



United States Mission to the OSCE

Introductory Statement on Role of Governments and Civil Society in Promoting Tolerance, Respect and Mutual Understanding, Particularly Through Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue and Partnerships

As prepared for delivery by William Cardinal Keeler, Archbishop of
Baltimore
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I bring to this topic a sense of humility – it is so complex and important. I also bring a sense of gratitude. I live in the state of Maryland in the United States. From its earliest days, Maryland was the first place in the English-speaking world enacting religious freedom. It was a beacon of hope to many in the faith and helped prepare the way for religious liberty in our nation. In addition, my life and ministry have been greatly enriched by dialogue with sisters and brothers who express faith in different ways. It has not always been easy, but the advances have outweighed the problems; hopes have overcome our fears.

However, in the United States, racism and discrimination have divided our nation, wounded our Church and diminished so many lives. At its core, the sin of racism dwells within the temptation of the human heart to discard the God-given dignity that belongs to each human being. I have personally witnessed the ravages and discord that racism brings as well as the hope that comes from dialogue, respect and common action to overcome bigotry and injustice.

Pope John Paul II recently addressed the treatment of migrants and refugees who are vulnerable to the most terrible forms of racism and xenophobia in his Message for the 89th World Day of Migrants. Increased mobility of migrants and refugees can transform our societies into multi-ethnic and multi-cultural communities. Such changes can have a positive impact by bringing renewed diversity, vitality, and greater awareness of ethnic and religious pluralism. They also heighten the need for improved understanding of relations and dialogue among people of different faiths and backgrounds.

On the other hand, such shifts can lead the majority to feel threatened and can make them resistant to a sense of welcome and accommodation to those “from outside.” In an atmosphere of fear and suspicion, newcomers are seen as a challenge to the status quo, threatening existing political, social and economic arrangements. Too often, religious identities and prejudices can be manipulated to draw people into ethnic or nationalistic conflicts or to intensify existing ones. Pope John Paul II has repeatedly urged us to resist the tendency to turn in on ourselves, inviting us instead to “discern in people of other cultures the handiwork of God.”¹ This can be a difficult path, requiring at times both prophetic and loving words, but a necessary path which can deepen the gift of unity and encourage solidarity in opposing all forms of racism, xenophobia and exaggerated nationalism.

Societies today not only face new tensions resulting from migration but also from internal longstanding racial, ethnic and religious differences that diminish human dignity, and in some tragic instances, lead to violence and even armed conflict. We must be constantly vigilant to see the signs of this sickness within ourselves and our societies while working ever more diligently to build genuine dialogue and respect among diverse communities.

The scourge of racism, xenophobia and discrimination is a complex reality that is sometimes exacerbated by dishonest and distorted religious claims which can create a lethal mix of hatred, fear and even violence. Given this, the commitment and witness of religious leaders to mutual understanding and authentic dialogue is essential.

I want to lift up two particular themes: the positive role that religion can play in public life and a renewed spirit of interreligious encounter. First, governments and elected officials have an important role to play in valuing and safeguarding the proper place of religion in public life, where religion can make positive contributions. While the state and religion clearly differ in their roles, they share a goal of building up the common good for the benefit of the entire society. Though religion may be misused -- even tragically at times -- or distorted, it can offer positive values to society and can be a major force for healing the infection of racism and xenophobia. The political order subverts its own best hopes by confining religion to the margins and mistakenly thinking that the way to preserve peace is to deny space in the public square to religious believers and communities. Faith should be respected and welcomed in public life, and the particular character of religious communities should be valued

¹ “Message of the Holy Father John Paul II for the 89th World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2003: For a commitment to overcome all racism, xenophobia and exaggerated nationalism.” 24 October 2002. #4.

along with other forms of association and civic engagement. Societies in which faith is marginalized and impoverished are diminished societies.

Second, the strength and persuasiveness of our religious call to overcome racism, bigotry, prejudice and discrimination will require greater understanding and cooperation among religious leaders and communities themselves. The path to greater respect and dignity requires a real change of heart, which cannot be achieved through political or legal measures alone. For believers, our faith reveals to us the full meaning of who we are and the road to which our human dignity is calling us. This path entails the “daily challenge of turning from egoism to altruism, from fear to openness, from rejection to solidarity.”²

Not content with tolerance and respect for each other’s differences, interreligious understanding and dialogue offer the hope of genuine mutual enrichment that can provide us with the resources necessary to overcome the darkness of violence and division. As children of Abraham, Jews, Christians, and Muslims have a special reason to seek the path of understanding and solidarity. Treasuring what is distinctive in each religious tradition, together we should resist any attempt to suggest that what the world needs is fewer rather than more people of faith.

