



HOLY SEE

Statement by Monsignor Anthony R. Frontiero
Official of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace
At the 2008 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
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During Working Session 12: Freedom of Religion or Belief

Mr. Moderator,

In his address to the United Nations General Assembly in April of this year, Pope Benedict XVI stated that “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. 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 liberty 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.”¹

It is in this context that the Holy See wishes to submit a few special considerations on this theme with a view to encouraging a serious examination of the present situation of freedom of religion or belief so as to ensure that it is effectively guaranteed everywhere. In doing so, the Holy See believes it is acting in full accord with the joint commitment contained in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975.

First, the dignity of the human person is the foundation for acknowledging and respecting rights and freedoms. Thus, on the one hand, each individual has the right and duty to seek the truth, and, on the other hand, other persons as well as civil society have the corresponding duty to respect the free spiritual development of each person.²

A second and no less fundamental element is the fact that religious freedom is expressed not only by internal and exclusively individual acts, since human beings think, act, and communicate in relationship with others. Therefore, visible acts, whether individual or collective, private or public, producing communion with persons of the same faith, and establishing a bond through which the believer belongs to an organic religious community, must also be respected. In many sectors of the OSCE region, such respect has been granted to religious communities by civil authorities, enabling people to exercise their religious freedom without fear and to realize their “right to worship God in accordance with the right dictates of his or her conscience.” Regrettably, however, there are still

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Address to United Nations General Assembly*, April 18, 2008.

² Pope John Paul II, *Letter to the Signatories to the Helsinki Final Act*, 1 September 1980.

too many places in the OSCE region where civil authorities persistently hinder this right, setting up structures of forced registration, or proactively discriminating against Christians and members of other religions. In many instances, such hindrances to the full exercise of religious liberty are not explicitly outlined in public policy, but are clearly part of every day practice. If religious freedom is to be given substance, the participation of those most concerned in it and who have special experience of it and responsibility for it must not be excluded. Setting arbitrary norms of application and imposing rules or restrictions that are opposed to man's true religious needs should be clearly seen as unacceptable by all those who are truly concerned with justice and peace and the true development of people.

Mr. Moderator,

The Holy See also follows with concern the developing regulations and restrictions on religious freedom currently in the process of elaboration in Kazakhstan, in Kyrgyzstan, and in Tajikistan. The Holy See exhorts the competent authorities in these States to ensure that such legislation respects the normative standards of religious liberty, which the OSCE has always promoted and to which every participating State is committed. The Holy See is also concerned with the treatment of the minority in Serbia's Christian Orthodox community in Kosovo, as well as the treatment of its property.

Respect for the principle of religious freedom, properly understood, will help to ensure the order and common welfare of each nation, of each society, because when individuals know that their fundamental rights are protected, they are better prepared to work for the common good.

Finally, respect for the principle of religious freedom will also contribute to strengthening international peace, which as we well know is threatened by any violation of human rights, including the man's right to a relationship with God. Only the effective protection of the fullness of rights for every individual without discrimination can guarantee peace down to its very foundation.

Thank you, Mr. Moderator.