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INTERVENTO DELLA DELEGAZIONE DELLA SANTA SEDE ALLA CONFERENZA DI MADRID SULL'EDUCAZIONE ALLA LIBERTÀ RELIGIOSA

INTERVENTO DELLA DELEGAZIONE DELLA SANTA SEDE ALLA CONFERENZA DI MADRID
SULL'EDUCAZIONE ALLA LIBERTÀ RELIGIOSA

In occasione della *Conferenza consultiva sull'educazione scolastica, relativa alla libertà di religione e di convinzione, alla tolleranza e alla non-discriminazione*, tenutasi a Madrid dal 23 al 25 novembre corrente, S.E. Mons. Diarmuid Martin, Capo della Delegazione della Santa Sede, ha pronunciato il 24 novembre l'intervento che pubblichiamo qui di seguito:

• INTERVENTO DI S.E. MONS. DIARMUID MARTIN

RELIGION PLAYS A CENTRAL ROLE IN THE LIVES OF MILLIONS

1. The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination based on Religion or Belief notes that "religion or belief, for anyone who professes either, is one of the fundamental elements in his conception of life" (Preamble). The recent Durban World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance recalled how "religion, spirituality and belief play a central role in the lives of millions of women and men, and in the way they live and treat other persons" (Durban Declaration §6).

This "International Consultative Conference on School Education in relation to Freedom of Religion or Belief, Tolerance and Non-Discrimination" comes at an opportune time. In an increasingly interdependent world, we feel the need urgently to rediscover the roots of what humankind has in common. Religious education is a powerful instrument to help believers intensify their efforts towards the realization of the unity of the one human family.

School education is a key factor in fostering understanding and tolerance among religious communities. It must likewise be a key factor, in often increasingly pluralist or secularised societies, in fostering tolerance among all for religious expression and in ensuring religious freedom for all.

EVERY RELIGION CAN BE A FERTILE GROUND FOR PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS

2. The question of religious freedom was the object of a special Declaration of the Second Vatican Council. On the specific question of education, - in language which is mirrored in both the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (§26,3) and in the Declaration on the Elimination of All Form of Intolerance and Discrimination based on Religion or Belief (§5) - the Vatican Council's Declaration stresses that parents "have the right to decide in accordance with their own religious beliefs the form of religious education which is to be given to their children" (§5), and it adds, "parents should not be subjected directly or indirectly to unjust burdens because of this freedom of choice" (ibid.). Governments have the obligation to ensure that parents can attain full realisation of these fundamental rights.

Religious freedom constitutes a fundamental human right and can certainly be considered one of the cornerstones of the edifice of human rights, because it touches such an intimate sphere of human existence and personal identity, the relationship between the person and the Transcendent.

Every religion, just as every culture, is capable of fully fostering all human rights and indeed of providing the fertile ground in which respect for human rights and the respect for the dignity of all can take root. It is possible - as can be seen, for example, in the practice of so many Catholic school systems, which now reach over 200,000 - for each religious tradition to educate its young members fully in the tenets of its own belief and at the same time create within them a spirit of openness to and respect for the religious traditions of others. Educational institutions established by a particular religious tradition can be open to and fully respectful of the rights of children of different religious traditions who attend them. This Conference could profitably initiate a process of sharing best practices in this regard.

RELIGIOUS VALUES CONTRIBUTE TO THE ORGANIZATION AND INSPIRATION OF SOCIETY

3. The Declaration of the Second Vatican Council notes that religious freedom also includes "the right of religious groups not to be prevented from freely demonstrating the special value of their teachings for the organization of society and the inspiration of human activity in general" (§4). Religious discourse, if presented within the framework of democratic debate, has the right to full citizenship in every society. To deny respect for such discourse would be to impose a limit on people to express their most deep-felt sentiments. Unfortunately, all too often, religion is superficially presented in contemporary society only in the context of division and intolerance, rather than its capacity to foster respect and unity.

Obviously, religious freedom must be exercised in such a way that it fully respects the views and the religious traditions of others. Curricula for school-based religious education - in both religious and public educational institutions - should include programmes that foster a more accurate and a more sensitive knowledge and understanding of a broad range of religious traditions. Education to sensitive respect for the religious values of others belongs to the education of believers and non-believers alike. Much unhealthy and negative stereotyping of religious traditions springs from a lack of knowledge or from the lack of an open and sympathetic understanding of the tenets of another's religious traditions.

Stringent efforts should be made by religious communities and their leaders to prevent religious factors from being used to exacerbate already existing historical, ethnic, social or political divisions. Fundamental religious values should rather be directed towards rejecting violence as a means of resolving disputes. Similarly, religious leaders should be attentive to reject false interpretations of religious tenets that offend human dignity or the unity of the human family. Religious-based school systems should ensure especially that girls have full access to education.

A FUTURE OF DIALOGUE, UNDERSTANDING AND RESPECT

4. Where mutual respect develops among religious groups, it becomes possible for all to work more effectively for the common good, without anyone renouncing his or her deep-felt convictions. It becomes possible to address tensions that may have arisen in the past. It becomes possible to re-read history together, in order to reach a better understanding of the hurts that individual religious communities may have caused or have suffered. This is a theme that has been particularly developed by Pope John Paul II, for example, at a special

ceremony of repentance that was held during the Jubilee Year of 2000 or during his visit to significant centres of worship of other confessions and religions.

Honestly addressing the tensions of the past generates a strong force for the construction of a different future and for the beginnings of a process of reconciliation and healing. The formation of future teachers should pay special attention to their ability to sensitively address divisive historical issues. Where necessary, school textbooks and curricula should be revised to remove harmful or unbalanced presentations of other religious traditions and historical events.

The task of fostering inter-religious dialogue belongs in the first place to religious leaders themselves. Such dialogue should be extended to include the widest possible sector of each religious community, with special attention being given to young persons. All educational establishments can and should be open to such respectful dialogue, which respects the specific values of the religious traditions of each individual and opens out to the values of others.

It is to be hoped that this International Consultative Conference will be an important impetus worldwide to such a process of dialogue, understanding and respect.

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