

## RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE PAPACY OF POPE BENEDICT XVI. SEVEN YEARS OF INTERVENTIONS BEFORE THE UN

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**Summary.** The article presents the most important aspects of the interventions made by the representatives of the Holy See before the United Nations dealing with the question of religious freedom, in the seven years since Benedict XVI was called to the Papal throne. In many parts of the World, difficulties with regard to religious freedom have increased or acquired new forms. The interventions are related to those questions under debate in each case and in the circumstances of that given moment. Nevertheless, they denote a remarkable coherency and help to understand how the pontifical diplomacy has promoted the right to religious freedom between 2005 and 2012, and express at the level of international relations the thoughts and priorities of Benedict XVI as head of the Catholic Church.

**Key words:** Religious freedom, Holy See, United Nations, Human rights, Freedom of religion, Benedict XVI, Christians, Freedom of conscience, Culture of peace, discrimination

In this paper I would like to present the most important aspects of the interventions made by the representatives of the Holy See before the United Nations dealing with the question of religious freedom, in the seven years since Benedict XVI was called to the Papal throne.

Joseph Ratzinger was named Pope on the 19th of April 2005; since then, in many parts of the World, difficulties with regard to religious freedom have increased or acquired new forms, as can be seen in the issues and the approach taken by the Mission of the Holy See; the specific aim of this paper is to highlight those aspects considered of most importance.

Considered as a whole, the interventions made by the papal delegation can be characterized by certain features.

Firstly, a study of the interventions confirms a real interest for the individual and his dignity. They do not represent a defense of a particular point of view, or the interests of a group or an attempt to strengthen a specific social position of the Catholic Church. On the contrary, the Holy See goes to great lengths to promote values related to human dignity, as is the case of Human Rights, of which religious freedom is one of the principle rights, as proclaimed in article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights approved in 1948.

It is this perspective that explains the presence of the Holy See at the UN and in a certain sense provides the key to the interpretation of the interventions

made by its representatives. The mission of the Holy See, although first and foremost spiritual, includes a responsibility towards the relations between peoples and in international forums, „a duty to be present in the life of Nations and a commitment to promote justice and solidarity among peoples”, as the then Cardinal Secretary of State expressed it in 2005<sup>1</sup>. In this way, the Mission brings a „spiritual and ethical dimension to the discussions concerning the serious problems confronting the human race”<sup>2</sup> and serves „the individual, the whole individual; the individual in his entirety”<sup>3</sup>.

Together with a serious and profound study of the disparate and complex questions submitted to debate at the UN, this perspective allows the Holy See to promote work in common and to contribute to the international community setting objectives which are suitable for the overall well being of each person, given the specific conditions of its status as Permanent Observer.

The Catholic Church recognized the work of the UN since its beginnings and acknowledges that the organization has become an irreplaceable element in the lives of people and in the search for a better future for all inhabitants of the earth. That is why the Holy See and the Catholic Church pay great attention to the UN, as was demonstrated by the visits of Popes Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

However, if the UN is to continue „to carry out its historic mission to maintain unity and to coordinate all States with a view to achieving common goals of peace, security, and integral human development for all”, the guarantee „will be provided through a constant reference to the dignity of all men and women and through effective respect beginning with respect for the right to life of even those who are the weakest, as the sick approaching the end of their life or the unborn children – and for religious freedom”<sup>4</sup>.

Due to their nature (as positions taken by a State which takes part in the work carried out by the UN in accordance with its status of Permanent Observer), the interventions are related to those questions under debate in each case and in the circumstances of that given moment.

For obvious reasons, the statements of the Papal Mission do not have a systematic order, given their nature and aim. Nevertheless, they denote a remarka-

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<sup>1</sup> Address of Cardinal Angelo Sodano, Secretary of State of the Holy See, at the High-level Plenary Meeting of the 60th Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, New York, 16 September 2005.

