



THE HOLY SEE

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Preventing and Responding to Hate Crimes in the OSCE Area and Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians and Members of other Religions

Mr. Chairman,

The Delegation of the Holy See appreciates this opportunity to reaffirm the Astana Declaration's "call to address the denial of rights, exclusion and marginalization of Christians and members of other religions in our societies."¹ At the heart of this call is the inherent and equal dignity of every person, and it is from this conviction that the OSCE mandate springs. This Review Conference is an opportunity to take stock of the ways in which the mandate has been successfully realized, and where challenges remain to be overcome. To be sure, the commitment of participating States to respect the legitimate autonomy of the State and at the same time recognize the public dimension of religious freedom has been proclaimed and, in many cases, enshrined. Indeed, a healthy dialogue between the State and the Church, which are not rivals but partners, can encourage the integral development of the human person and harmony in society. Such a dialogue is necessary in order to respect the principles of an authentic pluralism and to build a true democracy, both at national and international levels.

Autonomy of the state does not mean that religion has to be excluded from public life and banned to the private sphere. Transparent and regular cooperation between civil authorities and religious groups, in the service of the common good, contributes to building up a true community based on participation rather than exclusion, and on respect rather than on contempt. In this context, it is important to recognize the religious dimension of a Nation's culture as a positive factor not only for its own identity, but also for social cohesion and integration. Indeed, Christians are a vital part of European civil societies, but unfortunately East and West of Vienna they are often affected by acts of discrimination and intolerance. That is what the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI clearly mentioned during his recent visit to the UK: "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."² (*Pope Benedict XVI, Address to British Society, Westminster Hall, 17 September 2010*).

¹ Cf. *Astana Declaration*, June 2010.

² *Pope Benedict XVI, Address to British Society, Westminster Hall, 17 September 2010*.

The lack of transparency and consistency in registration procedures, the unlawful confiscation of property of religious communities and individuals, violent attacks against religious buildings and vandalism of cemeteries, are all manifestations of prejudice and hatred that in some cases directly reflect State legislation and policies, or, in other cases, are the result of a lack of protective action from State authorities. Many of these incidents against Christians have been noted in the 2009 Annual Report of the OSCE/ODHIR on Hate Crimes, which shows an increase in these problems. Likewise, defamation campaigns against minority religious groups, including verbal harassment and threats against Christian missionaries and evangelists, as well as similar attacks upon even majority religious groups in the context of increasingly secularized societies, is cause for alarm and merit protection against intolerance and discrimination.

Among these concerns, the Delegation of the Holy See cannot help but mention the emergence of a new “hyper-secularist” censorship, and its attempt to drive even religiously-informed moral arguments out of public life, as a violation of basic norms of democratic civility. This has been witnessed, for example, in the incidents in Europe where Christian preachers and institutions have been prosecuted for their vocal and non-violent opposition to life-styles that are considered sinful and contrary to Christian doctrine. Likewise, parents have also been fined for refusing to allow their children to attend classes of so-called “anti-discrimination education,” which they perceive as indoctrination into lifestyles they do not approve of.³ Such incidents reveal a serious threat to religious freedom, not to mention the freedom of speech.

These episodes of intolerance, discrimination and violence all-too-often affect Christians in the OSCE region. Nevertheless, the Holy See also strongly denounced in two distinct statements during the High-Level Meeting of the OSCE on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination held in Astana this past June incidents of Anti-Semitism and of violence against Muslims. When such incidents occur, it is important to address them within the wider context of intolerance and restriction of the right to freedom of religion that unfortunately continue to exist. As the annotated agenda for this meeting clearly indicates, it is the “transcendent dimension of the human being” that has to be recognized and protected. Legislation that does not respect this important human dimension triggers social intolerance towards religious communities and influences public discourse. The result is the discrimination against individuals in the workplace and public services, the disruption or prohibition of worship, sometimes even in private homes, the obligation in ethic questions like abortion and euthanasia to act against the conscience, and, in general, the failure to appreciate the legitimate role of religion in our societies. In this context it is important to recall that “Religion is not a problem for legislators to solve, but a vital contributor to the national conversation”.⁴

Mr. Chairman, such incidents of hatred, intolerance and discrimination against Christians and members of other religions are threatening peace, security and social cohesion in the OSCE region. Therefore it is a central duty of our Organisation and its participating States not only to fight criminal acts of vandalism and violence, but to promote respect and understanding. This task does not belong to governments alone, but requires the good will and strong commitment of all. 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 that should be organized on a regular basis are positive and hopeful events. Indeed, they reveal the possibility of a constructive dialogue toward mutual understanding and respect.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

³ Cf. Dr. Massimo Introvigne, *Statement at OSCE High-Level Meeting on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination*, Astana, June 2010.

⁴ *Pope Benedict XVI, Address to British Society, Westminster Hall, 17 September 2010.*