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Archbishop Gallagher: hostility against religious minorities must appeal to the conscience of the international community

Vatican City, 14 March 2016 – Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher, secretary for Relations with States, spoke at the meeting for Missionary Formation organised by the Centre for Missionary Cooperation between the Churches of the diocese of Rome, held last Saturday, 12 March. The theme of the encounter was "Our Church is a Church of martyrs". The following are extensive extracts from the archbishop's address, which focused on the prevention of radicalism and fundamentalism through dialogue and mutual understanding of different religions, and cooperation between States to put an end to persecution in the name of religion.

"For some years we have witnessed an exponential growth in cases of intolerance, discrimination, extremism, fundamentalism, and risks to individual freedom, especially with regard to freedom of worship and expression. ... In particular, I believe I may say that religious extremism and fundamentalism of various origins is often at the root of hostility against Christians and against the faithful of other religious minorities, beginning with the spread of armed groups of a fundamentalist type, transformed into terrorist organisations, which seriously compromise international security. To this there must be added the promulgation in some countries of laws on blasphemy, which have become an easy pretext for those who intend to persecute those who profess a religious belief different to that of the majority. Furthermore, it must not be forgotten that in countries governed by authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, there are serious limitations to religious freedom. In addition, in some other countries those who are detained for religious reasons receive worse treatment than others. Similarly, the scourge of illegal arms trafficking must not be ignored, as well as the production and sale of arms by subjects of international law, facilitating protracted conflicts. Finally, the continual destabilisation of the Middle East has aggravated the violence against religious minorities, including Christians, forcing them every day to abandon their homes to flee the horrors of war and persecution".

"Therefore, it is becoming increasingly urgent and necessary to ensure international cooperation to stop these atrocities, as well as to fully reaffirm the right to religious freedom and to condemn every type of discrimination and intolerance for religious reasons in every corner of the earth, even in the West, where forms of discrimination exist not infrequently and often appear in the guise of the so-called 'defence of democratic values'. ... Hostility against religious minorities must appeal to the conscience of the international community and shake from their torpor all those who are responsible for safeguarding respect for fundamental rights, including religious freedom and the right to life".

"The position of the Holy See is this: always to seek the good of the person and peoples, to protect peace and guarantee respect for the dignity of every human person and his or her fundamental rights, all for the dignity and protection of human beings and not for a mere reason of State, nor to defend partisan interests. To attain these objectives the Holy See makes every effort to promote dialogue with all available parties, inviting States and other entities to cooperate and seek to resolve conflicts via political and diplomatic solutions, always fully respecting international law. To this it is necessary to add the application of the principle of 'the responsibility to protect', the promotion of which has always been one of the primary cornerstones of the international activity of the Holy See and has always been part of its message to the community of Nations".

"On a number of occasions Francis has condemned the shameful and complicit silence of all faced with the 'atrocious, inhuman and incomprehensible persecutions, sadly still present in many parts of the world today'. ... The Holy Father has expressed his hope that 'public opinion around the world [may] be ever more attentive, sensitive and involved in the face of this persecution directed against Christians and, more generally, against religious minorities. I renew the hope that the international community not remain silent and inert in front of these intolerable crimes, which constitute an alarming decline of the most essential human rights and impede the richness of cohabitation among peoples, cultures and faiths".

"In this sense, the Holy See has always sustained the importance of respect for religious freedom, which must be promoted and not limited. Indeed, on the basis of this freedom, understood as a fundamental right, broader spaces for dialogue can be created, for instance involving various religious and social components; this favours the necessary conditions for constructing more inclusive and stable societies. It must also be recalled that religion is part of the identity of a country, and therefore the State must concern itself with maintaining and respecting this identity, avoiding its exploitation for political ends (with the risk, for example, that it give rise to radical nationalistic phenomena or movements based on confessional identification. ... Radicalism and fundamentalism can be extirpated by intervening at the root cause that generates them (religious, political, economic, cultural and military factors), among which social unrest must not be undervalued. ... Furthermore, at the level of the religious dimension, it is important to combat ignorance, also comparing various interpretations with the authentic one of professed faith, so as to avoid extremist derivations that, 'even before it eliminates human beings by perpetrating horrendous killings, eliminates God himself, turning him into a mere ideological pretext'. ... Finally, but no less important, it is to be remembered that social unrest, injustice, social inequality and in particular poverty constitute the ideal seedbed from which fundamentalist visions and practices may arise and take root".

"In conclusion, it seems to me entirely appropriate to note that, aside from the aforementioned diplomatic activities of international and regional institutions, the Holy See is strongly committed to promoting interreligious dialogue at various levels through its corresponding Pontifical Council, whose primary task is that of promoting mutual understanding, respect and collaboration between Catholics and followers of other religious traditions, encouraging the study of religions, and promoting the formation of people dedicated to dialogue".