Authentic dialogue cannot be satisfied with vague expressions of good will, empty of genuine search for truth and unity. We are called to listen to what other communities bring out of their own resources which may be complementary to or richer than our own. This is more than tolerance or even respect: it is to be ready to receive from others what we may not fully possess on our own. Thus our legitimate differences may enrich our world, rather than divide it.

I want to emphasize that genuine interreligious dialogue can only be a force to heal racism and other societal injustices if dialogue safeguards and respects the truth in each religion and culture. Attempts to distort the particular character, beliefs or practices of respective religious communities can itself be an offense against human dignity and basic human rights. Efforts to compel religions to alter fundamental tenets or moral principles can lead to further stumbling blocks on the path to peace.

In today’s world of increased tension between people of different faith, race and culture, we must take a stand to protect the religious freedom and human rights of every group. If not, we risk deepening divisions and fostering the prejudice and hatred that lies at the heart of racism, xenophobia and discrimination. It is a

² Ibid. #4

source of pain to acknowledge that, as Christians, we have at times failed to extend the tolerance and understanding that we ourselves expect. We cannot call for an end to discrimination against Christians if we do not seek the same for our Jewish, Muslim and brothers and sisters of other faiths and no faiths.

History is a sad reminder of the human capacity to justify hatred for one another because of religious, ethnic or other differences. The temptation to marginalize the outsider, to exclude the stranger and even destroy the one who is different has haunted the human family and still is shamefully with us today. We know and deplore the terrible human costs of anti-Semitism, hostility to Muslims and migrants, and other attacks upon people because of religious or other differences, as evidenced by the continuing reality of anti-Semitism and the fact that it is appearing in new forms. All forms of intolerance, xenophobia and racism should be resolutely condemned. Our challenge is to respect the dignity of all.

Rather than reach out in dialogue and solidarity, we are tempted to isolate ourselves, building spiritual and physical walls that are thicker, fences that are higher and employing weapons that are more deadly than ever before. In many parts of the world today, religious intolerance, ethnic conflict and excessive nationalism tragically combine with political oppression, economic disadvantage and cultural hegemony to fuel a seemingly endless cycle of violence and retaliation.

However, history also reveals a universal human yearning for unity and solidarity, for reconciliation and peace. Time and again, people of every creed and color have rejected the path of division and exclusion, and have courageously acted to prevent or end hatred and war. By their actions, they have borne witness to the mission of each religious community to be “agents of peace amidst the harsh realities of injustice, aggression, terrorism and war.”³

In order for religious communities to be “agents of peace,” it is necessary for us to engage in active and on-going collaboration. If religious communities can model in their own interaction the ideals of cooperation and respect, then can they help heal society’s divisions. The history and recent growth of interreligious cooperation shows great promise and offers great hope.

Beyond dialogue and mutual respect, people of faith are invited to witness to God’s power to unite through the very aspects of our traditions that distinguish

³ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. “Final Declaration of the Participants in the Symposium on Spiritual Resources of the Religions on Peace.” January 16-18, 2003.

us. In this regard, we have come to see that genuine justice and peace require active efforts at reconciliation. In the light of a troublesome history, where religions have sometimes added to the arsenal of hatred, it means asking for and being ready to grant forgiveness. Those who forgive, as those who are forgiven, will come to know true liberation from the sins of racism, xenophobia and intolerance.

For me and, I know, for many others, religious faith is the source of vision and moral integrity. Religious faith enables the Catholic community – and other believers – to be a builder of bridges among communities in conflict. It contributes to the vitality of democracy because it empowers commitment to pursue justice for all. Speaking very personally, I know that genuine dialogue, collaboration and reconciliation have strengthened my faith, enriched my religious community, helped to heal my nation's wounds and build bridges across a divided world. I know first hand that dialogue and forgiveness can lead to genuine conversion of the heart and mind. I sincerely believe that communities of faith must play an indispensable role in building a better world and lasting peace among all peoples and races. So let us live and proclaim the truths of our respective faith traditions with the excitement of captives finding freedom from prisons of bigotry, discrimination and exclusion. As believers, we are called to secure a place at the table of life for all of God's children.