<sup>2</sup> From an explication of the work carried out by the papal mission at [www.holyseemissiongeneva.org](http://www.holyseemissiongeneva.org). As the papal representative explained at the first meeting of the Council for Human Rights (Address of H.E. Mons. Giovanni Lajolo, first meeting of the Human Rights Council, Geneva, 20 June 2006), „the Holy See desires to contribute to the current debate in accordance with its specific nature and perspectives, always with the purpose of offering an essentially ethical reflection as a help in making the political decisions that must be taken here”.

<sup>3</sup> C. Soler, C. García, *El papel de la Santa Sede en la ONU*, Instituto Martín de Azpilcueta, Navarra Gráfica Ediciones, Pamplona 2001, pp. 61–62.

<sup>4</sup> Address by H.E. Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, Secretary for the Holy See’s Relations with States, General Debate of the 65th session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 29 September 2010.

ble coherency and help to understand how the pontifical diplomacy has promoted the right to religious freedom between 2005 and 2012.

In all the interventions there is an understanding about religious freedom which is based on article 18 of the Declaration of Human Rights. It is not a doctrine that has been recently created, nor the fruit of the work carried out by those who have had the responsibility for the papal Mission, but rather a religious and cultural patrimony with deep and wide roots. In recent years the papal delegates have followed this doctrine in all its integrity, but with some points that reflect its present validity and the way in which its replies to problems of our days.

Above all, the papal Mission has gone to great lengths to emphasize, along with its personal aspect, the importance of the social dimension of religious freedom. It stems from within but opens out to the external sphere, towards life in the community of faith and also in civil society. In this last context, the believer is simply a citizen the same as all others, but called upon to make a contribution to society because by so doing he helps enrich society in general. The contribution made by believers therefore should not be obstructed nor ignored<sup>5</sup>.

At the same time, throughout the statements examined, the importance that the Holy See gives to religious freedom as a basic right within the whole set of human rights stands out clearly<sup>6</sup>. Without this right, it would be impossible to recognize a higher dignity of the individual than that offered by a mere political recognition, and human rights would be no more than a political concession or the result of a changing balance of social forces. From the political bodies, a positive attitude in favor of the promotion of religious freedom is to be expected, thereby helping to create greater respect towards religion, along with the conditions in which religion can be freely practiced<sup>7</sup>.

From a practical point of view, the Mission of the Holy See has been obliged to describe the reality of religious practice as a cause for grave concern<sup>8</sup>. Alongside acts of violence – sometimes carried out with supposedly religious motives, which itself contradicts the real nature of religion – and with the support of certain legislation, there are also mentalities which are opposed to religious freedom, as the Holy See has criticized before the UN on occasion of de-

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example: General Segment, 16th session of the Human Rights Council, 2nd March 2011; and: Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI, Meeting with the members of the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization, New York, 18th April 2008.

<sup>6</sup> See Benedict XVI, Address to the members of the Diplomatic Corps, 10 January 2011; Address by H.E. Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, Secretary for the Holy See's Relations with States, General Debate of the 65th session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 29 September 2010.

<sup>7</sup> See Statement by H.E. Archbishop Francis Chullikatt, 65th session of the United Nations General Assembly, Before the Plenary, on item 63: Report of the Human Rights Council, New York, 3 November 2010.

<sup>8</sup> See Statement by H.E. Archbishop Celestino Migliore, 63rd session of the United Nations General Assembly, Before the Third Committee, on item 64 (b): Promotion and protection of human rights: religious freedom, New York, 29 October 2008.

bates, events and specific situations. In the majority of cases, those who suffer most have been Christians, who have become the religious group which undergoes greatest persecution<sup>9</sup>.

The increasing discrimination of Christians in Europe in recent years has been the subject of growing attention of the papal Mission. This discrimination is not only new, but also represents a paradox given that in most cases it takes place in countries where the population is mainly Christian<sup>10</sup>. It is not a violent persecution, but rather one that through the application of certain policies, seeks to place religion on the outskirts of public life and to exclude believers from social debate<sup>11</sup>.

