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Intervention of the under-secretary for Relations with States on the occasion of the launch, in Rome, of the “Persecution of Christians Review”

The following is the intervention by Msgr. Antoine Camilleri, under-secretary for Relations with States, at the launch yesterday of the *Persecution of Christians Review*, held at the Basilica of Saint Bartholomew on the Island in Rome:

Intervention by Msgr. Antoine Camilleri

Your Eminence,
Your Excellencies,
Distinguished panellists,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am grateful for the invitation and pleased to have this opportunity to offer some brief remarks on the alarming reality of the persecution of Christians, an issue that, as the Interim Report prepared by The Right Reverend Philip Mountstephen indicates, is becoming ever more widespread and urgent. Today's initiative is a tangible example of the growing concern over the problem of discrimination and persecution because of religious belief and of the determination to help bring greater awareness in particular to the tragic situations of Christians in many parts of the world, and to strive to overcome what Pope Francis has described as a “sort of genocide caused by general and collective indifference”.[1]

It is fitting, although perhaps not so much in a felicitous way, that we are holding the *Rome Launch of the Persecution of Christians Review* in this Basilica named in honour of the Apostle Bartholomew who, as you may know, was himself a victim of religious persecution, suffering martyrdom on account of his Christian faith by, according to legend, being flayed and then beheaded.

At the outset, I would like to underscore that unjust discrimination, violence and persecution of any innocent human being, and especially on the basis of religion and belief, is morally unacceptable and reprehensible. Over

the past several years, we have witnessed attacks upon individuals and groups of various religious backgrounds by terrorists, extremist groups and religious fanatics who have no respect for the lives of those who have beliefs different from their own. Given this tragic reality, we cannot ignore the fact that religious persecution in the broader context is experienced by a variety of religious communities, groups and individuals in many parts of the world. Sadly, most of these crimes seem to continue with impunity and with little more than a shameful blush from the international community and very often with scarce attention being given to it.

Naturally, for the Holy See, the disturbing reality of religious persecution is of grave concern not only for those Christians that suffer, but also for members of any religious conviction. Such persecution is an assault on the most fundamental freedom of the human person, namely, the ability to adhere freely, and without fear of persecution, to a religion. To be sure, the plight of Christians suffering torture and death is particularly distressing for those of us who also share with them a deep spiritual bond.

Although international law stipulates that States bear the primary duty for protecting their own citizens, it is also crucial to recognize the important responsibility of religious leaders to promote peaceful coexistence through mutual dialogue and understanding, so that their communities and their followers respect those of different religious backgrounds rather than foment aggression and violence. A good example of such an active and vocal collaboration among religious leaders may be found in the joint declaration signed in Abu Dhabi this past 4 February by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, on "Human Fraternity". One of the many notable points elaborated in that text may provide us with a very precise - surgically precise, if I may say - glimpse into the present reality of persecution based on religion and belief.

Together Pope Francis and the Grand Imam "resolutely declare that religions must never incite war, hateful attitudes, hostility and extremism, nor must they incite violence or the shedding of blood. These tragic realities are the consequence of a deviation from religious teachings. *They result from a political manipulation of religions and from interpretations made by religious groups who, in the course of history, have taken advantage of the power of religious sentiment in the hearts of men and women in order to make them act in a way that has nothing to do with the truth of religion. This is done for the purpose of achieving objectives that are political, economic, worldly and short-sighted*" [2]

The insight into the "political manipulation of religions" is something to which we should give special consideration. Such a subversion should not be understood only as referring to non-State actors, namely religious extremists or terrorists, who exploit or "politicize" religion in order to further their ideologies. Governments must ask themselves to what extent are they really committed to defending religious freedom and to combatting persecution based on religion and belief. How many refrain from condoning such acts, or even condemn them, yet still "collaborate" politically, economically, commercially, militarily or otherwise, or simply by turning a blind eye, with some of the most egregious violators of this fundamental freedom?

