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HOLY SEE

Statement of H.E. Archbishop Michael L. Fitzgerald,
President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue
Head of the Delegation of the Holy See
to the OSCE Conference on Tolerance and
the Fight Against Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination
Brussels, 14 September 2004

Mrs. Moderator,
Distinguished Delegates,

In my capacity as President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue I wish to join the previous speakers in congratulating the Belgian Government for hosting this International Conference on a very important and delicate topic, to which the OSCE has been devoting particular attention since the Porto Ministerial Council in 2002.

We are all well aware that the roots of racism, xenophobia, discrimination and intolerance are found in ignorance, prejudice and hatred, which may often arise from faulty and inadequate education and also from the misuse of the media.

The role of education as a "good practice to be promoted" in the struggle against these evils, is fundamental. It offers a unique opportunity to present - especially to the young - certain major values such as the unity of the human race, the equal dignity of all human beings, the solidarity which binds together all the members of the human family. Accordingly there is a continuous need to monitor, and to correct if necessary, the presentations made in text-books used in schools. The programmes of educational institutions should in fact transmit an objective knowledge of different cultures and encourage the interest of the new generations in the different historical, linguistic and cultural traditions of their particular area, of the European continent and indeed of the world as a whole. Pope John Paul II has often emphasised that the teaching of religion, in particular, can instil the hope that there is a real possibility of living together in a common perspective of solidarity and peace.

In this regard, the Catholic Church has, for centuries and in every continent, played a very active role "on the ground". Faithful to the values she cherishes, she carries out her educative mission in the service of every person and of the whole person. In many countries where the majority of the population is non-Christian, Catholic schools are places where children and young people of different faiths,

cultures, social class or ethnic background come into contact with one another and are educated together. This is true also of certain areas of countries with a Christian majority, but including a substantial presence of other faith communities.

The Declaration “Nostra Aetate” on the relations of the Catholic Church to other religions emphasises that *“we cannot truly pray to God the Father of all if we treat any people in other than brotherly fashion (...) No foundation therefore remains for any theory or practice that leads to discrimination between man and man or people and people, so far as their human dignity and the rights flowing from it are concerned (Nostra Aetate, n.5).*

In the light of what has been said, the Holy See is convinced that education and the commitment against discrimination should involve reference to the current UN and OSCE agreed causes of discrimination. Attempts to extend such categories to include causes which would clash with the legal systems, with the culture and the religious traditions of a vast majority of the members of the United Nations and of the OSCE, constitute a lack of respect for, and even of tolerance towards, such traditions. Such attempts are in contrast with the indications given by the 1993 Conference of Vienna on human rights (cf. *Vienna Declaration*, para. 5)

Furthermore, respect for each individual’s religious identity requires an education which will provide some understanding of the specificity of Churches and religious communities vis- à-vis the organisations of civil society, to which they cannot be reduced. Religious communities contribute to the culture of our societies and to the democratic debate within them, but they also point to a spiritual dimension that not all would recognize but which is of demonstrable importance to the life of citizens. Moreover, the specific identity of religious communities implies that their values cannot be calculated on the basis of purely political criteria, nor on the basis of criteria uncritically adopted from those which are used to evaluate other kinds of associations. The media have a great responsibility here, and constitute a meaningful resource for creating an awareness of this specificity, and gaining respect for it.

With reference to this identity, I wish finally to emphasise that when carried out in the right manner education in respect and tolerance does not imply reducing the fundamental principles of every religion and culture to the lowest common denominator. As is stated in the UNESCO Declaration on Tolerance, the latter does not imply renouncing one’s principles or weakening one’s adherence to them. Education in tolerance, including through the media, means educating in the exercise of the freedom to adhere to one’s own convictions, while accepting that others may adhere to theirs as well, and in respecting those practices that correspond to each individual’s religious beliefs, provided that they violate neither the rights of others, nor national security, public health or morals.

Thank You, Mrs. Moderator.