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Here below the statement delivered by H.E. Archbishop Celestino Migliore Apostolic Nuncio Permanent Observer of the Holy See, on 10 November 2009, at the 64th Session of the UN General Assembly before the Plenary on item 49: Culture of Peace:

Mr. President,

At the outset, my delegation would like to congratulate the Secretary General for his report highlighting the activities carried out by key United Nations entities involved in the field of interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

The question of religion and the contribution of religions to peace and development have resurfaced in the United Nations in recent years because they have become urgent and inevitable in the opinion of the world. A century and a half ago, at the beginning of the industrial revolution, religion was described as the "opium of the people", today, in the context of globalization, it is increasingly regarded as the "vitamin of the poor".

The unique contribution of religions and the dialogue and cooperation among them lies in their *raison d'être*

which is to serve the spiritual and transcendental dimension of human nature. They tend as well to raise the human spirit, protect life, empower the weak, translate ideals into action, purify institutions, contribute to resolving economic and non-economic inequalities, inspire their leaders to go beyond the normal call of duty, permit people to attain a fuller realization of their natural potential, and traverse situations of conflict through reconciliation, peace-building processes and the healing of memories scarred by injustice.

It is well known that throughout history individuals and leaders have manipulated religions. Likewise, ideological and nationalistic movements have taken religious differences as an opportunity to garner support for their own causes. Recently, the manipulation and misuse of religion for political purposes have given rise to debates and deliberations at the United Nations on the theme, placing it in the context of human rights.

Indeed, the debate within the UN on the role of religions has unfolded for quite some time now and the need for a coherent vision of and appropriate approach to this phenomenon is deeply felt. My delegation would like to offer some considerations on the matter with a view to contributing to a suitable and effective interaction of religion and religions with the United Nations' goals and activities.

Interreligious or interfaith dialogue aiming at investigating the theological and spiritual foundations of different religions in view of mutual understanding and cooperation is becoming more and more an imperative, a conviction and an effective endeavor among many religions.

I am pleased to call to mind here the leadership taken by the Catholic Church, some forty years ago, with the promulgation of the conciliar document *Nostra Aetate*, in reaching out to other religious traditions. Today, many Christian denominations and other religions are engaged in dialogue with programs of their own and in this way have continued to make progress in greater understanding among each other. In this regard, the Holy See has implemented a number of initiatives to promote dialogue among Christian denominations, with Jewish believers, Buddhists and Hindus. A Council on Interreligious Dialogue was set up more than forty years ago and more recently a first-of-its-kind initiative with the representatives of the 138 Muslim signatories of the document, *A Common Word Between Us and You*. This engagement seeks to foster greater respect, understanding and cooperation among believers of various denominations, encourage the study of religions and promote the formation of persons dedicated to dialogue.

This type of theological and spiritual dialogue requires that it be conducted by and among believers and adopt a proper methodology. At the same time, it offers the indispensable premise and basis for that much broader culture of dialogue and cooperation that different academic, political, economic and international institutions have launched in past decades.

Recent social and political events have renewed the engagement of the United Nations to integrate its reflection and action on affirming a culture of respect with a specific concern for interreligious understanding. The protagonists of this dialogue are member States in their interaction with civil society. Their approach and methodology stem from the very mission and purpose of the United Nations.

However, having in mind the spirit and the word of the UN Charter as well as core juridical instruments, it is safe to say that the United Nations' specific and primary responsibility vis-à-vis religion is to debate, elucidate and help States to fully ensure, at all levels, the implementation of the right to religious freedom as affirmed in the relevant UN documents which include full respect for and promotion not only of the fundamental freedom of conscience but also of the expression and practice of everybody's religion, without restriction.

Indeed, the United Nations' ultimate goal and achievement in pursuing interreligious understanding and cooperation is to be able to engage States as well as all segments of human society to recognize, respect and promote the dignity and rights of every person and each community in the world.

Thank you Mr. President.

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