Furthermore, and it would be remiss of me to fail to mention it, there are, as we all know, other forms of religious discrimination and persecution that, while perhaps less radical on the level of physical persecution, are nevertheless detrimental to the full enjoyment of the freedom of religion and the practice or the expression of that conviction whether in private or in public. Here, I am referring to a growing tendency, even in established democracies, to criminalize or penalize religious leaders for presenting the basic tenets of their faith, especially regarding the areas of life, marriage and the family.

Moreover, the increased social, cultural and religious tension surrounding the perceived conflict of rights with one another, as Pope Francis has noted, "has not always helped the promotion of friendly relations between nations, since debatable notions of human rights have been advanced that are at odds with the culture of many countries; the latter feel that they are not respected in their social and cultural traditions [...]. At the same time, it should be recalled that the traditions of individual peoples cannot be invoked as a pretext for disregarding the due respect for the fundamental rights proclaimed by the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*."^[3]

The right to religious freedom is rooted in the very dignity of the human person, and it is not only an achievement of a sound political and juridical culture but also a condition for the pursuit of truth that does not impose itself by

force. In this way, religions can serve as an important factor for unity and peace within the human family through the reasoned pursuit of the common good, which should be nurtured by dialogue. In this respect, while all means to overcome such persecution should be given support, including the necessity of open and honest intercultural and interreligious dialogue, an even more essential aspect is the indispensable recognition of each and every person as a fellow citizen. With this comes the duty of the State to protect believers of any, or no, religious conviction because they are equal citizens. In this context, the above-mentioned document on "Human Fraternity" underscores the basic dimension of respecting the equal citizenship of all members in a given society, in any particular State.

"The concept of *citizenship* is based on the equality of rights and duties, under which all enjoy justice. It is therefore crucial to establish in our societies the concept of *full citizenship* and reject the discriminatory use of the term *minorities* which engenders feelings of isolation and inferiority. Its misuse paves the way for hostility and discord; it undoes any successes and takes away the religious and civil rights of some citizens who are thus discriminated against."^[4]

It is true that the constitutions of a majority of countries affirm that all citizens, regardless of their ethnic, religious belonging or sex, are equal in rights and duties. However, the resurgence of nationalism in some countries, combined with the aggressive affirmation of religious identity, can easily lead to religious fundamentalism. Persons or groups not belonging to the majority ethnic or religious group may not only face discrimination, but also marginalization and persecution. The citizens belonging to the majority might have the feeling that the State is 'theirs' more than of others who do not belong to that religion. Indeed, as the Interim Report intimates, in some parts of the world, we are facing levels of persecution that could be considered as a form of genocide, where the presence of Christians is being systematically expunged from societies and cultures, even from the areas of its very origin. Such targeted aggression is not only an attack on the peaceful coexistence founded on religious pluralism, but even more fundamentally upon the essential concept of the equal and inviolable dignity of every human person.

The 2nd-century Christian theologian Tertullian wrote that "the blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians."^[5] Motivated by their love of God, the martyrs freely succumbed to a violence that was not self-inflicted, but which came at the hands of their persecutors. Their suffering provides a tremendous example of integrity of conscience and witness to faith, hope and charity.

Maintaining the presence of Christian communities, particularly in those areas where they are not part of the majority group, is much more than symbolic; it is a strong testimony of faith and a witness that peaceful coexistence among a plurality of religions is possible when the dignity of every person is respected.

Thank you for your attention.

[1] Pope Francis, Homily, Mass for the Faithful of the Armenian Rite (12 April 2015).

[2] Pope Francis and Ahamad Al-Tayyeb, "Human Fraternity or World Peace and Living Together", Abu Dhabi, 4 February, 2019 [emphasis added].

[3] Pope Francis, Address to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, 8 January 2018.

[4] Ibid [original emphasis].

[5] Tertullian, *Apologeticum* (ca. 197).