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*Here below the statement delivered by H.E. Archbishop Celestino Migliore, Apostolic Nuncio, Permanent Observer of the Holy See, on 26 October 2009 at the 64th Session of the Un General Assembly on Agenda 69 (b): Promotion and protection of human rights: Human rights questions, including alternative approaches for improving the effective enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms:*

Mr Chairman,

As we take up the promotion and protection of human rights, we know that the dignity of the human person is what motivates our desire to commit ourselves to work for the gradual realization of all human rights.

For some time now the United Nations has examined the notion of freedom of conscience with regard to religion and freedom of its expression. This has manifested itself especially in the context of the promotion and protection of universally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms, cultural diversity, and the elimination of all forms of religious intolerance in the world.

The right to religious freedom, despite being repeatedly proclaimed by the international community and specified in international instruments as well as in the Constitution of most States, continues to be widely violated today. There is unfortunately no religion on the planet which is free from discrimination. Acts of intolerance, and violations of religious freedom, continue to be perpetrated in many forms. In fact, more and more cases are brought to the attention of the courts or international human rights bodies.

With the increase of religious intolerance in the world, it is well documented that Christians are the religious group most discriminated against as there may well be more than 200 million of them, of different confessions, who are in situations of difficulty because of legal and cultural structures that lead to their discrimination.

Over the past months some Asian and Middle Eastern countries have seen Christian communities attacked, leaving many injured and others killed. Their churches and homes were also burned down. Such actions were committed by extremists in response to accusations against individuals, perceived –according to anti-blasphemy laws– as being in some way disrespectful of the beliefs of others. In this context, my delegation welcomes and supports the promise of the government of Pakistan to review and amend such laws.

Blasphemy laws have too easily become opportunities for extremists to persecute those who freely choose to follow the belief system of a different faith tradition. Such laws have been used to foster injustice, sectarian violence and violence between religions. Governments must address the root causes of religious intolerance and repeal such laws that serve as instruments of abuse.

Legislation which restricts freedom of expression cannot change attitudes. Instead, what is needed is the will to change. This can most effectively be achieved by raising the consciousness of individuals, bringing them to a greater understanding of the need to respect all persons regardless of their faith or cultural background. States should refrain from adopting restrictions on freedom of expression which have often led to abuse by the authorities and to the silencing of dissenting voices, particularly those of individuals belonging to ethnic and religious minorities. Authentic freedom of expression can contribute to a greater respect for all people as it can provide the opportunity to speak out against violations such as religious intolerance and racism and promote the equal dignity of all persons.

The advocacy of hatred and violence towards specific religions which persists in various places suggests a state of mind characterized by intolerance. For this reason it is imperative that the people of the various faith traditions work together in order to grow in mutual understanding. Here there is need for an authentic change of minds and hearts. This can be done best through education, beginning with children and young people, on the importance of tolerance and respect for cultural and religious diversity.

Cooperation among religions is a prerequisite for the transformation of society and must lead to a change of minds and hearts so that a culture of tolerance and peaceful coexistence among peoples can truly be built.

This Organization has for many years provided the international community with benchmarks for what countries need to do in order to make concrete advancements in respecting human rights. A key to this lies in adhering to the foundational instruments of the United Nations and in faithfully applying the principles enshrined therein, so that all people regardless of their beliefs will be accorded full respect in keeping with their dignity as members of the human community.

Thank you Mr Chairman.

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