

Religious Freedom

The First Freedom on Which Democratic Societies are Built

Archbishop Francis A. Chullikatt

Before the United States House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights,
and International Organizations

Mr. Chairman,

Thank you for this opportunity to address you and the Committee today. Your recognition of the consequential need to consider and respond effectively to existing and emerging threats to religious freedom in the world today is commendable. Such threats manifest not solely under authoritarian regimes or in traditional societies but even, I regret to say, in the great democracies of the world.

The Constitution of the United States apprehends well what the Holy See consistently affirms, namely: that religious freedom is also the “first freedom”, a fundamental human right from which other rights necessarily flow, and which must always be protected, defended, and promoted. Pope Benedict XVI identified religious freedom as:

the pinnacle of all other freedoms. It is a sacred and inalienable right. It includes on the individual and collective levels the freedom to follow one’s conscience in religious matters and, at the same time, freedom of worship. It includes the freedom to choose the religion which one judges to be true and to manifest one’s beliefs in public. It must be possible to profess and freely manifest one’s religion and its symbols without endangering one’s life and personal freedom. Religious freedom is rooted in the dignity of the person; it safeguards moral freedom and fosters mutual respect.¹

Every government bears the profound responsibility to guarantee in its Constitution, as your First Amendment and the entire text secure, religious freedom for its people and must moreover uphold religious liberty both in principle and in fact.

Today, however, religious persecution, be it overt or discrete, is emerging with an increased frequency worldwide. Even in some of the western democracies, the longstanding paragons of human rights and freedoms, we find instances of increasingly less subtle signs of persecution, including the legal prohibition of the display of Christian symbols and imagery – legitimate expressions of belief that for centuries has enriched culture – be they on the person or on public property. This suggests a profound identity crisis at the heart of these great democracies, which owe to their encounter with Christianity both their origin and culture, including their human rights culture.

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente*, 26 (2012).

I, personally, have witnessed many egregious threats to religious liberty during my service around the globe. My current posting also makes me familiar with the work of the United Nations, which your great nation helped establish when the world society was desperate for an institution whose mission would be to secure and maintain international peace and security. The founding Charter of the United Nations mandates that it fulfill this mission through safeguarding the fundamental and inalienable rights and responsibilities of each member of the human family. The preservation of authentic religious freedom thus stands at the heart of the UN's solemn responsibility.

Having said this, allow me to address the following two points in my brief remarks. I will also be submitting to the committee two more detailed texts for your further consideration.

The first issue on which I wish to focus today concerns challenges to religious freedom in the Middle East, particularly for Christians, who since the beginning of Christianity two thousand years ago have been continuous inhabitants of that important region of the world. A second issue I will touch upon briefly concerns the responsibility of the United Nations towards safeguarding this religious freedom. I also wish to highlight the crucial role the United States of America bears in the work of the UN by virtue of its significant influence within this organization, as well as its permanent membership in the Security Council.

Regarding my first point: flagrant and widespread persecution of Christians rages in the Middle East even as we meet. No Christian is exempt, whether or not he or she is Arab. Arab Christians, a small but significant community, find themselves the target of constant harassment for no reason other than their religious faith. This tragedy is all the more egregious when one pauses to consider that these men and women of faith are loyal sons and daughters of the countries in which they are full citizens and in which they have been living at peace with their neighbors and fellow citizens for untold generations.

One of the most graphic illustrations of ongoing brutality confronting Arab Christians is the emergence of a so-called "tradition" of bombings of Catholic and other Christian houses of worship every Christmas Eve, which has been going on now for the past several years. Will there be no end in sight for this senseless slaughter for those whom that very night proclaim the Prince of Peace in some of the oldest Christian communities in the world?

As is increasingly obvious, governments are by no means guaranteeing religious freedom consistently among fundamental human rights and, at worst, violations take the form of the outright persecution of religious believers by state actors. For its part, the Holy See regularly urges the world's attention to serious violations of the right to religious freedom, in general, as well as to recent and continuing instances of discrimination or systematic attacks on Christian communities, in particular. In a recent statement to the United Nations Human Rights Council, the Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations in Geneva said that

(r)esearch has indicated that more than 100,000 Christians are violently killed because of some relation to their faith every year, while other Christians and believers are subjected to forced displacement, to the destruction of their places of worship, to rape, and to the abduction of their leaders. Several of these acts have been perpetrated in parts of the Middle East, Africa and Asia, and are the result of bigotry, intolerance, terrorism and some exclusionary laws. In addition, some Western countries, where historically the Christian presence has been an integral part of society, a trend emerges that tends to marginalize Christianity in public life, ignore historic and social contributions and even restrict the ability of faith communities to carry out social charitable services.²

