



Statement by His Excellency Archbishop Ivan Jurkovič, Permanent Observer of the Holy See  
to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva  
at the 40<sup>th</sup> Session of the Human Rights Council  
Item 3 – Report of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief

*Geneva, 5 March 2019*

Mr. President,

The Delegation of the Holy See thanks the Special Rapporteur for his Report on the freedom of religion or belief and its close relationship with the right of freedom of expression.

As conveyed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, every person, “endowed with reason and conscience”,<sup>1</sup> has the inherent right to express his/her highest dignity by seeking the truth and acting in conformity with it.<sup>2</sup>

Rooted in the depths of the human person, the right to religious freedom blossoms or withers together with all human rights, in such a way that respecting it can be considered the “litmus test of all other human rights”.<sup>3</sup>

Learning from experience, after the barbarous acts that had outraged the conscience of mankind in the last century, the international community agreed to put the freedom of religion and belief, together with the right of freedom of expression, as one of the centre pillars of the architecture of human rights.

Through recent decades, the international legal framework on this right has grown solidly and constantly, and it is mirrored in regional and national constitutions.

Notwithstanding these positive developments, recent reports on the abuse of this right are astonishing.

They are worrisome, in first place, for the predicament of victims who, in so many parts of the world, courageously face discrimination, intolerance, aggression, imprisonment and even death for staying faithful to their conscience.

They are worrisome as well for the future of those societies: when persons and communities are not allowed to live and celebrate in coherence with their deepest convictions

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<sup>1</sup> Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Art.1.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. Pope Francis, *Address to the participants at the International Conference on “Religious Freedom and the Global Clash of Values”*, 20 June 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Address to the participants in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe*, 10 October 2003.

the bonds that keep society together dissolve and the violation of rights often turns into a violent crisis. In a way, even the current crisis of multilateralism could depend, *inter alia*, on “the growing influence within the international Organizations of powers and interests’ groups that impose their own visions and ideas, sparking new forms of ideological colonization, often in disregard for the identity, dignity and sensitiveness of people”.<sup>4</sup>

The Holy See advocates the universal and unbiased application of this fundamental right. In particular, efforts offered by some Governments to assist persecuted Christians around the world, as well as the establishment of effective legal frameworks that respect this right, are appreciated.

Mr. President,

Among other dimensions that should be given due consideration, this right entails also the “freedom, at personal, civic or social levels, from any form of coercion to perform acts contrary to one’s faith...”<sup>5</sup>

Today, more and more often, people of different cultures, religions and beliefs live side by side. It is therefore vital and sensible to incorporate into legislation, with due prudence and wisdom, options that allow everyone, when faced with a problem of conscience, to act freely, in accordance with their deepest conviction.

And yet, “recent examples of increasing calls to restrict the right of conscientious objection show how some politicians and even some quarters of international agencies, forgetting their nature and acting without a mandate, are still uncomfortable with the right of freedom of conscience and belief.”<sup>6</sup>

In conclusion, Mr. President,

An effective protection of the right of freedom of religion and belief, together with the right of freedom of expression, would help vouchsafe an inclusive future, one that could lead toward a successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

As Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyib, have recently jointly declared: “Dialogue, understanding and the widespread promotion of a culture of tolerance, acceptance of others and of living together peacefully would contribute significantly to reducing many economic, social, political and environmental problems that weigh so heavily on a large part of humanity”.<sup>7</sup>

Thank you, Mr. President.

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<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, *Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See for the traditional exchange of New Year Greetings*, 7 January 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Message on the Value and Content of Freedom of Religion*, 14 November 1980.

<sup>6</sup> Archbishop R.P. Gallagher, *Statement at the High-Level Segment of the Human Rights Council*, 25 February 2019.

<sup>7</sup> His Holiness Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyib: *Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, Abu Dhabi, 4 February 2019.