



Statement of H.E. Archbishop Ettore Balestrero, Apostolic Nuncio
Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations
and Other International Organizations in Geneva
at the 54th Regular Session of the Human Rights Council
**Item 9: Interactive Dialogue with the High Commissioner on his oral update on drivers,
root causes and human rights impacts of religious hatred constituting incitement to
discrimination, hostility or violence**
Geneva, 5 October 2023

Mr. President,

The Holy See thanks the High Commissioner for his update and takes this opportunity to reiterate its grave concern at the serious and systematic nature of the violence and human rights violations perpetrated against Christians, Jews, Muslims and members of other religions.

The recent appalling incidents involving the burning of the Quran are just the tip of the iceberg. Pope Francis has strongly condemned such appalling acts, because “*Any book considered sacred by its people must be respected out of respect for its believers, and freedom of expression must never be used as an excuse to despise others, and to allow this, must be rejected and condemned.*”¹

Sadly, today, members of all religious groups are experiencing rampant intolerance and discrimination against them because of their religious beliefs. Statistics show that Christians are the most persecuted group of believers in the world today, with an estimated “*one out of every seven Christians [who] experience persecution*”².

It is also extremely worrying that “*we continue to live in a world where people are persecuted simply for professing their faith in public*”³. Regrettably, such heinous acts of violence and hostility often take place amid indifference.

My Delegation would like to stress that religious freedom has an individual dimension, which should be protected and guaranteed for all human beings, but it also has a collective and an institutional dimension, which should equally be protected and guaranteed. Unfortunately, we can still find national laws and policies, that severely restrict the freedoms of minority religious groups and allow their discrimination and harassment to go unpunished. “*At the same time, we should not overlook the fact that violence and acts of discrimination against Christians are also increasing in countries where the latter are not a minority.*”⁴

Mr. President,

¹ Pope Francis, Interview published in *Al-Itihad*, 3 July 2023; cf. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2023-07/pope-decries-the-burning-of-the-quran-in-sweden.html>.

² Pope Francis, Address to Members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, 9 January 2023.

³ H.E. Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher, Secretary for Relations with States and International Organizations, Statement at the General Debate of the 78th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, 26 September 2023.

⁴ Pope Francis, Address to Members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, 9 January 2023.

Religious discrimination and intolerance can even be disguised as freedom of expression or justified on the basis of a misguided notion of tolerance that nonetheless fails to tolerate those who profess different principles while though living peacefully according to their faith.

The Holy See affirms that the rights to freedom of religion and freedom of expression, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments, are mutually reinforcing and must be protected. Both, however, must be exercised with full respect for the inherent dignity of every human person.

Tragically, however, the precious gift of freedom of expression is often misused if not abused to perpetrate acts of religious intolerance, generating further hatred and polarization, while undermining peaceful coexistence.

On the other hand, religion must never be instrumentalized to foment violence. Indeed, *“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”*⁵. The name of God must never be used *“to justify acts of murder, exile, terrorism and oppression”*⁶.

Mr. President,

In conclusion, allow me to echo the heartfelt appeal of Pope Francis: *“Today we need builders of peace, not makers of weapons; today we need builders of peace, not instigators of conflict; we need firefighters, not arsonists; we need advocates of reconciliation, not people who threaten destruction.”*⁷

Thank you, Mr. President.

⁵ Declaration on “Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together”, co-authored by His Holiness Pope Francis and His Eminence the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Sheikh Ahmed El Tayeb, Abu Dhabi, 4 February 2019.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Interview published in *Al-Itihad*, 3 July 2023; cf. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2023-07/pope-decries-the-burning-of-the-quran-in-sweden.html>.