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THE HOLY SEE

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Official of the Secretariat of State

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Forward Looking Discussions: Working Session 1:
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Freedom of the Media**

Mr. Chairman,

The quest for a balanced normative approach to the fundamental human rights of freedom of religion and belief, freedom of expression, and respect for all persons holding religious or different convictions is part and parcel of the OSCE mandate and commitments. It is in this context that the Delegation of the Holy See addresses this *forward-looking discussion* on the freedom of the media. In the effort to find and embrace such an approach, participating States have been moving toward effective provisions for national and international protection and reaffirmation of the importance of dialogue. Such efforts are being undertaken with the aims of preventing social conflicts and the disparagement of individuals and groups of believers and avoiding marginalization of, or violence against, these groups.

To be sure, however, other measures are necessary, in particular, to avoid the promotion of racism, religious intolerance, and child pornography in the media, which are all grave transgressions and which only foster and perpetuate the degradation of society, often with violent repercussions for the most vulnerable members of the human family. In the effort to develop such measures, and at the same time to preserve an authentic freedom of the media, it seems necessary to ask some basic philosophical questions, such as: What does it mean to be free? What kind of society do we want to become? What constitutes human decency and what does not? And, what are the objective principles and values we should embrace so that the freedom of the media, which is a good, can be preserved and not corrupted?

Aware that the increasing manifestations of religious intolerance in the OSCE region are undermining the rights of all persons of any religion and belief, especially members of religious minorities, as well as members of religious majorities, the Holy See is convinced that a concerted solution is necessary, one that is based on the full respect for the dignity of the person and religious freedom. There is a growing consensus, for example, which represents a fine balance between reaffirming the importance of freedom of expression and the need to curb hate speech. Particularly in this area that touches on deep emotions and on a personal and collective sense of identity, laws are not enough. A new outlook is required, one that takes into account the increased pluralism in most societies and the interconnectedness of a globalized world.

Modern technology (especially through the means of social communication) can be an effective resource and can contribute to a clearer awareness of one's dignity and human rights. Thus the

convergence of freedom of expression and the means of social communication is fundamentally positive. It is only a question of choice. Media can be used either to build and sustain the human community in all its economic, political, cultural, educational and religious aspects to the enrichment of people's wellbeing and spirituality, or it can be used to injure the integral good of the person, to incite hatred, to marginalize and alienate people and to stereotype them based on race and ethnicity, sex, age and also religion.¹

Indeed in the relationship between the means of social communication and religion there are temptations on both sides. Media often ignore and marginalize religious doctrine, ideas, practices, experiences, and sentiments of religious persons are belittled and religion is judged by secular standards. Such a perspective can result in hostile treatment of legitimate religious groups.

In his latest Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI noted that:

Given the media's fundamental importance in engineering changes in attitude towards reality and the human person, we must reflect carefully on their influence, especially in regard to the ethical-cultural dimension... *The meaning and purpose of the media must be sought within an anthropological perspective.* This means that they can have a *civilizing effect* not only when, thanks to technological development, they increase the possibilities of communicating information, but above all when they are geared towards a vision of the person and the common good that reflects truly universal values. Just because social communications increase the possibilities of interconnection and the dissemination of ideas, it does not follow that they promote freedom or internationalize development and democracy for all. To achieve goals of this kind, they need to focus on promoting the dignity of persons and peoples, they need to be clearly inspired by charity and placed at the service of truth, of the good, and of natural and supernatural fraternity. In fact, human freedom is intrinsically linked with these higher values. The media can make an important contribution towards the growth in communion of the human family and the *ethos* of society when they are used to promote universal participation in the common search for what is just.²

In conclusion, freedom of expression is not only a right but also a responsibility that needs to be strengthened. The presumption should always be in favour of the possibility to exchange ideas and articulate opinions in a respectful way. The free expression of general or personal considerations in terms of public debate, or of cultural, philosophical and theological dialogue cannot be regarded as a form of defamation of religions, or as forms of incitement to hatred against a religion or a community of believers. Freedom of thought and expression, including freedom to criticize, when exercised responsibly and within the limits of accuracy, fairness, respect, public morality and order, can be considered a gain of civilization to be protected as a common political and juridical patrimony of humanity, not only as a prerogative of a particular social context or a particular cultural tradition.

The development and self-realization of the human person entails, as an essential component, the expression and sharing of her vision of reality. To deny this right would mortify one of the deepest aspirations of the human person and a key factor for the progress of all civilizations.

¹ Cf. Mons. Silvano Tomasi, Intervention of the Holy See Delegation to the 12th Ordinary Session of the Human Rights Council on Religious Freedom, 30 September 2009.

² Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 73.

Respect for people and communities of persons, then, is not fulfilled by a mere “preservation” or formal “immunization” from criticism of the systems of values and principles, but by a substantive promotion and affirmation of fundamental rights and freedoms. Thus freedom of expression, including freedom to criticize, does not deny the rights of persons or communities of persons. It is rather an element of the rule of law which includes freedom of religion or belief. In this context, attention should focus on the people and communities of persons to see how their rights are protected *de facto*, beyond the preservation of a given system of values and principles, cultural or religious, whether majority or minority. Protecting the freedom of expression, however, is not an absolute obligation; normally it should be upheld for the good of society and also for the enjoyment of the freedom of religion and belief. When people are performing the social duty and right to inform, they are called to take into account principles of social ethics such as truth, solidarity, tolerance, fairness, principles that form the cornerstone of justice, equity, respect for privacy, and subsidiarity. Media too should remain at the service of the person.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.