



**THE HOLY SEE**  
**2013 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting**  
*Working Session 7: Specifically selected topic:*  
*Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief*  
**Thursday, September 26, 2013**

Mr. Moderator,

Religious freedom is an individual, irrepressible, inalienable and inviolable right, with a private, and also a public dimension. It is individual, collective but also institutional. The respect for religious freedom, as protection of the transcendent dimension of the human person, allows the balanced development of all other freedoms and rights. Therefore, it is not only one of the fundamental human rights, it is pre-eminent among these rights as the Blessed Pope John Paul II recalled when he received the members of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly: *its (religious freedom's) defense is the litmus paper in order to check the compliance with all others; superior, because historically it was among the first human rights that has been claimed; at last, superior because other fundamental rights are uniquely related to it. Where religious freedom thrives, all other rights flourish and grow; when religious freedom is in danger, they all shake. Freedom of religion and conscience, in fact, is also the freedom to express freely one's own faith, one's own religious thinking, and to convert, to gather for religious reasons, to enter into marriage in accordance with one's faith, to give children religious education, to exercise works of religion and, thus, health care and social development.* (John Paul II, Speech addressed to participants in the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, 10 October 2003, no. 1.)

Mr. Moderator,

Since human beings think, act and communicate through their relationships with others, this freedom is expressed through concrete actions, whether individual or collective, both in religious communities and in society at large. Believers must therefore be allowed to play their part in formulating public policy and in contributing to society as a way of living their faith in daily practice. When this right is truly acknowledged, religious communities and institutions can operate freely for the betterment of society through initiatives in the social, charitable, health care, and educational sectors, which benefit all citizens, especially the poorest and most marginalized. Furthermore, religious freedom entails the right of religious communities to set the qualifications judged necessary for those running their own institutions.

Unfortunately, religious freedom is far from being effectively guaranteed everywhere. Sometimes it is denied for religious or ideological reasons. At other times, although it may be recognized in law, it is hindered in practice by a legal system or social order which enforces strict control, if not a monopoly, over society. Hence, whenever and wherever the right of freedom of conscience and religion is endangered, we are obliged to express our objections with clarity and courage.

Mr. Moderator,

Continuous attempts to limit expressions of religious faith to places of worship and to certain initiatives of social nature should be judged as a serious curtailment of a guaranteed right. To act and speak out publicly as a committed Christian in one's professional life has never been more necessary. When many would like to exclude religious believers from full participation in society's fundamental institutions is precisely the time to claim the right to participate. Religious believers should therefore be allowed to express their religious identity publicly, free from any pressure to hide or disguise it.

A legitimate secularity draws a distinction between religion and politics, between Church and state. But, unlike radical secularism, this distinction excludes neither religious beliefs nor communities from freely engaging in the public debate necessary for shaping civic life. Healthy secularists strive to keep the public square open to the transcendent, so that society's laws and institutions may be informed by the religious beliefs of its citizens.

In this context it is important to point out that the notion of separation of Church and State is increasingly being interpreted in a way that really means the exclusion of religion from society, or at least from public life. Properly understood, what Church-State separation means is that there cannot be a state imposed religion. Church and State were separated as much for the protection of the Churches as of the State. This is, unfortunately, often forgotten. Church-State separation most certainly does not mean that religious believers are to be barred from partaking in public life as religious believers.

Mr. Moderato,

Even though the commitments regarding the freedom of religion include the right to preach, educate, convert and fully participate in public life, restrictions to religious freedom, still prevailing in a number of countries, arise from a reductionist approach which limits religious freedom to individuals and denies it to communities. However, in fact, religious freedom is not limited to the individual dimension alone, but is attained within one's community and in society, in a way consistent with the relational being of the person and the public nature of religion. When freedom is limited in principle only to the individual dimension, it very often ends up being

denied also to individuals, if not by the law, then by private discrimination and persecution.

Besides being free from external coercion, everyone must be able freely to exercise the right to choose, profess, disseminate, and practice his or her own religion in private and in public.

The State's role is to be guardian and enforcer of the freedom of religion not only for individuals but also for religious communities. However, the secular State is often not neutral toward existing religious communities; not even in Western democracies where liberalism sometimes leads not so much to a neutral society but to one without a public presence of religion. But the State can and should preserve a religious identity provided it acts with impartiality and justice toward all religious groups in its territory, not by neutralizing them.

The Holy See continues to appeal for the recognition of the fundamental human right to religious freedom on the part of all states, and calls on them to respect, and if need be protect, religious minorities who, though bound by a different faith from the majority around them, aspire to live peacefully with their fellow citizens and participate fully in the civil and political life of the nation, to the benefit of all. As for the majority religious communities their rights also need to be protected from any unjust and unlawful restrictions, in particular when this is required by the common good.

Thank you, Mr. Moderator!