



HOLY SEE

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Delegation of the Holy See at the
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Freedom of the Media: Access to Information and Protection of Journalists
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Working Session 2

Freedom of Opinion and Expression:
The role of voluntary professional standards in facilitating mutual respect and understanding

Mr. Moderator,

1. I would like to congratulate the OSCE for hosting this Meeting, with the goal of identifying recommendations for best practices concerning freedom of the media in the participating States.

To begin, the Holy See would like to underscore that it strongly supports freedom of expression and free exchange of ideas. The “freedom to seek and know the truth is a fundamental human right, and freedom of expression is a cornerstone of democracy” (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Ethics in Internet*). Public opinion, “an essential expression of human nature organized in society,” also requires this “freedom to express ideas and attitudes” (*idem*).

2. The right to freedom of expression also carries with it corresponding responsibilities. The late Pope John Paul II wrote: “An authentically ethical approach to using the powerful communications media must be situated within the context of a mature exercise of freedom and responsibility, founded upon the supreme criteria of truth and justice” (Apostolic Letter, *The Rapid Development*). Therefore it is necessary that freedom of expression highlights and respects the dignity of the individual and the common good. History has proven that overlooking any of these principles can lead to dangerous and even dramatic consequences.

In particular, the Holy See would like to draw attention to the need for greater respect of religious institutions, symbols and sensibilities, since they often go to the core of one’s identity and what is held dearest. Religious faith guides the existence of billions of people, though this can be difficult to appreciate for those who do not share it.

At various meetings of the OSCE, the Holy See has supported efforts aimed at eradicating discrimination and intolerance against Christians, Jews and Muslims. Prejudice, mockery or, in the worst case, hate speech against believers, their religious institutions and symbols, should in no way be permitted. If any group is ridiculed, this can cause a chain reaction of negative effects against other religious believers. It is in the case of Christians, and Catholics in particular, that the general tendency is to underestimate or to play down attitudes of intolerance or disrespect towards believers and their religious sensibilities, especially in the context of public discourse and in the media. Even though such intolerance and disrespect may sometimes be expressed under the guise of “humour”, it should be remembered that language is

performative: when we say something, we are at the same time doing something, even if it is only provoking. Public discourse, then, inevitably needs some kind of monitoring in order to assure respect of religions and to avoid creating or worsening divisions and conflicts.

3. The question to ask, therefore, is how to guarantee what might be called *responsible freedom of expression*. An absolute idea of freedom without any limits can allow for expressions which offend human dignity and leave little room for a sense of the common good, solidarity, or even the claims of truth itself. When freedom of expression is not guided by any standard, whether voluntary or mandatory, then it can become a right which is a law unto itself. At the same time, communication which is overly controlled or has unjust constraints placed upon it, can suppress the right to authentic freedom of expression and also allow for serious abuses of power and intolerance. Therefore, more discussion and reflection is needed on how to find a careful balance between rights and responsibilities, so that one does not come at the exclusion of the other.

Responsible public discourse recognizes the vital necessity of a free flow of information and its impact on shaping public perception. It is mindful of its ethical responsibility and the need to respect and defend basic human rights - and the right to religious freedom is indeed a fundamental human right.

4. Industry self-regulation can be a way to guarantee the responsible use of freedom: regulation according to criteria of public service and greater public accountability. Industry codes of ethics can play a useful role, provided they are seriously intended, involve stakeholders and representatives of the public in their formulation and enforcement, and, along with giving encouragement to responsible communicators, carry appropriate penalties for violations. Circumstances sometimes may require state intervention: for example, by setting up media advisory boards representing the range of opinion in the community.

Legislators and civil authorities have a duty and a right to create and enforce laws against hate speech, libel, fraud or criminal behaviour. Today I wish to stress the specific need for laws against hate speech and those explicitly addressing hate speech against persons on the grounds of their religious affiliation.

5. Another issue related to this Session's theme concerns the raising of awareness among journalists about religious and cultural sensitivities. In this area the encouragement of local seminars might be considered, whether for journalists or the wider community. The purpose would be to help others understand and further their knowledge of the diverse religious and cultural traditions making up their societies. These encounters could be organized locally or nationally and involve representatives of the various religious or cultural groups.

Thank you, Mr. Moderator.