



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 6<sup>th</sup> Session of the Forum on Minority Issues  
*Geneva, 26 November 2013*

Madame Chairperson,

The topic of this Forum centred on guaranteeing the rights of religious minorities is both timely and necessary. Surveys related to religious minorities show that around the world, attainment of such rights has been blocked or even has been reduced. Currently, in 51% of all countries some limitation or restriction has been placed upon religious minorities and in 25% of these countries, some or all religious minorities are classified as illegal. Furthermore, in 24.2% of all countries, restrictions have been placed on building, leasing or repairing places of worship, while in 7.3% of countries all such activities are completely prohibited. Restrictions placed on religious schools are found in 18.6 % of all countries, and this phenomenon is increasing<sup>1</sup>. The latest Pew Forum Report on Religion states: “Globally, the share of countries with high or very high restriction on religion rose from 37% in the year ending in mid-2010 to 40% in 2011, a five-year high. Because some of the most restrictive countries are very populous, more than 5.1 billion people (74%) were living in countries with high government restrictions on religion or high social hostilities involving religion, the brunt of which often falls on religious minorities”.<sup>2</sup> Thus, in many parts of the world, religious minorities struggle merely to survive, and their future is tied to full respect of their rights. Therefore, in order to ensure the survival of religious minorities, we need to expand the discussion beyond the fundamental right to religious freedom, to that of guaranteeing all human rights of such groups. Recent events have shown how the identities of minorities are naturally linked to their sense of community, to the point that no peaceful political solution can be reached without addressing the religious dimension of the different minorities present in a country or region. The dramatic and horrendous civil war in Syria shows, beyond any doubt, that the respect and implementation of the rights of religious minorities are an essential precondition to peace and political stability.

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers taken from the dataset collected since 1990 by the Religion and State-Minorities Project (ARDA Project): <http://www.thearda.com/ras/>.

<sup>2</sup> Pew Forum, “Arab Spring Adds to Global Restrictions on Religion”, June 20, 2013, p.3.

Among religious minorities, Christian communities are under special threat<sup>3</sup>, especially in the Middle East, where they have existed for centuries and have developed a fair degree of peaceful coexistence, which now is deteriorating<sup>4</sup>. Members of the various Christian communities in Syria<sup>5</sup>, in Egypt<sup>6</sup>, in Iraq<sup>7</sup> and elsewhere are choosing exile over remaining in their ancestral lands where they are victims of untold violence, threats and an overall increase in discrimination<sup>8</sup>. The rights of these minorities are violated as a result of the lawlessness from wars, of prejudice, exclusion from public office, greed for their properties, and power plays. Without rapid changes, the presence of Christians in the Middle East, which has extended over the past two millennia, is no longer assured.

All religious minorities must be protected by respecting and upholding all the rights inherent in every person. In the experience of the Catholic communities, two approaches have proven effective: first, the recognition of the dignity of every person, and of her equal right and duty as any other citizen to participate in the social, cultural, political and economic life of the country; second, the implementation of practical steps, through education, dialogue and solidarity, that make possible productive coexistence.

The foundation for human relations in society and in any country that allows for practical initiatives of dialogue and friendship in today's pluralism of beliefs and lifestyles is the common dignity shared by all as well as the gift of reason: "In a globalized world marked by increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies, the great religions can serve as an important factor of unity and peace for the human family. On the basis of their religious convictions and their reasoned pursuit of the common good, their followers are called to give responsible expression to their commitment within a context of religious freedom. Amid the variety of religious cultures, there is a need to value those elements which foster civil coexistence, while rejecting whatever is contrary to the dignity of men and women."<sup>9</sup> A practical aspect of the recognition of this common dignity is provided by the common citizenship that requires the State to prevent any discrimination based on religious conviction and its expression in private or in public with others. The State cannot imprison groups of citizens through archaic legal structures that more often facilitate their exploitation and abuse rather than their protection. The elimination of all barriers to the full enjoyment of citizenship becomes an urgent responsibility. Acceptance of diverse religious beliefs and groups should be seen as a normal experience. At the same time, when collective expressions of belief are accepted, the individual must be free to participate in society on the basis of equality of opportunities, duties and rights. Citizenship becomes the criterion for equal participation possibilities in the management of society.

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<sup>3</sup> "Harassment of Christians continued to be reported in the largest number of countries (105)" in 2011. Christians were most subjected to government and social harassment in all countries. Pew Forum, "Arab Spring Adds to Global Restrictions on Religion", June 20, 2013, p.10 and 11.

<sup>4</sup> Pew Forum, "Religions on the Move. Religious Affiliation of International Migrants", March 8, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.mei.edu/content/migration-syrian-christians>.

<sup>6</sup> <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/2402/24/The-Copts-flee-Egypt.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> [http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/36/49/61/PDF/Chatelard\\_Iraqi\\_migration.pdf](http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/36/49/61/PDF/Chatelard_Iraqi_migration.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> See the "United States Commission on Religious Freedom" Countries Reports: <http://www.uscirf.gov/countries.html>

<sup>9</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Message of his Holiness for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace*, Rome, January 1, 2011.

The various recommendations of the Independent Expert on minority issues<sup>10</sup> are excellent, concrete and have all our support. Experience, however, indicates that such recommendations presuppose a modern, Western, secular State. On the other hand, the rights of religious minorities are highly dependent of the way States understand secularity and translate it into positive rights and policies. If the recommendations are to be more realistic the Forum should dedicate special attention to this issue. In line with the request for presentation of good practices that can help the protection of religious minorities, the Catholic experience has embraced a variety of initiatives:

- Promotion of interreligious meetings at the international and national level;
- Initiation of dialogue with specific religious communities;
- Acknowledgement and exchange, on a regular basis, of messages and good wishes for specific feasts observed by different religious communities as on the occasion of Ramadan, Purim, etc.;
- Education of millions of young people in Catholic schools that includes teaching mutual respect and rejection of manuals, textbooks, teaching, that promote hate;
- Encouragement, through the voice of the Pope, of public opinion that favours mutual respect and the formulation of just policies related to religious minorities.
- Channelling of aid and services through Catholic programs open to serving all religious groups, since any poor or needy person is assisted without regard to race, language, religion or sex.

In conclusion, Madame Chairperson, it is well-known that the international community has developed a significant number of instruments to guard against discrimination toward any religious group and to guide people toward the path of effective protection of persons and minorities professing a specific belief. Good practices are not lacking. Certainly, the theme of the Forum is correct as it affirms that the rights of religious minorities extend beyond religious freedom, while, at the same time, that freedom remains of central importance to the life and identity of religious communities. The political will to recognize the equal human dignity and rights of all persons opens the way to a future without discrimination and persecution for religious people and communities and to a genuine and stable democracy.

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<sup>10</sup> U.N. Human Rights Council. Forum on Minority Issues. Sixth Session. Note by the Independent Expert on minority issues, Rita Izsak, on guaranteeing the rights of religious minorities. 3 October 2013 A/HRC/FMI/2013/2