



HOLY SEE

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**Statement by H.E. Archbishop Celestino Migliore
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61st session of the UN General Assembly

**Before the Third Committee, on item 67 (b):
Promotion and protection of human rights:
Human rights questions,
including alternative approaches for improving
the effective enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms**

New York, 27 October 2006

Mr Chairman,

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate you on your election and leadership of this Committee and thank the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief for her report on the elimination of all forms of religious intolerance.

Three of the themes considered during her June 2006 visit to the Vatican merit particular attention, namely, the coexistence of different religions and religious communities, the propagation of religion, including the sensitive issue of proselytism and the relationship between freedom of expression and religion. My delegation shares the Special Rapporteur's position that the need for interreligious dialogue at all levels is of crucial importance not only for resolving disputes, but also for fostering peaceful coexistence that enables all religions to live side by side and in mutual respect.

As we celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the adoption of the 1981 Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, my delegation is seriously concerned that freedom of religion or belief does not exist for individuals and communities, especially among religious minorities, in many parts of the world. We are also concerned that the high level of religious intolerance in some countries is leading to an alarming degree of polarization and discrimination. We share a grave duty to work together to reverse this trend.

While religious tolerance is sometimes characterized as accepting or permitting those religious beliefs and practices which disagree with one's own, the time has come to move beyond this type of religious tolerance, and to apply instead the principles of authentic religious freedom.

Religious freedom is the right to believe, worship, propose and witness to one's faith. It grants the opportunity and creates the occasions for people to profess freely the tenets of their faith. Furthermore, it includes the right to change one's religion and to associate freely with others in order to express one's religious convictions. Religious tolerance is simply a starting point, a basis for universal religious freedom and there cannot be full religious tolerance without an effective recognition of religious freedom.

We know well that, historically, tolerance has been a contentious issue among believers of different faiths. However, we have come to a turning point in history which demands more of us, including a commitment to interreligious dialogue. At the same time, my delegation is increasingly convinced of the indispensable importance of reciprocity, which, by its very nature, is apt to ensure the free exercise of religion in all societies.

The Holy See continues to be concerned by a number of situations where the existence of enacted or proposed legislative and administrative measures for placing limits on the practice, observance or propagation of religion are a reality. Likewise, the Holy See is concerned with those situations where religion or freedom of religion is used as a pretext or a justification for violating other human rights.

Furthermore, there appears to exist a recurring case of intolerance when group interests or power struggles seek to prevent religious communities from enlightening consciences and thus enabling them to act freely and responsibly, according to the true demands of justice. Likewise, it would be intolerant to denigrate religious communities and exclude them from public debate and cooperation just because they do not agree with options nor conform to practices that are contrary to human dignity.

National and global decision making, legal and political systems, and all people of good will must cooperate to ensure that diverse religious expressions are not restricted or silenced. Every individual and group must be free from coercion and no one should be forced to act in a manner contrary to his or her beliefs, whether in private or public, whether alone or in association with others. It is important here to pay particular attention to the needs of the weakest groups, including women, children, refugees, religious minorities and persons deprived of their liberty. The disturbing signs of religious intolerance, which have troubled some regions and nations, at times affecting even majority religious groups, are much to be regretted.

Part of the founding ethos of the UN is the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Therefore, it is this Assembly's duty to continue to provide the leadership that ensures and protects these fundamental rights and fosters full religious freedom in every land.

In our diverse and ever-changing world, religion is more than an internal matter of thought and conscience. It has the potential to bind us together as equal and valuable members of the human family. We cannot overlook the role that religion plays in feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, healing the sick and visiting the imprisoned. Nor should we underestimate its power, especially in the midst of conflict and division, to turn our minds to thoughts of peace, to enable enemies to speak to one another, to foster those who were estranged to join hands in friendship, and have nations seek the way to peace together. Religion is a vital force for good, for harmony and for peace among all peoples, especially in troubled times.

Thank you, Mr Chairman.