



SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE **BOLLETTINO**

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INTERVENTO DELL'OSSERVATORE PERMANENTE DELLA SANTA SEDE PRESSO L'UFFICIO DELLE NAZIONI UNITE A GINEVRA NELLA 60a SESSIONE DELLA COMMISSIONE DEI DIRITTI UMANI

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Nel corso della 60a Sessione della Commissione dei Diritti Umani delle Nazioni Unite, che si svolge a Ginevra dal 15 marzo al 23 aprile 2004, in occasione del dibattito sui diritti civili e politici, il 1° aprile S.E. Mons. Silvano Tomasi, C.S., Osservatore Permanente della Santa Sede, ha pronunciato l'intervento che pubblichiamo di seguito:

• INTERVENTO DI S.E. MONS. SILVANO TOMASI

Mr. Chairman,

1. The place of religions in society, and their desire to participate in public life at the service of the people, have been part of recent debates that have been provoked by political events and an increased pluralism in many countries of the world. Religion is an important dimension in the lives of individuals and peoples, and it is natural that it should play an active role in the public arena. In fact, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (art. 18) promotes religious freedom: "Everyone has the right to 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". I find it here opportune to emphasize that the right to religious freedom includes both an individual and an institutional dimension. The respect for the institutional dimension of religious freedom is necessary so as to guarantee full recognition and promotion of the individual aspect of the same right.

2. Any follower of any religion has the right, with no prejudice to the security and legitimate authority of the State, to be respected in his/her convictions and practices, in the name of religious freedom, which is one of the fundamental aspects of the freedom of conscience and an effective contribution to the common good of society. The international juridical instruments - treaties and declarations - have constantly affirmed the value and importance of religious freedom and, at the same time, provided protection against discrimination for all religious believers so that they may freely profess their faith, according to their conscience, their symbols and their

tradition. Unfortunately religious freedom continues to be violated in several places and there is an added dimension today of non-State groups taking upon themselves the initiative to discriminate and even use violence against religious minorities, in many cases with impunity. Places of worship and cemeteries are burnt down or vandalized and desecrated; believers are threatened, attacked and even killed, and their leaders are made a special target of discrimination. The ability to choose one's religion, including the right to change it, meets with great obstacles in some social contexts in direct violation of the guaranteed freedom of conscience.

3. The role of the Commission on Human Rights remains timely and necessary in the defense of religious freedom. Since 1987 a Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief has been calling attention to the unfulfilled provisions of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. Such a precious service deserves sincere appreciation and should certainly continue to ensure that human rights norms concerning religious freedom become recognized and practiced by member states. After all, "Religious freedom, an essential requirement of the dignity of every person, is a cornerstone of the structure of human rights and for this reason an irreplaceable factor in the good of individuals and of the whole society...an essential element for peaceful human coexistence...The civil and social right to religious freedom, inasmuch as it touches the most intimate sphere of the spirit, is a point of reference for the other fundamental rights and in some way becomes a measure of them." (John Paul II, Message for the Twenty-first World Day of Peace, "Religious Freedom: Condition for Peace", 8 Dec. 1987, n. 1) This right, therefore, not only should not be violated by anyone, but believers at risk of discrimination and attacks must be protected, have a fair access to justice, and if victimized, they should be compensated.

4. An emerging subtle form of religious intolerance is opposing the right of religion to speak publicly on issues concerning forms of behavior that are measured against principles of a moral and religious nature. While respecting a healthy sense of the State's secular nature, the positive role of believers in public life should be recognized. This corresponds, among other things, to the demands of a healthy pluralism and contributes to the building up of authentic democracy. Religion cannot be relegated to a corner of the private sphere of life and in this way risk losing its social dimension and its charitable action toward vulnerable people it serves without any distinction.

5. On the contrary, all religions can make a unique contribution to a peaceful living together by rejecting the violent plans and means of some of their members who cover their destructive goals under the guise of religion and by opening instead the way for inter-religious dialogue. In the present circumstances, the way forward for a future of peace is no doubt that of mutual knowledge and understanding, of constructive dialogue and cooperation in the cause of peace. To attain this objective, however, the implementation of the right to religious freedom, and practice, both for individuals and communities of faith, has to become a universal reality. At the same time, in the education process at all levels respect for these rights needs to be acknowledged and communicated thereby building a culture of reciprocal respect and of a positive appreciation for diversity in an environment where all human rights can flourish.

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