



## THE HOLY SEE

Statement of Archbishop Józef Wesołowski  
Apostolic Nuncio  
Head of the Delegation of the Holy See  
to the OSCE Tolerance Implementation Meeting on  
Promoting Inter-Cultural, Inter-Religious and Inter-Ethnic Understanding  
Almaty, 12-13 June 2006

### Session 2

*Inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic partnerships as a tool to counter stereotypes and prejudice and to promote mutual respect and understanding in public and political discourse*

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Mr. Moderator,

The Delegation of the Holy See wishes to express its congratulations to the Kazakh Government for the commitment with which it has organized this meeting together with the Belgian Chairmanship.

The diverse ethnic, cultural and religious makeup of the participating States renders this Organization a laboratory of potentially effective and lasting inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic partnerships. Strongly convinced of this potential, my Delegation is also confident that this emblematic country, where many different nationalities and ethnic groups live side by side, can inspire the OSCE to take new and effective steps in its struggle for dialogue and mutual understanding.

1. On this subject, I would like to emphasise first of all that no partnership among cultures, religions and ethnicities can be established in mutual ignorance. Creating a partnership requires dialogue. However, dialogue is only the first step, which should lead to identifying a common and solid “ground” upon which a lasting partnership can be established. What should make up this common “ground”?

It is necessary that this common ground consist of respect and appreciation for different cultures and religions. Instead, today religions are too often manipulated or even misunderstood as part of the problem, when in fact they are and should be considered part of the solution to problems that exist between different cultures and civilizations. In this light, it is important to note that inter-religious dialogue will be unable to favour greater respect and unity in civic and political life if the public role

of religion is not duly recognised. If religion is relegated only to the private sphere, then it is denied its ability to have a positive impact on society. Also, the long standing efforts of OSCE in favour of religious freedom come from an awareness that such freedom characterises one of the most basic dimensions of the human person and naturally goes beyond the private sphere only.

2. If inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue is to succeed in helping counter prejudices in civic and political life, then the educational system and the media must avoid stereotypes, distortions, attitudes of intolerance and the frequent belittling of religion and culture.

In this regard, the Delegation of the Holy See would like to emphasise how such biased attitudes against religion and culture (whether subtle or overt) are always deplorable. It is also important to note that today, unfortunately, there is little awareness or due recognition given to an increasing bias and at times hostility against Christians and their religion. This reality also threatens other religions and all are at risk as long as any one of them is the victim of stereotype or prejudice.

Mr. Moderator,

3. The geographic makeup of the OSCE, its wide ranging mandate, and the activities of its institutions and missions in different areas, give this Organisation a privileged ability to deal with common challenges. One in particular concerns freedom of expression and how an absolute interpretation of it can give legitimacy to civic and political expressions that do not respect legitimate limits or other values, such as the right not to be offended. Such expressions can create or sharpen existing ethnic, cultural and religious tensions, since, as experience has already shown, they strike at the heart of what people hold dearest.

If, in the name of an incorrect interpretation of freedom of expression, member States were to allow the religious sentiments of individuals or entire communities to be offended, the same States would not only be unable to effectively contribute to dialogue among different religions, cultures and ethnic groups, but they would also risk prejudicing it. This dialogue has to be based upon knowledge and respect.

In the current socio-political context, the OSCE and its institutions are able to underscore how the guarantee of freedom of expression is a fundamental right in pluralistic democracies, but also how it is to be exercised responsibly, with respect for the convictions and practices of all believers, as well as for the symbols which distinguish their religions. The respect and protection of the fundamental rights of freedom of expression and freedom of religion should be guaranteed, aiming at a careful balance and at safeguarding the exercise of both.

Thank you, Mr. Moderator.