



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 34th Session of the Human Rights Council
Item 3 – Report of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief

Geneva, 6 March 2017

Mr. President,

The Holy See welcomes the first report of the new Special Rapporteur, His Excellency, Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, and hopes that his future work will be most effective in ensuring the fundamental human right of freedom of religion or belief for all.

As noted by the Special Rapporteur, at the present time “the global pushback on human rights has generally deepened the worldwide crisis of the right to freedom of religion or belief.”¹ In too many countries, Christians and other members of religious communities are being denied this fundamental human right.

Similar conclusions also are drawn in the 2016 Report of the Catholic-inspired humanitarian organization “Church in Need”, underscoring that at present there are millions of people, throughout the world, who cannot enjoy religious freedom. Moreover, this phenomenon represents a strong defeat for the protection of human rights and, in particular, of human rights defenders. As the Special Rapporteur explains, “intimidation or discrimination against religious groups by government actors and non-State actors has, and continues to be, prevalent in many countries.”²

The commitment of the Holy See “to protect, to defend, to promote religious freedom”, the “first human right”,³ for all people, regardless of their respective religion or belief, remains both strong and determined. The Holy See firmly believes that every human person has a “transcendent dignity [that]... must be acknowledged and protected as a universal good, indispensable for the building of a society directed to human fulfilment.”⁴ In accord with such dignity, every person is endowed with fundamental human rights, which must be protected at both the domestic and the international levels.

Mr. President,

As noted by the Special Rapporteur, we must acknowledge the increasing importance of not only guaranteeing the fundamental human right of freedom of religion or belief as a personal conviction, but also of respecting the external expressions, alone or in association

¹ Report of the Special Rapporteur, *Freedom of Religion or Belief*, A/HRC/34/50, n.34.

² Ibid.

³ Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Secretary of State of His Holiness, *World Economic Forum*, Davos, 2017.

⁴ Cfr., Pope Benedict XVI, *Message of Peace*, 2011, n.2.

with others, of one's religious identity. As we all know, such freedom is not recognized in many parts of the world, where an open profession of respective religious convictions is forbidden or is severely limited.

It is particularly regrettable that many religious communities, Christians included, are exposed to violence and to significant violations and abuses of their human rights and dignity, because of their religious convictions, including mass murder, deportation, expulsion from homes and settlements, sexual violence and sexual slavery. In the midst of this dramatic situation, the international community and individual States should put aside any political, economic, strategic or religious interests and cooperate to alleviate the sufferings of the victims of such crimes.

Mr. President,

The Holy See also is concerned about the persistent tendency, at least in certain parts of the world, to relegate religious practice, only to the private sphere, thus minimizing the importance of expressions of religious belief in the wider social context. Therefore, it is very important to clarify the meaning of the secular principle of "laicity", whose achievement cannot ever be confused with certain tendencies to exclude the doctrine and religious practices from the life of societies. Furthermore, attempts to alienate spiritual practice and belief in the divine from today's world inevitably leads to a profane and materialistic vision of the human person and of the human family⁵. Only full respect of religious freedom can guarantee the holistic development of every human person and all of society.

Religious freedom appears to be under constant pressure, from many sides, especially in situations of social unrest and of armed conflict. Indeed, too many social forces and stakeholders seem determined to reduce the content and range of action by religious adherents in today's society. It is therefore important that we commit ourselves to positive examples and share best practices in order to promote more inclusive societies.

Thus, my Delegation encourages the Special Rapporteur to investigate and highlight these positive examples in order to demonstrate the "links between respect for the right to freedom of religion or belief and prospects for social harmony, economic prosperity and political stability."⁶

Thank you, Mr. President.

⁵ Cfr., Joint Declaration by Pope Francis and the Catholicos Karekin II, 27 June 2016.

⁶ Report of the Special Rapporteur, *Freedom of Religion or Belief*, A/HRC/34/50, n. 21.