

**CHRISTIANS IN THE OSCE REGION:  
FREEDOM, INTOLERANCE AND DISCRIMINATION**

*Rome - Angelicum*

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First of all I would like to express my gratitude to the Embassy of Ukraine to the Holy See and to the Ukrainian Chairmanship of the OSCE for the invitation to participate in this Conference. I would also like to present the best regards of the President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Cardinal Peter K. A. Turkson, to H. E. Ms Tetiana Izhevskaya, to the Secretary General of the Organization and to the other Speakers and distinguished guests.

1. As I use to introduce myself as the "dean" of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, I will start my presentation recalling a document written almost 35 years ago. I am referring to the personal **Letter addressed on September 1st 1980, by Pope John Paul II to the Heads of State of the nations who signed the Helsinki Final Act**. In doing so, I am not only satisfying a certain taste for History. In fact, actually, this document is of great help to focus on some very basic points that remain valid also today.

This letter was written by someone who had had the *experience* in his own country of deprivation of religious liberty and persecution perpetrated by totalitarian regimes. Against the Polish Jews, among whom, it is well known, John Paul II counted many friends, and, afterwards, against Catholics, Christians and all believers.

Thanks to this experience and in the path traced by the Document *Dignitatis humanae*, Pope John Paul II affirms that the starting point for acknowledging and respecting religious freedom is the *dignity of the human person*, who experiences the inner and indestructible exigency of acting freely "according to the imperative of his own conscience". This characteristic of being founded in the very human nature,

ensures that the *freedom of religion* continues to exist also in the faithful of other religions or in non believers.

A second important point underscored in the 1980 Letter is "the fact that religious freedom is expressed not only by internal and exclusively individual acts". "Professing" and "practicing a religious faith is expressed through a series of *visible acts, whether individual or collective*, private or public, producing communion with persons of the same faith"<sup>1</sup>.

Moreover, this Document refers to a series of closely interrelated *individual and community aspects*, private and public, necessary to actually enjoy religious freedom on a personal level and on a community level that deserve to be taken seriously into account also today.

To conclude this brief recall of Pope John Paul's initiative *vis à vis* the original core group of States of what is today the OSCE, I would quickly focus on two other points:

in the view of Pope John Paul, religious freedom is the most meaningful freedom and the right to religious freedom is considered "*the litmus test for the respect of all the other human rights*"<sup>2</sup>;

the importance of this very basic document shows also the esteem and the relevance attributed by the Holy See to the Helsinki Process before and to the *role of OSCE* today. As recognized, indeed, by the head of the Holy See Delegation at the High Level Conference held in Astana in June 2010, the Organization has shown to be a pioneering institution because long time ago it introduced the fight against the intolerance and the discrimination against Christians as one of the issues in which the States have to engage.

2. Unfortunately, despite the commitments undertaken by the member States, examples of **intolerance and discrimination against Christians have not diminished**, but rather increased also in various parts of the OSCE region.

As it was said by Pope Francis a few days ago, Christians, all over the world,

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1 John Paul II, *Personal Letter to the Heads of State and nations who signed the Helsinki Final Act*, 1 September 1980

2 John Paul II, *Address to Participants in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe*, 10 October 2003, n. 1.

are suffering persecution for their faith, "more now than in past centuries"<sup>3</sup>. In fact, they represent the 75 % of the victims of religious violence, corresponding to 300 millions people object of persecution<sup>4</sup>. Looking at the OSCE region, Christians are frequently reminded in public discourse, and increasingly even in courts, that they can believe whatever they like in their own homes or heads, and largely worship as they wish in their own private churches, but they simply cannot act on those beliefs in public. This situation is described by the Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI in his 2011 World Day of Peace Message: " It is painful to think that in some areas of the world it is impossible to profess one's religion freely except at the risk of life and personal liberty. In other areas we see more subtle and sophisticated forms of prejudice and hostility towards believers and religious symbols"<sup>5</sup>.

This second case reflects what is happening in Europe, where, however, the Churches have become so vital a part of the social fabric, forming, in centuries, citizens devoted to the common good. One cannot but observe that Europe has been hit by a kind of a pragmatism that systematically justifies compromise on essential human values, as if it were the inevitable acceptance of a lesser evil. And "when non-religious and relativistic tendencies are woven into this pragmatism, Christians as such are eventually denied the very right to enter into the public discussion, or their contribution is discredited as an attempt to preserve unjustified privileges"<sup>6</sup>.

3 **Several questions** arise before this phenomenon.