Pope Francis himself, in praying recently for all Christians who experience discrimination on the basis of their belief stated,

Let us remain close to these brothers and sisters who, like (the first martyr of the Church) St Stephen, are unjustly accused and made the objects of various kinds of violence. Unfortunately, I am sure they are more numerous today than in the early days of the Church. There are so many! This occurs especially where religious freedom is still not guaranteed or fully realized. However, it also happens in countries and areas where on paper freedom and human rights are protected, but where in fact believers, and especially Christians, face restrictions and discrimination.³

His predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, similarly pointed out the same problem in his 2012 address to the members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See. He stressed how:

(i)n many countries Christians are deprived of fundamental rights and sidelined from public life; in other countries they endure violent attacks against their churches and their homes. At times they are forced to leave the countries they have helped to build because of persistent tensions and policies which frequently relegate them to being second-class spectators of national life. In other parts of the world, we see policies aimed at marginalizing the role of religion in the life of society.⁴ It even happens that believers, and Christians in particular, are prevented from contributing to the common good by their educational and charitable institutions."⁵

² Cf., e.g., Statement of the Holy See at the 23rd Session of the Human Rights Council on Violence against Christians (May 27, 2013).

³ Pope Francis, Angelus Address (Dec. 26, 2013).

⁴ Address of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI to the members of the Diplomatic Corps (Jan. 9, 2012).

⁵ Address of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI to the members of the Diplomatic Corps (Jan. 7, 2013).

This past autumn, in a Message to the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I, Pope Francis called to mind the 1700th anniversary of the Edict of Milan, which brought about the end to the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire, and drew attention to “...the many Christians of all the Churches and Ecclesial Communities who in many parts of the world experience discrimination and at times pay with their own blood the price of their profession of faith.” The Pope also stressed the “...urgent need for effective and committed cooperation among Christians in order to safeguard everywhere the right to express publicly one’s faith and to be treated fairly when promoting the contribution which Christianity continues to offer to contemporary society and culture.”⁶

Current circumstances make it particularly important that Christians work together to ensure religious freedom for all, and to this end it is crucial that every government guarantee religious freedom for each and every person in its country not only in its legislation but also in praxis. Strictly connected to freedom of religion is respect for conscientious objection, of which everyone should be able to avail himself or herself. Conscientious objection is based on religious, ethical and moral reasons, and on the universal demands of human dignity. As such it is a pillar of every truly democratic society and, precisely for this reason, civil law must always and everywhere recognize and protect it. After all, these steps ensure not only human dignity but the dignity of democratic institutions.

Regarding my second point, which concerns the United Nations: the essential importance of religious freedom for each and every person, community and society, is confirmed by the foundational international legal instruments and other documents. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* states that “(e)veryone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”⁷

Since the summer of 2010, as the Holy See’s Representative to the UN, I have labored alongside many people of good will to bring an end to the suffering in the world. The religious persecution of Christians throughout the Middle East looms large in this theatre of suffering. The UN General Assembly addresses the question in certain resolutions, which we have a hand in negotiating.

However, these noble efforts fail to receive the profile they justly deserve on the world stage. Only Member States, especially those with leadership profiles like the United States, can take decisive steps to ensure that the non-derogable human right of religious liberty becomes more robustly protected worldwide. The self-evident truths underlying healthy democracy – truths upon which both President Jefferson and the Church agree – require as much. The religious freedom which the law is expected to protect and promote abides no mere passive toleration but requires, rather, that States guarantee the basic

⁶ Pope Francis, Message of Pope Francis to His Holiness Bartolomaos I, Ecumenical Patriarch, for the Feast of Saint Andrew (Nov. 25, 2013).

⁷ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18 (1948).

preconditions that permit its free exercise by citizens in both their private and public endeavours.

Allow me now to express my gratitude for efforts this committee undertakes in promoting religious liberty and those it will undertake in this issue to bring an end to further suffering and social exclusion of Christians.

As I mentioned, I also leave for your further consideration two documents of crucial concern to my testimony, namely: (1) The *Lineamenta* (or Guidelines) for the 2009 Synod of Bishops Special Assembly for the Middle East,⁸ and (2) Pope Benedict XVI's 2011 World Day of Peace Message entitled "Religious Freedom, the Path to Peace."⁹

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, I express my gratitude to you and to the Committee for this important opportunity to express solidarity with all Christian believers in the harsh reality of the persecution of their communities and adherents at this present time. We look to your country to stand true to its own *Constitution* and show its leadership in every forum in working to end the erosion of this most fundamental of human rights.

Thank you for your attention.

⁸ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20120914_ecclesia-in-medio-oriente_en.html

⁹ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20101208_xliv-world-day-peace_en.html