has established along the years stable and periodical initiatives of dialogue with Muslim organizations and institutes: the International Islamic Forum for Dialogue (Jeddah, Saudi Arabia), Al-Azhar Permanent Committee for Dialogue with Monotheistic Religions (Cairo, Egypt), the World Islamic Call Society (Tripoli, Libya), the Center for Inter-religious Dialogue of the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (Teheran, Iran), the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies (Amman, Jordan).

Also, the Dicastery has organized Christian-Muslim regional meetings, for example in North of Africa and in South East Asia.

Besides this, the Pontifical Council sends every year, since 1967, a Message to Muslims for `Id al-Fitr, at the end of Ramadan, a Message much appreciated and waited for, both by Muslims and their Christians friends.

It is worth mentioning that the efforts of the catholic Church in promoting friendly and fruitful relations with persons and groups of other religions are also made at the local level, particularly where Catholics live alongside other religious groups. Normally a special Commission is instituted to take care of this important dimension of the life of the Church and of the society.

4. Unfortunately, there is a tendency today, especially in the mass media, to generalize or equate terrorism and violence with Islam. In this regard, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe should hold firm to one of its basic principles that rejects the “*identification of terrorism with any nationality or religion*”. The Catholic Church has repeatedly deplored that crimes have been committed which offend God and humanity and throw discredit on Islam. Groups or individuals responsible for acts of terrorism, irrespective of their race, colour or religion, should be condemned. The manipulation of religions for ideological, political or economic purposes should equally be condemned and both religious authorities and political leaders should guide and encourage their followers and constituents in this direction. Furthermore, all strong condemnation of terrorism by Muslim religious leaders does significantly help in avoiding any misunderstanding about their religion and in distancing it from terrorism.

5. However, the question of intolerance and discrimination towards Muslims needs also to be seen in the wider context of religious intolerance in general. During the Bucharest Conference, held in June 2007, Mr. Doudou Diene, UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and intolerance, clearly stated that anti-Christian sentiment occupies a neglected space in today’s globalized world. In fact, he observed that the current hostility to the Western world is frequently projected on its institutions as well as on Christianity. All monotheistic religions still suffer from misperceptions and ungrounded allegations. It is therefore necessary to fight against each of these plagues, that sometimes are inter-related, if we want to solve all of them.

Consequently, the OSCE participating States should avoid eventual reticence or unjustified selective actions and should guarantee a correct balance between their commitments to fight against anti-Semitism, the discrimination against Muslims and against Christians. Such approach will certainly contribute to combat any division of the world, based on religious/confessional beliefs.

6. Moreover, if the OSCE States wish to tackle effectively intolerance and discrimination against Muslims, they need to address properly the phenomenon of migration, both at the international and national level. Migration has already become a structural element of many contemporary societies; it often changes their cultural and religious composition and requires the cooperation of both the migrants and the community that receives them, in mutual respect and in search of the true common good. In the construction of society, it is important that each person, each religious or ethnic denomination feels free to make itself heard and to express its opinions. No one can be arbitrarily cut off from the various groups that legitimately make up the social body. Everyone’s human rights and fundamental freedoms must be respected and religious freedom occupies a prominent place in the spectrum of freedoms that are to be respected. In this regard, I find it important to stress that the

OSCE States have recognized that the exercise of religious freedom includes the right to change one's religion. All of which should be guaranteed not only legally, but also in daily practice. "Religious particularities" should not be used to justify limitation of full and effective respect of religious liberty of persons belonging to other religions.

Furthermore, the religious and cultural identity of the society of destination must be respected. Most Muslims desire to live peacefully and respectfully, but there are sometimes radical factions which make relations with western societies difficult, especially on the social and cultural level. Unfortunately, the resulting fears and racist feelings turn against immigrants, making their integration even more difficult.

Civil Authorities should also address the problem of poverty, since it often affects ethnic and religious minorities in a particular way and, though it can never justify, it fosters *de facto* conflicts and divisions between religious believers.

Mr. Chairman,

7. In his Address to the Members of the Office of the President for Religious Affairs in Turkey, Pope Benedict XVI expressed the following wish: *"May we come to know one another better, strengthening the bonds of affection between us in our common wish to live together in harmony, peace and mutual trust. As believers, we draw from our prayer the strength that is needed to overcome all traces of prejudice and to bear joint witness to our firm faith in God."*

This is the wish and commitment of my Delegation as well. Thank you.