

Country Visit: Holy See

Report of the Personal Representatives of the OSCE Chair-in-Office on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Issues Rabbi Andrew Baker, Dr. Massimo Introvigne and Ambassador Adil Akhmetov

May 6, 2011

The Holy See and OSCE

The Holy See has traditionally been extremely active in most OSCE activities and believes it has a crucial role in developing awareness that religious freedom is an essential part of human rights. The visit of the Personal Representatives to the Holy See was relatively brief and more of a conversation about common international concerns. It was recognized that both the activities of the OSCE in general and the Holy See's participation in them are not generally well-known at the local level within the Catholic Church. It would be useful to bring the main results and commitments arising from the activities of OSCE across the Catholic world by making use of the Church network. This would help maximize the positive impact of OSCE activities, particularly in the fields of human rights and religious liberty.

Racism

The meeting at the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (Bishop Mario Toso, Ms Flaminia Giovannelli, Mgr Anthony Frontiero) described the activities of the Holy See, operating through the Council, for combating racism and xenophobia throughout the world. The Council has been a very active participant in world conferences against racism (occasionally noting certain problematic features), and has published various declarations and books. The Holy See emphasizes the need to promote anti-racist education, particularly for youth. While several significant results have been obtained, education in this field should continue both inside and outside the Church.

Roma and Sinti issues

In recent years the Holy See and Pope Benedict XVI himself have been very active in speaking out whenever the rights of Roma and Sinti populations have been threatened. Offices of the Holy See have not hesitated to criticize "friendly" European governments on these issues. On the other hand, there is the feeling that even within the Catholic fold much remains to be done at the educational level in order to fight persistent stereotypes. Roma and Sinti communities should be helped in seeing themselves not as "object" but rather as "subject" of their full integration into the larger society.

Anti-Semitism

Bishop Brian Farrell, Secretary of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, explained that the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, established in 1974, is part of his Council rather than of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. This stresses the special role the Holy See attributes to the dialogue with Jews. Among the questions

often discussed by the Commission, as explained by his secretary Father Norbert J. Hofmann, is anti-Semitism. Several meetings on anti-Semitism have seen the joint participation of the Commission and of international Jewish organizations. It was also frankly acknowledged that firm declarations against anti-Semitism by the Holy See and several national Bishops' Conferences do not prevent incidents of anti-Semitism at the local level among Catholics, thus confirming that the problem has not disappeared. During the meeting, it was recommended that better cooperation be established between the Commission and OSCE, which has become a major venue to address issues of anti-Semitism. It is also important that the work of the Commission and of OSCE on anti-Semitism becomes better known by other bodies of the Holy See and at the local levels of the Catholic Church.

Discrimination against Muslims

The question of discrimination against Muslims was addressed by Jean-Louis Cardinal Tauran, president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. He stressed the importance of knowing each other, of sharing common issues in a secular society, and he emphasized the positive role religion can play in promoting peace. It was candidly acknowledged that there is a fear of Islam in the West and particularly in certain European countries, which is connected to immigration and other political issues. But it also reflects a general lack of knowledge about Islam by non-Muslims. Addressing discrimination in schools and universities should be a common concern. Cardinal Tauran acknowledged some problems in the dialogue between the Catholic Church and Islam, particularly with al-Azhar University in Cairo, but expressed the hope that they will be resolved, in particular through the inter-religious meeting in Assisi that the Pope and the Council are organizing in October, 2011.

OSCE's Mediterranean Partner States came up in the discussion with Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, Secretary for the Holy See's Relations with States. With international attention focused on the "Arab Spring," it was suggested that the OSCE can play a role in the transition to democracy now underway in some of these countries. The yearly Mediterranean Seminar which normally comes late in the OSCE calendar could pay special attention to concerns of religious liberty and non-discrimination and effective ways to promote tolerance.

Kazakhstan will also host several international initiatives, such as the Fourth Congress of World and Traditional Religions, which may become a further forum for dialogue between the Catholic Church and Islam.

Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians

The Holy See believes that freedom of religion is a fundamental human right. Although it is paid lip service almost everywhere, it is in fact denied in a number of countries. Vatican officials cited the address of Pope Benedict XVI on January 10, 2011, to accredited diplomats which made the case for religious liberty based on human reason and international law as well as theological principles. It noted that Christians are still persecuted in many regions of the world, although most of them are located outside the OSCE region.

The Pope was concerned about the "marginalization of religion", which he described as "a tendency to consider religion, all religion, as something insignificant, alien or even destabilizing to modern society, and to attempt by different means to prevent it from having any influence on the life of society".

Benedict XVI's Message for the 44th World Day of Peace, 2011, was referenced to explain that religious freedom should be understood as not only freedom of worship but the right to announce the faith, to convert, to publish books and newspapers, to open schools, to participate in the public and political life without discriminations.

Recommendations

- The several documents and declarations which the Holy See, through its various bodies, published on religious freedom and on combating racism, anti-Semitism, discrimination against Roma and Sinti, and intolerance and discrimination against Christians and members of other religions, including Islam, should be promoted among Catholic networks in order to reach the local levels of the Church, where they are not necessarily well-known. This may greatly contribute to the educational efforts in these fields both inside and outside the Church.
- Awareness of OSCE and its activities in the field of human rights should also be promoted through vertical and horizontal networks. Bodies of the Holy See not directly involved with OSCE and Catholic bodies and organizations worldwide should learn about both OSCE and the Holy See's participation in OSCE activities and commitments, in order to maximize their positive impact.
- Educational programs on combating stereotypes against Roma and Sinti should also be spread through vertical networks in order to reach the local levels, if possible by making those involved in the field also aware of OSCE's Roma Action Plan and other OSCE initiatives.
- Vigilance and education to combat anti-Semitism should remain primary concerns of the Church. While recent declarations by the Holy See have been an important contribution, anti-Semitism persists, and in some countries it is still rooted in the anti-Jewish themes of early Christianity.
- Despite the difficulties, the Church's dialogue with Islam can be an important contribution to reducing discrimination against Muslims and an element of wider educational initiatives.
- The Holy See should support efforts to bring civil society representatives to the annual OSCE Mediterranean Seminar and insure that the agenda will address issues of human rights and religious freedom.
- The Holy See and key Catholic NGOs can work with the OSCE in raising global awareness of intolerance and discrimination against Christians. The September 2011 Rome conference on hate crimes against Christians is an opportunity to promote such co-operation.

HOLY SEE

List of participants in meetings with the Personal Representatives of the Chair-in-Office during the country

Secretariat of State

- H.E. Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, Secretary for Relations with States
- Father Florian Kolffhaus, Official of the Secretariat of State

Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue

- H.E. Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, President of the Council

Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace

- H.E. Bishop Mario Toso, Secretary of the Council
- Ms. Flaminia Giovannelli, Under-Secretary of the Council
- Mgr. Anthony Frontiero, Official of the Council

Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity

- H.E. Bishop Brian Farrell, Secretary of the Council, Vice-President of the Commission for Religious Relations with Judaism
- Father Norbert J. Hofmann, Secretary of the Commission for Religious Relations with Judaism

NGO "Aid to the Church" ("Kirche in Not")

- Mr. Massimo Ilardo, Director of the Italian Section of the organization.