



THE HOLY SEE

2011 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting

Working Session 15: Enhancing the implementation of OSCE

commitments regarding Roma and Sinti (continued):

Partnership between States and representatives of Roma and Sinti in the design and implementation of integration policies for Roma and Sinti.

Msgr. Florian Kolfhaus

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Mister Chairman,

1. In his Address on the occasion of a Meeting with Representatives of the Roma and Sinti from all over Europe (11 June 2011), Pope Benedict XVI said: *“Your history is complex and in some periods, painful. You are a people who in past centuries did not uphold nationalistic ideologies nor aspired to possess land or dominate other peoples. Being without a homeland, in spirit, you considered the entire continent your home. Nevertheless, serious and disturbing problems persist, such as the frequently difficult relations you have with the societies in which you live. Unfortunately through the centuries you have tasted the bitterness of inhospitality and at times, persecution, as occurred during the Second World War: thousands of women, men and children were barbarously killed in extermination camps. It was — as you say — the Porrájmos, the “Great Devouring”, a tragedy still little known and whose proportions are difficult to gauge, but which your families bear impressed in their hearts. During my visit to the concentration camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau on 28 May 2006, I prayed for the victims of persecution and bowed before the stone slab which commemorates your fallen, in the Romanes tongue. The European conscience cannot forget so much suffering! May your people never again be the object of harassment, rejection and contempt! On your part, always seek justice, legality and reconciliation and do your utmost never to be the cause of others’ suffering!”*

2. Unfortunately, even today, whenever Roma and Sinti people are mentioned, they are oftentimes referred to with diffidence, if not actual contempt. It is essential to observe that the Roma and Sinti culture was born and developed in this context of violent rejection and also withdrawal, an obligatory condition for its survival. This development created and maintained a distance and misunderstanding between the Roma and Sinti people and society which continues to stigmatize them, labelling them with a “bad reputation”, even more heavily accentuated by the political and juridical evolution of states.

3. The OSCE Action Plan on Roma and Sinti calls for enhanced access to quality education as a key to overcoming the vicious cycle of poverty and social

exclusion that so often affect people on the move, including Roma and Sinti. The Delegation of the Holy See commends the ODIHR, particularly as it continues to “reinforce the efforts of participating States and relevant OSCE institutions and structures aimed at ensuring that Roma and Sinti people are able to play a full and equal part in our societies, and at eradicating discrimination against them.” Such efforts have been met with a degree of success, including an increased awareness among Roma and Sinti themselves of their ability to influence their own circumstances through political participation and their own desire to attain literacy and professional formation. The dignity of Roma and Sinti populations must therefore be safeguarded, their families protected, their collective identity respected, initiatives for their development encouraged, and their rights defended.

4. In this context, it is especially important to encourage young Roma and Sinti to make a concrete and permanent commitment to improve the living conditions of their communities and to defend their dignity and rights. At the same time it is also necessary to remind them of their duty to take on all obligations that responsible participation in social and political life entails. In the third place, it is necessary that all people of good will and host communities unfold paths of trust and respect, of reciprocal understanding and forgiveness. Finally, states must adopt legislation that truly safeguards the rights of Roma and Sinti people and protects them from discrimination, racism and marginalization. In short, it is a matter of renewing the recommendation of open and constructive dialogue between the Roma and Sinti representatives and the indigenous communities.

5. Today there are many Roma and Sinti communities and individuals who have developed an awareness of the need and the desire to play a lead role in the decision-making and political processes that concern the human and social promotion of their races. Indeed, it is not easy to be able to speak of a constructive future for Roma and Sinti if they are not fully involved in the politics that concern their existence. They are convinced that there can be no effective international or national strategies for achieving this without the Roma and Sintis’ own participation in their preparation and implementation. This awareness is expressed in ways unlike those of the past; it is better suited to cultural and political exchanges with the majority society. Greater commitment should be devoted to training Roma and Sinti mediators who can serve as channels of communication between their own communities, the institutions and the majority population, or as support for their peers in pursuing a sound professional training and uprooting the diffidence present in their communities, as well as the negative prejudices that are widely persistent in our societies.

6. The Catholic Church explicitly recognizes the dignity and affirms the fundamental human rights of Roma and Sinti people. Thereby, she has contributed to a wider-ranging discovery of the problem and hence of the approach to it. We must not undervalue the important work of evangelization and catechesis that many people dedicated to the pastoral care of Roma and Sinti carry out every day. Not everyone may know that today there are about 100 priests, deacons, religious and sisters of Roma and Sinti origin.

7. In conclusion, Mister Chairman, If we are to speak of authentic acceptance — also in terms of integration and cultural encounter at the national and international levels — a great shift in mentalities is called for, also in the civil sector. Acceptance actually requires consideration of the identity and dignity of Roma and Sinti people and the consequent commitment to guaranteeing them a dignified life and respect for their basic rights. The international community has made considerable progress, thanks also to the contribution of the OSCE. Nevertheless strategic cooperation is as yet insufficient and a better use of the instruments available to the international community is certainly necessary.

Thank you, Mister Chairperson.