*What is the cause of the intolerance against Christians?* Card. Jean-Louis Tauran, the President of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, recently gave the following answer. Christians are accused to be a community and, consequently, to represent a "fifth column"; they are considered linked to a foreign power, the Pope, and, for this reason, not to be good citizens. Furthermore, and, this is the case for OSCE region, Christians are accused to cultivate a set of values that

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3 Pope Francis, *Angelus* 17 November 2013.

4 This datum has been given by the President of the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, Card. Jean-Louis Tauran, during his presentation to the Conference organized by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the publication of the Encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, 3-4 October 2013, cfr. <http://www.iustitiaetpax.va/content/giustiziaepace/it/eventi/convegni-realizzati/2013/pacem-in-terris--2--4-ottobre-2013.html>

5 Benedict XVI, *Message for the World Day of Peace 2011*, n. 1.

6 Benedict XVI, *Address to the COMECE*, 24 March 2007.

are no longer in fashion<sup>7</sup>.

*In what ways* the intolerance towards Christians is manifested? Apart of the more severe situations in various part of the world where it gets to the suppression of human lives, in the OSCE region we can observe a number of different ways in which this hostility is evinced.

There is, in general, the attempt to confine religion to the private sphere and to enact laws that upset the natural order of nature and of the human person.

Afterwards, intolerance against Christian speech can be seen. In recent years there has been a significant increase in incidents involving Christians who have been arrested and even prosecuted, for speaking on Christian issues. Even private conversations between citizens, including expression of opinions on social network, can become the grounds of a criminal complaint, or at least intolerance, in many European countries.

Discrimination in the access to higher education has also, sadly, to be noted.

But what is even more serious is the intolerance against Christians in the workplace. Throughout Europe there have been numerous instances of Christians being removed from workplace simply for seeking to act according to their conscience. Some of them are well known since they have come even before the European Court of Human Rights. " It is remarkable (and even paradoxical) that after centuries of struggling for freedom of conscience, some citizens of the OSCE region in the 21st century are now being forced to choose between two possible scenarios: they can abandon their faith and act against their conscience, or resist and face losing their livelihood"!<sup>8</sup>

Another sector in which the hostility to Christians is manifested is the widespread vandalism targeting churches and Christian cemeteries. Insulting or mocking graffiti, broken and burnt down windows, desecrated or devastated places of prayer and worship, damaged or smashed tombstones, in particular tombstones

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, n. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Statement of the Holy See as delivered by Bishop Mario Toso, at the *High Level Conference on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination*, Tirana, 21-22 May 2013.

crosses, have been noted throughout the OSCE region<sup>9</sup>.

The means of communication are also often expression of attitudes of intolerance and denigration regarding both Christians and the members of other religions.

One cannot, finally, fail to mention the very serious offenses brought in various environments not only to the symbols of Christian faith but also to priests, hierarchy and even to the head of the Catholic Church. We have just been witnesses of such offenses in this very country.

4. **What can be done** to better counteract this intolerance towards Christians in the OSCE region?

The Canadian Bishops suggest the following four actions to uphold the right of citizens to participate fully as believers: affirm the rightful role of religion in the public square; uphold a healthy relationship between Church and state; form conscience according to truth; and protect the right to conscientious objection<sup>10</sup>.

The Holy See Secretary of State, has reaffirmed in his intervention to the OSCE Summit of Heads of State and Governments held in Astana in 2010, that "the international community must fight intolerance and discrimination against Christians with the same determination with which it combats the hatred of members of other religious communities. Moreover - Card. Bertone stated - the States Parties to the OSCE are committed to doing so"<sup>11</sup>.

The Organization should therefore develop effective proposals to combat the forms of injustice of which Christians are victims. Promoting the celebration of an International Day against persecution and discrimination of Christians might prove to be an important sign that Governments of the State Parties are willing to deal with this serious issue.

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Permanent Council of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Freedom of Conscience and Religion*, April 2012.

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/secretariat\\_state/card-bertone/2010/documents/rc\\_seg-st\\_20101201\\_kazakhstan-osce\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/secretariat_state/card-bertone/2010/documents/rc_seg-st_20101201_kazakhstan-osce_en.html)

I would like to conclude my presentation quoting Pope Francis' *Apostolic Exhortation, Evangelii Gaudium*, which has just been issued. These words seem to me to be very meaningful and to assume the character of a warning: "A healthy pluralism, one which genuinely respects differences and values them as such, does not entail privatizing religions in an attempt to reduce them to the quiet obscurity of the individual's conscience or to relegate them to the enclosed precincts of churches, synagogues or mosques. This would represent, in effect, a new form of discrimination and authoritarianism. The respect due to the agnostic or non-believing minority should not be arbitrarily imposed in a way that silences the convictions of the believing majority or ignores the wealth of religious traditions. In the long run, this would feed resentment rather than tolerance and peace".

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