



**Remarks of His Excellency Archbishop Fortunatus Nwachukwu,
Apostolic Nuncio and Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations and
Specialized Agencies in Geneva, at the Side-Event in the margins of
the 52nd Regular Session of the Human Rights Council**

“Hard to Believe”: Trends in Restrictions on Religious Conversion
8 March 2023

Your Excellencies,
Madam Special Rapporteur,
Distinguished Panelists,
Dear Friends,

I wish to begin by expressing my gratitude to the organizers for the invitation to participate in this discussion on the crucial issue of the freedom of religion or belief. The importance of this fundamental right is universally recognized in numerous international instruments, including, first and foremost, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR).

These instruments appropriately distinguish between the unalienable and inviolate right to hold certain beliefs, free from coercion, and the right to *manifest* one’s religious convictions and beliefs. However, all too frequently, only the second aspect of the right to religious freedom – namely, its external manifestation – is taken into account. In this context, the scope of religious freedom is considered primarily from the perspective of the ability to engage in acts of worship, and to express one’s convictions privately, reducing it to freedom of expression and of peaceful assembly. Such an approach empties the right to religious freedom of its specific content and scope and risks to denature this fundamental freedom.

This unfortunate reality is particularly relevant for the topic of today’s Panel: *“Hard to Believe”: Trends in Restrictions on Religious Conversion*. Indeed, while international law does recognize, in certain circumstances, the right of States to limit the manifestation of one’s religion or beliefs as prescribed by law and necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms

of others, no public authority has such a right with regard to the *adoption* of and *adherence* to religious beliefs. As a result, any restriction, coercion, limitation or intimidation with regard to converting to or from a religion is explicitly prohibited by international law.

Dear Friends,

I would suggest that the confusion that reigns in the protection and promotion of the right to freedom of religion or belief is indicative of a deeper problem that faces the international community's approach to human rights in general. All too frequently, human rights are considered as a collection of prerogatives, more or less agreed upon by the international community and therefore bestowed upon individuals and groups based on that international consensus. From this perspective, only those "concessions" that are agreed upon, and then implemented into national legislation, are considered "rights". If there is no consensus, or if a given State –hiding behind the pretext of national sovereignty – chooses not to implement those "rights" into its national legislation, those "rights" do not exist.

This approach could be described as an *externalization* of human rights. In other words, whenever one accords any authority with the role of arbitrating which right applies to whom, the fundamental basis of human rights is overturned, and the exercise of that authority runs the risk of becoming arbitrary and dictatorial.

One should ask, "is that not exactly what international instruments purport to do?" I would respond that, when understood properly, the answer is a resounding "no".

The *incipit* of the UDHR clearly precludes such an interpretation. In it, we read that the "*recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world*". This affirmation is confirmed, once again, in its first article, "*All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.*"

This year marks the 75th Anniversary of the adoption of this seminal international document on human rights, and we would do well to remember its ethical foundations. As the abovementioned quotations clearly demonstrate, human rights are anchored in human dignity. Without respect for human dignity, there is no

respect for human rights. We can equally say that any approach to human rights that is not rooted in human dignity, cannot be considered authentic. International human rights instruments and mechanisms are therefore incapable of “creating” rights. Instead, their role and scope is to *recognize* those inalienable, universal, fundamental, eternal and objective values that are the natural consequence of our common human dignity. Their task is then to implement measures to ensure the adequate and appropriate protection and promotion of these self-evident rights at all levels.

In order to ensure that human rights, therefore, are firmly rooted in our common human dignity, it is worthwhile to reflect briefly on the meaning of human dignity. Allow me to mention three aspects, all of which have been recognized as specific to the human person, even from the days of Aristotle: intellect, free will and social nature. Our human intellect allows us to reason, contemplate and recognize the truth. Our free will enables us to accept the truth, once it is recognized. And our social nature implies that we have a duty to respect the intellect and free will of our fellow human beings in their search for the truth, with a view to promoting the common good.

In this way, when rooted in the dignity of the human person, rights are not simply a set of “licenses” accorded to individuals and groups, based on current social norms. They are, rather, the fruit of the recognition of our common human nature, our capacity to seek human flourishing individually and collectively, and of the incumbent duty to allow our fellow brothers and sisters to do the same.

When human dignity is understood from this perspective, it becomes immediately clear why the freedom of religion or belief must never be reduced to the external manifestation of those beliefs. To deny any person the full freedom to seek the truth, for which religion is fundamental, or to espouse it freely, including free from coercion, or to proclaim it in thought, word and deed, would be to deny the very intellect, free will and social nature that underpin our common human dignity. This is all the more the case with regard to religious beliefs and truths, which touch on our transcendental relationship with the Almighty, and therefore touch the most intimate aspects of our existence. This is why restrictions on religious conversion, or coercion to convert to a religion other than one that corresponds to a person’s beliefs, is not only a violation of a human right, but a direct attack on our ability to be human and an affront to our God given dignity.

Dear friends,

Before closing, I would like to make one final distinction that is relevant to our discussion. While it is thoroughly illegitimate to coerce or restrict a person in their adoption of certain religious beliefs, the same cannot be said with regard to a respectful and thoughtful conversation about religious values and truths. On the contrary, since our common human dignity entails intellect and free will, such fraternal dialogue – in a common pursuit of the truth – can only help the flourishing of the human person and promote the common good. An excellent example of the positive role of such dialogue can be seen in the *Document on Human Fraternity*, jointly signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, in Abu Dhabi on 4 February 2019. Amongst other things, the document reiterates, *“The firm conviction that authentic teachings of religions invite us to remain rooted in the values of peace; to defend the values of mutual understanding, human fraternity and harmonious coexistence; to re-establish wisdom, justice and love; and to reawaken religious awareness among young people so that future generations may be protected from the realm of materialistic thinking and from dangerous policies of unbridled greed and indifference that are based on the law of force and not on the force of laws.”*¹

Let us, therefore, eschew any aggressive, unilateral, or coercive imposition of religious values on one another, and rather grow in our appreciation for one another, in a respectful and mutual pursuit of the common good.

Thank you for your attention.

¹ Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, 4 February 2019.