



*CONFERENCE PROMOTED BY THE RELIGIOUS FREEDOM PROJECT OF GEORGETOWN
UNIVERSITY,
BERKLEY CENTER FOR RELIGION, PEACE AND WORLD AFFAIRS*

*INTERVENTION BY H.E. MSGR. DOMINIQUE MAMBERTI,
SECRETARY FOR RELATIONS WITH STATES*

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Distinguished Speakers,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I should like first of all to thank Professor Thomas Farr, Director of the Interreligious Project at Georgetown University, for his kind invitation to open this morning's session with a brief introduction to the main theme of the Conference: namely, the relationship between Christians and religious freedom. The theme is an important and complex one, made all the more timely by our present historical context of globalization. The Church's recent magisterium has been particularly attentive to this context, from the Declaration *Dignitatis Humanae* of the Second Vatican Council to the teaching of his Holiness Pope Francis, who has asked me to convey to you his greetings and his blessing.

In speaking of Christians and religious freedom, it is easy to bring up the all too frequent cases where that freedom is violated as a result of intolerance or discrimination – we can think of the recent case of a television journalist who was removed from her job because she wore a small cross around her neck – or the more serious situations of actual persecution. Sadly, we have to acknowledge that in many parts of the world Christians have become a target of violence and are often forced to abandon their culture and the lands where in some cases they have been living for centuries, not infrequently because they are deprived of their civil rights and even threatened with physical harm.

Here, however, I would like to move beyond a mere presentation of cases and examples, which ultimately does no more than cast blame on those responsible. Certainly "a disciple is not above the teacher" (Mt 10:24) and Christians cannot expect to be spared anything that the Lord did not himself experience (cf. Jn 15:20). Rather, I would like to address the relationship between Christianity and freedom, not least with the aim of discrediting the erroneous and outdated notion that Christianity is the enemy of personal freedom and conscience, and that its claim to truth surely leads to violence and oppression. Nothing could be historically less accurate than statements such as these. Indeed, the concept of "human rights" itself originated in a Christian context. We think of that great statesman, Saint Thomas More, who at the price of his own life bore witness to the fact that Christians, in the light of reason and by virtue of their freedom of conscience, are called to reject every form of oppression.

The link between Christianity and freedom is thus original and profound. It has its roots in the teaching of Christ himself and Saint Paul appears as one of its most strenuous and brilliant defenders. Freedom is intrinsic to Christianity, for it was, as Paul says, for freedom that Christ set us free (cf. Gal 5:1). The Apostle, of course, was referring primarily to the interior freedom enjoyed by Christians, but this interior freedom naturally also has consequences for society. This year marks the one-thousand-seven-hundredth anniversary of the Edict of Milan, which crowned the expansion throughout society of that interior freedom of which Saint Paul spoke. At the same time, from an historical and cultural standpoint, the Edict represented the beginning of a process which has marked European history and that of the entire world, leading in the course of the centuries to the definition of human rights and the recognition of religious freedom as "the first of human rights, for it expresses the most fundamental reality of the person" [1] and as "the litmus test for the respect of all the other human rights" [2]

Constantine saw that the growth of the Empire depended on the ability of each individual to profess freely his or her religious beliefs. The Edict of Milan was something more than the result of a clever political calculation; it was a significant step forward for civilization. Not only did it recognize a fundamental right, since it was not limited to granting Christians the freedom to worship, but first and foremost it declared religious freedom to be a factor of civil stability and social creativity. "Strengthening religious freedom" – as Benedict XVI has pointed out – "consolidates social bonds, nourishes the hope of a better world, creates favourable conditions for peace and harmonious development, while at the same time establishing solid foundations for securing the rights of future generations" [3] For "the right to freedom of religion, both in its private and its public dimensions, manifests the unity of the human person who is at once a citizen and a believer" [4]

History shows that there is a virtuous circle between that characteristically human openness to the transcendent and the growth of society. It suffices to consider the great patrimony of the world's art, not only that of Christian inspiration, in order to appreciate the inherent goodness of this relationship. The restriction of religious freedom thus proves harmful to society, as well as to individual men and women in their deepest needs and aspirations for what the medievals called the transcendentals of being: truth, goodness and beauty. The exercise of religious freedom is inseparably linked to these. Indeed, whenever human beings cannot be open to the infinite in accordance with their own conscience, truth yields to a mendacious relativism and justice to the oppression of the prevailing ideology, whether it be atheistic, agnostic or even overtly religious.

At this point, however, there is a need to avoid possible misunderstanding, since the word "freedom" can be interpreted in many ways. Freedom cannot be reduced to mere caprice, or understood in a purely negative sense as the absence of constraint, as is often the case in today's culture. Here we can recall the words of Benedict XVI: "A freedom which is hostile or indifferent to God becomes self-negating and does not guarantee full respect for others. A will which believes itself radically incapable of seeking truth and goodness has no objective reasons or motives for acting save those imposed by its fleeting and contingent interests; it does not have an 'identity' to safeguard and build up through truly free and conscious decisions. As a result, it cannot demand respect from other 'wills', which are themselves detached from their own deepest being and thus capable of imposing other 'reasons' or, for that matter, any 'reason' at all" [5] Consequently, the proper exercise of religious freedom cannot prescind from the interplay of reason and faith, which ensures that there is a correspondence between the "corrective role of religion vis-à-vis reason" and "the purifying and structuring role of reason within religion" [6] This also provides a bulwark

against both relativism and against those forms of religious fundamentalism which, like relativism, see in religious freedom a threat to their own ideological dominance.

When the Second Vatican Council set forth the principle of religious freedom it was not proposing a new teaching. Rather, it was restating a common human experience: namely, that "all human beings, because they are persons, that is, beings endowed with reason and free will, and therefore bearing personal responsibility, are impelled by their nature... to seek the truth".^[7] At the same time it restated an ancient principle: namely, that human beings must be "immune from coercion by... any human power".^[8] This, then, is the basis of religious freedom. But this is also the reason why religious freedom represents a "problem" in international debates, where it is frequently reduced to a matter of examining individual cases as they emerge, rather than being put on the same level as other fundamental freedoms. Underlying such an approach is the deliberate refusal to acknowledge any possible truth claim in human existence. Whether this rejection is based on relativism or fundamentalism matters very little, since both have a single common denominator: fear, which arises from the iniquity which obscures what is good (cf. Wis 4:11-12) and corrupts the heart. As I mentioned above, the Christian vision is radically different. It is not dominated by fear, but rather by the joy of that truth which sets us free (cf. Jn 8:32). It is in the truth, seen not so much as an absolute which we already possess, but as the potential object of rational and relational knowledge,^[9] that we encounter the potential for a sound exercise of freedom. And it is precisely in this connection that we discover the authentic dignity of the human person.

[1] BENEDICT XVI, Address to Members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, 9 January 2012.

[2] JOHN PAUL II, Address to Members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE, 10 October 2003

[3] BENEDICT XVI, *Homily in Plaza de la Revolución*, Havana, 28 March 2012.

[4] Ibid.

[5] BENEDICT XVI, *Message for the 2011 World Day of Peace*, 1 January 2011, No. 3.

[6] BENEDICT XVI, *Meeting with the Civil Authorities of the United Kingdom*, Westminster Hall, London, 17 September 2010.

[7] SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis Humanae*, 2.

[8] Ibid.

[9] FRANCIS, *Letter to a Non-Believer*, 4 September 2013.