



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE CONGRESS ON
SECULARISM AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM MARKING
THE THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF "DIGNITATIS HUMANAЕ"**

Thursday, 7 December 1995

*To the Participants in the Congress
on Secularism and Religious Freedom
marking the Thirtieth Anniversary
of "Dignitatis Humanae".*

1. It is with great pleasure that I greet the participants in the *International Congress on Secularism and Religious Freedom* organized by the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty and the Pontifical Athenaeum Regina Apostolorum, and under the auspices of the Pontifical Council for Culture. Today marks 30 years since the Second Vatican Council issued its Declaration on Religious Freedom, "[Dignitatis Humanae](#)". That important text has been the subject of your reflection during your meeting, which has brought together distinguished experts from different backgrounds, and witnesses capable of offering their personal testimony regarding the way in which religious freedom is observed or not observed in the contemporary world. I express a particular word of appreciation to the Becket Fund, for its many efforts in defence of religious freedom in the United States and around the world.

2. As I have often stated, the Second Vatican Council constituted an extraordinary grace for the Church, and a decisive moment of her recent history. "[Dignitatis Humanae](#)" is undoubtedly one of the Council's most innovative texts. It has the specific and important merit of having cleared the way for that remarkable and fruitful *dialogue between the Church and the world*, so ardently proposed and encouraged by that other great Council document, the Pastoral Constitution "[Gaudium et Spes](#)", issued on the very same day. Looking back over the last 30 years, it must be said that the Church's commitment to *religious freedom as an inviolable right of the human person*

(cf. *Dignitatis Humanae*, chap. I) has had an effect beyond anything the Fathers of the Council could have anticipated.

When the Council declared that the demand for freedom in human society, and in the first place the demand for religious freedom, is "greatly in accord with truth and justice" (*Ibid.*, 1), the way was opened for the Church's members and her institutions to play a practical and substantial part in promoting that global "quest for freedom" which, as I said recently at the United Nations, is "one of the great dynamics of world history" (John Paul II, *Address for the Fiftieth General Assembly of the United Nations Organization*, 2 [5 Oct. 1995]). In many cases, the defence of religious freedom, as the first of human rights and the foundation of any meaningful scheme of rights, has been the main inspiration of men and women who, "even when threatened by violence, have *taken the risk of freedom*, asking to be given a place in social, political and economic life which is commensurate with their dignity as free human beings" (John Paul II, *Ibid.*). In a word, the Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom resulted in the release of enormous moral and religious energies, which have had a real bearing on the social and political transformations of recent years, and indeed on the whole structure of international relations.

3. As "*Dignitatis Humanae*" teaches, men and women "are at once impelled by their nature and bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth" (*Dignitatis Humanae*, 2). We are religious by nature, insofar as we are gifted by the Creator with intelligence and will, and therefore capable of knowing and loving the Author of life himself. In the depths of our being, we yearn for God and strive to find him. In the changing circumstances of life, every human person hears the whispered invitation: "Seek my face" (Ps. 27 [26]:8). And we, often without knowing the full implication of our answer, respond from the depths of our heart: "Your face, O Lord, do I seek. Hide not your face" (*Ibid.*, 9). It is the integrity and legitimacy of that dialogue between the human heart and mind and the Creator that we defend when we defend the inalienable right to religious freedom. In defending religious freedom, the Church is not defending an institutional prerogative; she is defending the truth about the human person.

4. The theme of your Congress brings together two significant concepts: *secularism* and *religious freedom*. The Council itself acknowledged the content, but also the limits, of the autonomy of the temporal order. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church states: "While it must be recognized that the temporal sphere is governed by its own principles, since it is properly concerned with the interests of this world, that ominous doctrine must rightly be rejected which attempts to build a society with no regard whatever for religion, and which attacks and destroys the religious liberty of its citizens" (*Lumen Gentium*, 36). Throughout the 20th century, millions of human beings have been the innocent victims of political ideologies and of forms of religious and ethnic hatred which in one way or another have sought to extinguish or limit the *individual's right to be free from coercion in matters religious*. Is it too much to hope that the blood of those countless victims will have prepared the world for a new understanding of the importance of religious freedom, and its inviolability?

5. "Dignitatis Humanae" was in a sense a response to a situation which has often occurred in the Church's history, and which has not altogether disappeared from the contemporary world. Today however we would do well to consider another form of limitation on religious freedom, one which is more subtle than overt persecution. I am thinking here of the claim that a democratic society should relegate to the realm of private opinion its members' religious beliefs and the moral convictions which derive from faith. At first glance, this appears to be an attitude of necessary impartiality and "neutrality" on the part of society in relation to those of its members who follow different religious traditions or none at all. Indeed, it is widely held that this is the only enlightened approach possible in a modern pluralistic State.

But if citizens are expected to leave aside their religious convictions when they take part in public life, does this not mean that society not only excludes the contribution of religion to its institutional life, but also promotes *a culture which re-defines man as less than what he is*? In particular, there are moral questions at the core of every great public issue. Should citizens whose moral judgments are informed by their religious beliefs be less welcome to express their most deeply held convictions? When that happens, is not democracy itself emptied of real meaning? Should not genuine pluralism imply that firmly held convictions can be expressed in vigorous and respectful public dialogue? The Church readily encourages such a dialogue, which she knows will be most useful and productive as long as it is open to objective truth which can be reached and adhered to, and is not conditioned by a preconceived "areligious" and "moral" view of the human person and of human community.

6. On their part, *religious believers must be deeply committed to the method of dialogue and persuasion*. As we prepare to celebrate the 2,000th anniversary of the birth of Christ, the Church acknowledges, in a spirit of profound repentance, those times in history when "acquiescence (was.) given... to intolerance and even the use of violence in the service of truth" (John Paul II, Tertio Millennio Adveniente, 35). With the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, the Church today holds firmly to that basic tenet of the Declaration on Religious Freedom: "The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth, which wins over the mind with both gentleness and power" (Dignitatis Humanae, 1). The Church neither seeks nor desires to see any worldly power placed at the service of the truths she bears. She asks only to be allowed to address man in freedom; and she asks for all human beings the freedom to respond to the Gospel in the full measure of their humanity.

7. My wish for all of you is that your deliberations will strengthen your commitment to the defence and advancement of religious freedom. In serving this cause, you are effectively promoting human dignity and serving the integral well-being of the human family. When you do so "in the Holy Spirit, in unaffected love, in the word of truth" (2 Cor. 6:6-7), you are serving the Lord who sets us free in the deepest possible sense of our freedom. May his abundant blessings be upon you all!

From the Vatican, 7 December 1995.

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