

Statement by the Delegation of the Holy See

Permanent Council, 25 March 2004

Current issues –Terrorism and Islam

Mr. Chairman,

The distinguished Ambassador of Turkey has drawn our attention to a tendency, especially in the mass media, to generalize or to equate terrorism and violence with Islam and to see this religion and Muslims in general as the cause of the violence and terror prevailing in today's world. He has also invited us to condemn groups or individuals responsible for acts of terrorism, irrespective of their race, colour or belief.

My Delegation wants to recall that the day after 11 September 2001, Pope John Paul II unequivocally condemned the terrorist attacks and declared that no motivation can be invoked to justify such acts, even less a religious one. Our Organization, with Decision N° 1 of the Bucharest Ministerial Council Meeting, has explicitly rejected the “identification of terrorism with any nationality or religion”.

In New York, Bali, Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, Casablanca, Istanbul, Moscow, almost daily in the Holy Land and most recently in Madrid, horrendous crimes have been committed which offend God and humanity and throw discredit on Islam.

However, the clash between the West and the extreme forces of Islam does not have any moral legitimacy and cannot be justified with manipulation of religion.

In this respect, the Pope not only condemned the unfounded exploitation of religion by terrorism, but also expressed respect for Islam, as in Kazakhstan, on 24 September 2001, when he declared: “In this Land of encounter and dialogue I wish to reaffirm the Catholic Church's respect for Islam, for authentic Islam; the Islam that prays, that is concerned for those in need. Recalling the errors of the past, including the most recent past, all believers ought to unite their efforts to ensure that God is never made the hostage of human ambitions. Hatred, fanaticism and terrorism profane the name of God and disfigure the true image of man”.

Another very important element for the Holy See is dialogue. On 2 December 2003, welcoming the Organization for Islamic Culture and Communications of Iran, the

Pope said: “Religion is called to build bridges between individuals, peoples and cultures, to be a sign of hope for humanity”.

For the Holy See, besides all the efforts already made, a political mobilization is needed to eliminate the root causes of injustice that may drive people to actions of desperation and violence. A commitment to programmes of education is likewise necessary: particular attention should be devoted to the contents of text-books and in educating the new generations. The question is not merely to uproot from them all possible remains of diffidence towards cultures that are different, but rather to arouse in them, through educational work, a culture of deep respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Mr. Chairman,

It cannot pass unnoticed that Islam today is in ferment. The majority of Islamic people desire to live in peace, but it is also true that radical factions make relations with Western countries difficult, especially on the social and cultural level. The resulting fears and racist feelings turn against immigrants making their integration even more difficult.

Islamic intellectuals may contribute to pacification and mutual esteem between Islam and the West, if they can show that Islam, which in the Middle Ages contributed to the scientific, artistic and philosophic progress of the West, does not lose its soul while opening to Western modernity. Furthermore, all strong condemnation of terrorism by Muslim religious leaders does significantly help in avoiding any misunderstanding about their religion and in distancing it from terrorism.

For its part, the Catholic Church, promoting - despite difficulties - the dialogue with Islam, intends to work for mutual appreciation and acceptance, in the name of God.

In this spirit, I wish to inform the Permanent Council that on 25 February 2004, the Joint Committee of the Permanent Committee of Al-Azhar for Dialogue with Monotheistic Religions and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue issued a common declaration and an appeal to all to avoid generalizations in judging people and to allocate responsibility only to those who have committed transgressions and not to blame innocent people for the misdeeds of others.

Thank you, Mr Chairman.