



Statement by His Excellency Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva at the 21st Session of the Human Rights Council - Item 2: Interactive Dialogue with the High Commissioner for Human Rights
Geneva, 10 September 2012

Madam President,

Allow me to start by expressing my sincere gratitude to the High Commissioner for outlining in her intervention the human rights situations that require the Council's attention and the activities undertaken by her Office.

Madam President,

My Delegation wishes to thank the High Commissioner for her reference to the alarming situation of religious minorities in a number of regions and to the law against blasphemy which has recently been applied to Rimsha Masih. "This is a girl who can neither write nor read, who collected garbage for a living, and found the fragments of the book (*the sublime Coran*) that were among the rubbish."¹

The Holy See Delegation regrets this new episode and reiterates the rejection to any act of violence and discrimination in the name of religion or against any religious group: "*the discrimination to human beings for religious motives and beliefs constitutes an offense to human dignity and a negation of the principles of the United Nations Charter*"².

My Delegation welcomes the steps taken by the Pakistani government for the physical protection of the girl accused and her family, as well as for the demonstrated effort for the clarification and solution of the case. At the same time, we would like to take this opportunity to underline the decision of President Asif Ali Zardari to grant the pardon to Madam Asia Bibi, a Christian woman who was sentenced to death in November 2010 on the same grounds. At the same time, we acknowledge the

¹ Interview with Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, president of the Pontifical Council for interreligious dialogue, *Radiovaticana*, 25 August 2012 (http://en.radiovaticana.va/storico/2012/08/29/her_name_is_rimsha_masih/en1-616655)

² Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, proclaimed by the UN General Assembly on November 25, 1981 (resolution 36/55), Art. 3, "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have a religion or whatever belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching." Cfr. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Art. 18); cfr. International Covenant on civil and political Rights (Art. 18).

contributions and interest of the International Community and of human rights advocates in both cases.

My Delegation, without undermining the principle of nonintervention and respect for national sovereignty, declares, however, that “among the norms prejudicing the right of persons to religious freedom, particular mention must be made of the law against blasphemy in Pakistan: I once more encourage the leaders of that country to take the necessary steps to abrogate that law, all the more so because it is clear that it serves as a pretext for acts of injustice and violence against religious minorities.”³

Indeed, the existence of a civil law with religious character interpreted, sometimes, in a radical way by some intolerant groups, favors violent acts not only against Christians, but also against the religious minorities followers of the same religious denomination - object of the mentioned law - who are accused of heresy. Consequently, a separation between the political community and the religious community, a separation which benefits both communities, is required.

In order to combat religious intolerance, in theory and in practice, not only do we need the determination of the civil authorities, but also and primarily, that the religious leaders educate their believers to tolerance and mutual respect⁴. My Delegation acknowledges the efforts of many religious leaders in favor of an interreligious dialogue of peace and mutual tolerance.

In conclusion, the Holy See Delegation encourages “the accompaniment of the full safeguarding of religious freedom and other humans rights by programmes which, beginning in primary school and within the context of religious instruction, will educate everyone to respect their brothers and sisters in humanity.”⁵ In no few occasions the blind fundamentalism is the result of inadequate or little education, and the wrong association of certain decisions taken by the Western political communities to Christianity. Such interpretation does not reflect reality.

Thank you, Madam President.

³ Address of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI to the members of the Diplomatic Corps, Regia Hall, 10 January 2011.

⁴ *Ibid.*: “I exhort everyone, political and religious leaders and persons of every walk of life, to set out with determination on the path leading to authentic and lasting peace, a path which passes through respect for the right to religious freedom in all its fullness.”

⁵ *Ibid.*; *cfr.* General Assembly Resolution A/RES/66/137, United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training, 16 February 2012.