



HOLY SEE
Address of Monsignor Anthony R. Frontiero
Official of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace

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Working Session 2:
Freedom of Thought, Conscience, Religion or Belief
Tuesday, 29 September 2009

Madam Moderator,

The Delegation of the Holy See wishes to express its appreciation for the opportunity to participate in this important discussion. Today's working session is a timely follow-up to the Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting held in Vienna from 9-10 July 2009. In her keynote address at that Meeting, Professor Ombretta Fumagalli Carulli rightly affirmed participating States' commitment to religious liberty, as outlined in Principle VII of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, as a resounding success, in that through its subsequent elaboration by the OSCE since 1975, it has become one of the most detailed and complete provisions pertaining to religion by any international human rights instrument. Nevertheless, as Professor Carulli also pointed out, there remain significant challenges to the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief that must be addressed.

It is clear that some of these challenges are age-old, and are manifested in acts of intolerance, violence, and discrimination, such as State interference in the ability of people to pray and worship, social hostility or stereotyping of religions, unnecessarily burdensome, restrictive or invasive registration requirements. Other challenges have arisen in more recent times, in increasingly relativistic societies, where efforts are being made to subordinate the freedom of religion, or to eradicate it altogether, sometimes in order to advance other agendas perceived as rights. Given these challenges, the Delegation of the Holy See would like to recall the centrality of religious freedom as evidenced in OSCE commitments, which upholds the fact that "the human person has a right to religious freedom, a right that has its foundation in the dignity and very nature of the human person, a right that reflects the fact that all men and women are endowed with reason and free will and therefore privileged to bear personal responsibility."¹ Religious freedom is a more fundamental and important right than the freedom of expression.

The OSCE commitment to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief clearly indicates that religious faith properly understood is not to be regarded with grudging suspicion, or as a bizarre quirk or quaint relic left over from a simpler past. Participating States are obliged to respect and to ensure to all individuals subject to their jurisdiction the right to freedom of religion or belief, recognizing religious freedom as pre-eminent among the fundamental rights and its defense as the "litmus test" for the respect of all other human rights. The purpose of OSCE commitment to

¹ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 2.

religious freedom is not to push religion to the margins in hope it will wither, but rather to shield and support it, so that it may flourish. There must be a true distinction between the State and religion, but religion must not be separated from social and cultural life. Religion is a vital and positive contribution to our societies wherever its freedom is respected. Indeed, the freedom of religion is seen as a fundamental, “natural” human right, which can and should co-exist with the political community’s obligation to secure public order and safety. The vision for freedom of thought set forth by the OSCE in Helsinki did not purport to exclude religious believers and values from public life and the civic conversation. Rather, it set out to protect everyone—believers and non-believers alike—against coercion in religious matters. It is a fundamental right that protects the transcendental dimension of the human being and, therefore, his or her dignity. To be sure, participating States’ commitment to freedom of religion protects our right to keep our faith private. It does not, however, require the privatization of faith, or require us to somehow disintegrate our lives before entering into the public square or taking up the responsibilities of citizenship. It rather promotes the contribution that religious freedom can offer to the public sphere.

Regarding the relationship between religious freedom and freedom of speech, there is no right “not to be offended” by the expression of deeply held religious convictions. To grant such a right would restrict the freedom of expression of individuals and groups, including religious individuals and groups, and constitute discrimination against those persons expressing a differing viewpoint through such convictions.

In 1975 in Helsinki, participating States made a strong statement, one that must be renewed in the face of contemporary challenges: religious freedom matters. These same participating States knew that unless our most sacred values are protected, including the profession and practice of faith, all our other freedoms—of the press, of speech, of conscience—are vulnerable. A listing of concrete recommendations will be submitted to the Secretariat along with this text.

Thank you, Madam Moderator.