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Statement of the Holy See to the U.N. at the 69th Session of the United Nations General Assembly Third Committee, Agenda Item 68 (b and c): "Human Rights" (New York, 29 October 2014)

Here below the Statement by H.E. Archbishop Bernardito Auza, Apostolic Nuncio, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations at the 69th Session of the United Nations General Assembly Third Committee, Agenda Item 68 (b and c): *Human Rights* (New York, 29 October 2014):

Statement H.E. Archbishop Bernardito Auza

Madam Chair,

I would like to thank the various Special Rapporteurs and Special Mandate holders for their reports and work during the past year. Today's discussion brings to light a great number of serious challenges to human rights around the world, and reminds us of the need to rebuild trust in the human rights system in upholding fundamental human rights.

The right to life as enshrined in natural law and protected by international human rights laws lies at the foundation of all human rights. The Holy See reaffirms that all life must be fully protected in all its stages from conception until natural death.

In this regard, my delegation welcomes the reduction in the last two years of the recourse to the death penalty around the globe. As Pope Francis affirmed before representatives of the Association of International Penal Law, received in the Vatican last October 23, "it is impossible to imagine that states today cannot make use of another means than capital punishment to defend peoples' lives from an unjust aggression." The Pope also recommends the abolition of life imprisonment, which he defines as "a hidden death penalty" because, like the death penalty, it excludes all possibilities of redemption and recuperation. He warned against "penal populism" that privileges punishment to solve society's ills, rather than a more rigorous pursuit of social justice and preventative measures. This is especially important when it comes to juvenile delinquency and crimes committed by the elderly. Pope Francis called on all people of goodwill to struggle also to improve prison conditions, out of respect for the human dignity of prisoners, so many of whom, in so many countries of the world, have been detained for

long periods without trial.

Along with the right to life, the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion continues to face serious challenges around the world. In some regions, violations against religious freedom have multiplied and intensified in their brutality, in particular against religious minorities. My delegation insists that these ruthless violations must not only be seen as violence against ethnic and religious minorities, but first and foremost must be condemned as blatant violations of fundamental human rights, and must be dealt with accordingly.

In other parts of the world, religious freedom faces legal barriers put by public authorities and experiences condescending if not outright discriminatory behavior of some in society. Some authorities seek to restrict religious observance to the private realm and impose legal obligations that conflict with personal conscience and religious beliefs. Given this misconstrued understanding of religious freedom and similar misconceptions still existing today, my delegation wishes to note that the struggle for religious freedom was at the origins of certain nations. The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is an inalienable fundamental human right; thus, it has always been and will always be at the core of the struggle for the recognition and free exercise of fundamental human rights.

In this context, my delegation welcomes the *Interim Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief (A/69/261)*, which, inter alia, identifies measures of "reasonable accommodation" to overcome discrimination and violation of this fundamental human right in the workplace. Indeed, a world that truly respects religious freedom must move beyond mere toleration. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international human rights instruments explicitly affirm that the right to freedom of religion or belief includes the right of all to practice their faith alone or in community, in public or private, and the right to change his or her religion or belief.

In order to address these challenges, we must strengthen the international human rights system. My delegation hopes that the resolution on *Strengthening and enhancing the effective functioning of the human rights treaty body system (A/RES/68/268)* translates into meaningful reform towards greater observance of treaties (*Pacta sunt servanda*) and their faithful and objective, not political or ideological, monitoring.

Madam Chair,

With lessons learned from our failure to stop massive violations of fundamental human rights – including and most especially religious freedom- and of international humanitarian law, the time is for courageous decisions. My delegation looks forward to working with all delegations during this session to reinvigorate respect and appreciation for fundamental human rights around the world.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

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