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THE HOLY SEE

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Fundamental Freedoms I including: Freedom of Thought, Religion or Belief

Mr. Chairman,

The Delegation of the Holy See joins the Delegations of other Participating States in expressing its gratitude for the opportunity to contribute to the Human Dimension Sessions of the Review Conference. The freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief is a cornerstone of the OSCE commitments because the OSCE recognizes that the dilemmas and controversies in this area are illustrative of the current crisis of the entire human rights project. Indeed, the 1989 Vienna Concluding Document gives greater specificity to the right to freedom of thought, religion and belief and emphasizes its individual and communal dimensions.

The Holy See never ceases to affirm this right, seeing its unmistakable link to the other fundamental human rights; so much so that it can rightly be argued that respect for religious freedom is a touchstone for the observance of the other fundamental rights. The State's respect for the right to freedom of religion is a sign or respect for the other fundamental human rights, in that it explicitly recognizes the existence of an order which transcends the political dimension of existence (Cf. *John Paul II, Address to the Diplomatic Corps*, 1989). This sentiment is even articulated in the Annotated Agenda for this Review Conference, recalling that "freedom of belief is a fundamental human right that protects the transcendental dimension of the human being..." (*Session 2*).

Today, nearly every nation in the world is officially committed to freedom of thought, religion or belief as a fundamental human right. Among the OSCE Participating States, a certain measure of progress has been realized towards the more fulsome recognition and enjoyment of this right, including by a more widespread respect for the right of communities to have places of worship, to organize themselves according to their own hierarchical structure in accordance with the tenets of their beliefs, to use and disseminate sacred books and religious publications, and the like. The Delegation of the Holy See acknowledges with gratitude such progress, *and calls upon participating States to embrace the principle and true spirit of reciprocity and mutual respect.*

There remain, however, all-too-many instances where the freedom of thought, religion or belief continues to be thwarted. Even a cursory survey of the contemporary landscape reveals that the religious liberty of individuals, families, associations and institutions is under growing threat from many different directions. Flagrant violations still abound. Tensions are mounting among religions

themselves, and between religions, governments, and civil society groups. Religious freedom is often attacked in the name of other rights and values. There is increasing conflict and confusion about the relations among the various bodies responsible for implementing human rights instruments at local, national, and international levels. The difficulty of fostering habits of respect and tolerance for the religions of others remains acute.

Pope Benedict XVI, in his recent visit to the United Kingdom, spoke about this issue in the following way:

Religion, in other words, is not a problem for legislators to solve, but a vital contributor to the national conversation. In this light, I cannot but voice my concern at the increasing marginalization of religion, particularly Christianity, that is taking place in some quarters, even in nations which place a great emphasis on tolerance. There are those who would advocate that the voice of religion be silenced, or at least relegated to the purely private sphere. There are those who argue that the public celebration of festivals such as Christmas should be discouraged, in the questionable belief that it might somehow offend those of other religions or none. And there are those who argue—paradoxically with the intention of eliminating discrimination—that Christians in public roles should be required at times to act against their conscience. These are worrying signs of a failure to appreciate not only the rights of believers to freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, but also the legitimate role of religion in the public square (*Pope Benedict XVI, Address to British Society, Westminster Hall, 17 September 2010*).

Mr. Chairman, the uneasy progress of the concept of religious liberty—its gradual acceptance in religious and political settings, and the persistent lack of consensus on its meaning, its foundations, and its relation to other rights—must continue to be examined, so that freedom of thought, religion and belief may move beyond the mere conceptual, to the lived experience of men and women everywhere. In this regard, the Holy See notes with appreciation the relevant Seminars organized by the OSCE/ODIHR on this issue, including the Round Table Meeting on the theme *Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians*, held in Vienna in March 2009. Such initiatives are positive and hopeful events, and reveal the possibility of constructive dialogue toward mutual understanding and respect among Christians, members of other religions, and non-believers. Towards this end, the Delegation of the Holy See welcomes the upcoming OSCE Review Conference, and anticipates its fruitful outcome to renew and strengthen the commitment of this august body to promote and protect the fundamental human right to the freedom of thought, religion or belief. It also commends the work of the ODIHR in this sphere, and looks forward to the Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on this theme to be held in December in Vienna.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.