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Intervention by the Secretary for Relations with States at the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly on “Freedom from Persecution: Christian Religious Minorities, Religious Pluralism in Danger

The following is the intervention pronounced yesterday in New York by H.E. Msgr. Paul Richard Gallagher, secretary for Relations with States, head of the Holy See Delegation, at the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly on the theme *Freedom from Persecution: Christian Religious Minorities, Religious Pluralism in Danger*.

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Intervention by H.E. Paul Richard Gallagher

Your Excellency, the Foreign Minister of Hungary,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank Hungary for inviting me to speak at this high-level discussion on the “Freedom from Persecution: Christian Religious Minorities, Religious Pluralism in Danger.”

It is an indisputable historical fact that Christianity’s beginning was in the Middle East. Yet the hard truth is that the ancient Christian communities are struggling in the region of Christianity’s birth. The Christian population in the Middle East has decreased dramatically in recent years and, in some places, it may not survive no matter how deep its roots are.

Christians have always co-existed with Muslims and have been part of the fabric of the Middle East. Such a self-evident fact serves to remind the world once more that the Christians have every right to live in peace and freedom. Indeed, across two millennia, the Christian communities in the Middle East have actively contributed to their respective societies. They were instrumental in the protection and promotion of ancient cultures in the region. The Syriac community still speaks and prays Aramaic, the language of Jesus. The Christian diaspora

from the Middle East has spread its culture worldwide. During long periods in history, Christians and Muslims have lived peacefully side by side, in spite of sporadic cases of violence based on a political manipulation of religion or ethnicity.

In recent decades, however, something shattered this relatively harmonious co-existence. Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities in the Middle East have endured difficulties, pressures, discrimination and even deadly persecution. As the Chaldean Patriarch testified before the Security Council in May 2015, "The Islamic extremist groups refuse to live with non-Muslims. They are persecuting and uprooting them from their homes and destroying all traces of their history," an immense and irreplaceable patrimony of humanity.

This is not only a religious question; this is an issue of fundamental human rights. While for Christians those who were killed for the faith are martyrs, for all people of faith or no faith they were victims of the most outrageous human rights violations. These heinous crimes demand therefore a response not only from Christians and other people of faith; before the law, they demand a response from public authorities, whose duty is to protect their people and provide them space in which to flourish, create harmonious societies and be law-abiding citizens.

"Protection" is a primary responsibility of States toward all and every one of its citizens regardless of race, religion or ethnicity. During the first part of the sixteenth century, when the concept of national sovereign States was emerging, the Spanish Friar Francisco de Vitoria described the responsibility of governors to protect their citizens as an aspect of natural reason shared by all nations, and a rule for an "international" order whose task is to regulate relations between peoples. The United Nations rests on this bedrock principle.

"Protection" becomes a more specific and urgent responsibility for a State when parts of the population, simply by the fact of their being minorities, targeted for persecution, are subjected to all forms of physical violence, subjugation, false detention, expropriation of property, enslavement, forced exile, murder, ethnic cleansing and other crimes against humanity.

The duty to defend does not only refer to the "responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity," as defined in the 2005 World Summit Outcome,[1] but from all violations of their fundamental human rights and of their rights as citizens.

Violations of the religious rights of minorities extend, in fact, beyond the most egregious violations like genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity; they also include various forms of discrimination built into legal and administrative structures, resulting in bureaucratic harassment and heavy administrative burdens with regard to building houses of worship and schools.

Such protection therefore must extend beyond merely preventing the intended or actual annihilation of minorities, but must include examining and addressing the root causes of discrimination and persecution against them. In this regard, I would like to mention briefly three elements, which I consider as essential in our long-term efforts to address the root causes of persecution of and discrimination against religious minorities, indeed, all minorities.

First, I believe that the key to protecting religious or ethnic minorities from persecution is full respect of the rule of law and full equality of all before the law based on the principle of citizenship, regardless of religious, racial or ethnic differences. Laws must unequivocally guarantee the fundamental rights of all citizens without exception, including the right to religious freedom. Even in places where the law gives a special status to a particular religion, a law that deprives an individual or a community of fundamental freedoms is not a just law.

This December, we mark the seventieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration establishes that "all are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law" (Art. 7). It guarantees "freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance" (Art. 18). These fundamental freedoms must apply to all peoples in every corner of the globe: in Iraq, Syria or Libya, just as much

as in the United States, Italy or Japan. Equality for all before the law must be an essential element in our advocacy in favour of the persecuted Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities —indeed, of every person — in the Middle East.

Second, the recent savagery against religious or ethnic minorities has been perpetrated by violent non-state actors operating in States with weak institutions. The international community has a grave responsibility in the face of such atrocities that continue even as we speak. By universally adopting the 2005 World Summit Outcome, the international community committed itself to assisting States to exercise this responsibility to protect, to helping them build capacity to safeguard their populations from atrocity crimes, and to taking collective action in a timely and decisive manner.[2] The international community has been failing to act on this commitment. We must shake it from its inertia and divisions.

Third, if we have failed to guard the religious and ethnic minorities from having been subjected to the most egregious violations of their fundamental human rights, then we must work to restore their rights. Justice for survivors demands not only justice against the perpetrators of the crimes; it also demands that we seek to return to them, as much as possible, what had been taken from them. This means ensuring the conditions for religious and ethnic minorities to return to their places of origin and live in dignity and safety, with the basic social, economic and political frameworks necessary to ensure community cohesion. It is not enough to rebuild homes, schools and houses of worship, which is a crucial step, as is happening in various towns in the Nineveh Plain thanks to the generosity of governments like Hungary or charitable organizations like Aid to the Church in Need or the Knights of Columbus. It is also imperative to rebuild society by laying the foundations for peaceful coexistence on the basis of citizenship.

This list is far from exhaustive, but achieving them would already go a long way in protecting the persecuted religious and ethnic minorities in the Middle East and beyond.

I wish to conclude by recalling the grave and specific responsibility of religious leaders to confront and condemn the abuse of religious belief and sentiment to justify terrorism and violence against believers of other religions. They must teach a firm and clear 'No!' to every form of violence, vengeance and hatred carried out in the name of religion or in the name of God, and an equally firm and clear "Yes!" to the right of every person in conscience to follow God as he or she believes that God is summoning him or her to worship and follow him. If the fundamental freedom of conscience and belief were respected, we would not need any "special" or "specific protection" for anyone.

Thank you for your kind attention.

[1] 2005 World Summit Outcome, 138-139.

[2] 2005 World Summit Outcome, 138-139.
