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The right to religious freedom

The President to the readers
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In our world where there is so much talk of democracy, human rights and tolerance, paradoxically a very worrying phenomenon is spreading like wildfire: the violation of the right to religious freedom. In many countries manifestations of fanaticism and fundamentalism of a religious or secular nature are increasing as well as discrimination against religious minorities, which often arrive at veritable persecution. It is significant that increasingly the victims of these acts of intolerance and violence are Christians. Some people even talk of a dangerous spread of a kind of “Christianophobia” and a “new antiChristianity” (R. Remond). On the threshold of the third millennium of the Christian era, martyrs for the faith are once again a reality. It is a very serious problem and one that deserves careful consideration.

Among the rights of the human person, religious liberty occupies a special place. The Second Vatican Council teaches that “all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such a way that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits” (Dignitatis Humanae, n. 2). And the servant of God John Paul II sees this law the “source and synthesis” of all other rights of the human person and the most reliable confirmation of their implementation (cf. Centesimus Annus, n. 47). For this reason, the spread of religious intolerance in today’s world concerns us all, and forces us to clearly and unequivocally condemn it.

In the context of respect for the right to religious freedom, the Asian continent deserves particular attention. It is home to two thirds of the world population, of which a small minority of about one hundred and twenty million is Christian. According to the 2008 Report on International Religious Freedom, published by Aid to the Church in Need, out of fiftytwo Asian countries, in at least thirty-two religious freedom is restricted or even denied. During the recent Congress of the Catholic laity in Asia, organized by the Pontifical Council for the Laity in Seoul, Korea, we heard very moving testimonies about the price paid by Christians for their faith in some Asian countries. Even the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, which took place at the Vatican October last, said the situation in which Christians live in the Middle East is particularly delicate. In recent months the world press has informed us of the tragic reality of Christians in Iraq, where the Catholic Church has become a real target of radical Islamic terrorism. Public opinion has been deeply shaken by the terrorist attack on the Syrian Catholic Cathedral of Baghdad where fiftyeight faithful were killed, including three priests. And the flurry of antiChristian attacks continued. A form of “confessional cleansing” appears to be in act that seeks to eliminate the Christian presence in those lands where the Church has been present now for two millennia. In fact, the bishops of the

Churches of the Middle East denounce this fanatical strategy and talk about a disturbing “bleeding” of Christians in that region, a very grave fact from the cultural point of view.

Faced with these painful episodes, the Pope and the Holy See have been tireless in expressing their communion and solidarity with the Christians who are suffering because of their faith, while seeking to inform and sensitize public opinion and governments about the seriousness of the situation. Benedict XVI recently said: “I think of the many difficult situations, such as the continuous attacks that occur in Iraq against Christians and Muslims, the clashes in Egypt where there were deaths and injuries [...] May our prayer to the Lord and our solidarity bring hope to those who are suffering” (Angelus, December 5, 2010). And in his latest apostolic exhortation on the Word of God he wrote: “I also express the whole Church’s gratitude for those Christians who have not yielded in the face of obstacles and even persecutions for the sake of the Gospel. We likewise embrace with deep fraternal affection the faithful of all those Christian communities, particularly in Asia and in Africa, who presently risk their life or social segregation because of their faith” (Verbum Domini, n. 98). But the Pope also urged Christians – especially Catholic laity – to engage seriously in favour of “the promotion of an authentic freedom of religion and conscience, one of the fundamental human rights that each state should always respect” (Homily, October 24, 2010).

Faced with these glaring facts, after a long silence, the international community seems to have finally awakened: the United Nations Security Council explicitly expressed itself against the persecution of Christians in Iraq, the European Parliament – in turn – approved a resolution condemning the massacres of Christians in Iraq and that commits the governments of EU member states to put pressure on Baghdad for an end to violence against Christians. But Iraq, as we have seen, is not the only country where religious freedom is violated. Suffice it to recall the violence in some Indian states like Orissa or the case of Asia Bibi in Pakistan, a Christian woman sentenced to death for blasphemy. During the recent OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) summit in Astana (Kazakhstan), Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Vatican Secretary of State, strongly advocated: “It is well documented that Christians are the most persecuted and discriminated against religious group. Over two hundred million of them, belonging to different denominations, are in difficult situations because of legal and cultural structures. The international community must combat intolerance and discrimination against Christians with the same determination with which it fights against hatred against members of other religious communities” (L’Osservatore Romano, December 2, 2010). The principle of freedom of religion and conscience is for all, and therefore, can not be denied to anyone.

But religious intolerance is spreading in our old Europe, which prides itself on being the cradle of modern democracy. This is clearly evidenced in a detailed report (Shadow Report 20052010) recently published by the Austrian nongovernmental Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination Against Christians in Europe. The forms of violations of religious freedom on our continent are, however, more sophisticated and are even promoted in the name of tolerance. Sometimes, the suspicion arises that hostility towards, offense or defamation of Christians in the mass media is seen by the public as something “normal”, indeed “politically correct”. In reality, this is a new form of intolerance, known as “negative tolerance”, of which Pope Benedict XVI spoke about in his recent booklength interview with Peter Seewald *Light of the world*. It is worth recalling the clear and enlightening words of the Holy Father: “There are well established standards of thinking that are supposed to be imposed on everyone. These are then announced in terms of so called “negative tolerance”. For instance, when people say that for the sake of negative tolerance [i.e. “not offending anyone”] there must be no crucifix in public buildings. With that we are basically experiencing the abolition of tolerance, for it means, after all, that religion, that the Christian faith is no longer allowed to express itself visibly. When, for example, in the name of nondiscrimination, people try to force the Catholic Church to change her position on homosexuality or the ordination of women, then that means that she is no longer allowed to live out her own identity and that, instead, an abstract, negative religion is being made into a tyrannical standard that everyone must follow. [...] In the name of tolerance, tolerance is being abolished; this is a real threat we face. The danger is

that reason – so-called Western reason – claims that it has now really recognized what is right and thus makes a claim to totality that is inimical to freedom. I believe that we must very emphatically delineate this danger. No one is forced to be a Christian. But no one should be forced to live according to the “ new religion ” as though it alone were definitive and obligatory for all mankind ” (pp. 8283). Therefore, the words of the Servant of God John Paul II in *Centesimus Annus* were prophetic, when he wrote: “ As history demonstrates, a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism ” (n. 46).

What, then, is the conclusion of our reflections? Freedom is a gift from the Creator that gives the person a unique human dignity, but at the same time, it is a challenge, a task that requires a permanent commitment and responsibility so that it is not lost. Freedom requires the courage to become, following the example of our Master, a “ sign of contradiction ” in the world (cf. Lk 2, 34). The Russian philosopher Nikolai Bierdiajev was right when he wrote that for a Christian freedom is not only a right... it is a must.