



THE HOLY SEE
2011 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
Working Session 2: Fundamental Freedoms I.
Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief
Tuesday, September 27, 2011

Mr. Chairman,

1. 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, the OSCE Commitments on freedom of religion and belief constitute a significant elaboration and strengthening of international standards in the field of freedom of religion or belief. These commitments stand among the most significant achievements of the OSCE in strengthening the protection of freedom of religion or belief, not only in the area from “Vancouver to Vladivostok”, but also beyond the OSCE region.

2. Human rights, of course, must include the right to religious freedom, understood as the expression of a dimension that is at once individual and communitarian – a vision that brings out the unity of the person while clearly distinguishing between the dimension of the citizen and that of the believer. The OSCE has always emphasized the positive contributions of religious communities to society. In this sense, the activity of the OSCE has ensured that public debate gives space to viewpoints inspired by a religious vision in all its dimensions, including ritual, worship, education, dissemination of information and the freedom to profess and choose religion. It is inconceivable, then, that believers should have to suppress a part of themselves, namely, their faith, in order to be active citizens. It should never be necessary to deny God in order to enjoy one’s rights.

The rights associated with religion are all the more in need of protection if they are considered to clash with a prevailing secular ideology or with majority religious positions of an exclusive nature. The full guarantee of religious freedom cannot be limited to the free exercise of worship, but has to give due consideration to the public dimension of religion, and hence to the possibility of believers playing their part in building the social order. Indeed, they actually do so, for example through their influential and generous involvement in a vast network of initiatives which extend from Universities, scientific institutions and schools to health care agencies and charitable organizations in the service of the poorest and most marginalized. Refusal to recognize the contribution to society that is rooted in the religious dimension and in the quest for the Absolute – by its nature, expressing communion between persons –

would effectively privilege an individualistic approach, and would fragment the unity of the person.

3. In this context, it is unfortunate that in some countries, manifestations of religious intolerance still exist, such as serious prohibitions to religious instruction of children and young people, and restrictions in the concession of visas to religious personnel. There is also lack of freedom in the use of mass media and other means of social communication for religious purposes; denial of permits to build new places of worship; hate propaganda; misleading statements at times even by public authorities against other religions; destruction and irreparable damage of holy sites. Furthermore, it is regrettable that certain national legislations deprive their citizens of the freedom to change their religion, even when they decide to do so after having honestly, freely and responsibly sought the truth, according to the dictates of their conscience.

4. It pertains to the nature of religions, freely practiced, that they can autonomously conduct a dialogue of thought and life. If at this level, too, the religious sphere is kept separate from political action, then great benefits ensue for individuals and communities. On the other hand, the Member States of the OSCE can count on the results of dialogue between religions, and can draw fruit from the willingness of believers to place their experiences at the service of the common good. Their task is to propose a vision of faith not in terms of intolerance, discrimination and conflict, but in terms of complete respect for truth, coexistence, rights, and reconciliation.

To ensure freedom for every believer means also to increase the protection given to the rights of the human person. Those rights are grounded and shaped by the transcendent nature of the human person, which permits men and women to pursue their journey of faith and their search for God in this world. Every violation of religious freedom, whether overt or concealed, does fundamental damage to the cause of peace and security. Recognition of the religious dimension must be strengthened if we are to sustain humanity's hope for a better world and if we are to create the conditions for peace, development, cooperation, and guarantee of rights for future generations.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.