The efforts made to build a „culture of peace” will help facilitate the full validity of religious freedom<sup>12</sup>. The Holy See is grateful for the work carried out by the UN, but also warns that it would be a mistake to accept proposals put forward by those who insist with ideas such as „sexual and reproductive health” or the „notion of gender”<sup>13</sup>, which are vague, without a clear recognition in international documents and can be used in order to justify practices which are not for the good of man. On the other hand, a new form of discrimination has appeared – that which is suffered by those who make known their views opposed to relations between people of the same sex, and has even led to their being brought before a court of law<sup>14</sup>.

Religions must continue to contribute to the building of „culture of peace” and a more just society<sup>15</sup>; this requires them to be able to do so freely. The initiatives taken by different religions in recent times in order to promote dialogue and cooperation undoubtedly help reach this objective, and as such the papal Mission and the related bodies of the UN have welcomed them with satisfaction<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> See Statement by H.E. Archbishop Celestino Migliore, 64th session of the UN General Assembly, Before the Third Committee, on item 69 (b): Promotion and protection of human rights: Human rights questions, including alternative approaches for improving the effective enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms, New York, 26 October 2009.

<sup>10</sup> See Address of H.E. Msgr. Silvano M. Tomasi at the 10th ordinary session of the Human Rights Council, Geneva, 16 March 2009.

<sup>11</sup> See Address by H. E. Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, Secretary for Relations with States, General Debate of the 66th session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, New York, 27th September 2011.

<sup>12</sup> See Archbishop Giovanni Lajolo, President of the Governatorate of the Vatican City State, General Debate of the 61st session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, New York, 27 September 2006.

<sup>13</sup> See Statement by H.E. Archbishop Francis Chullikatt, 65th session of the United Nations General Assembly, Before the Plenary, on item 15: Culture of Peace, New York, 18 October 2010; Statement of the Holy See in Explanation of Position on the Agreed Conclusions (E.CN.6/2011/L.6), 55th session of the Commission on the Status of Women of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, New York, 14 March 2011.

<sup>14</sup> See Statement by H.E. Archbishop Silvano M. Tomasi, at the 16th Session of the Human Rights Council – Item 8 – General Debate, Geneva, 22 March 2011.

<sup>15</sup> See Intervention by His Eminence Jean-Louis Cardinal Tauran, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, 63rd session of the General Assembly, Item 45: Culture of Peace, New York, 12 November 2008.

<sup>16</sup> See Address by H.E. Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, Secretary for the Holy See’s Relations with States, General Debate of the 62nd session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, New York, 1 October 2007.

In this context, Mary Ann Glendon, president of the Pontifical Academy for Science and professor of Law at Harvard University brought up an issue which she described as a challenge for religious and cultural leaders, as viewed from the perspective of such dialogue. I would like to recall it as I come to a conclusion. That is the „challenge... of motivating their followers to meet others on the plane of reason and mutual respect, while remaining true to themselves and their own beliefs”.

She asks: „Why has it been so difficult to face up to this challenge?”; and she offers the answer: „For one thing, religion has often been exploited for political purposes. But many obstacles cannot be blamed on outside forces. They include not only misunderstandings about the faith of others, but also a poor grounding in one's own faith. Thus, another crucial task for leaders and educators is to find resources within their own traditions for promoting respect and tolerance, and to draw upon those resources as they transmit their traditions to their followers”<sup>17</sup>.

Emphasizing these aspects, and many others, of religious freedom, the activity carried out by the delegation of the Holy See at the UN has shown to be fruitful in the service of their common goals.

In a sense, and with respect to the nature of the UN, this activity has been able to express and convey at the level of international relations, the thoughts and priorities of Benedict XVI as head of the Catholic Church. As the Pope said before the members of the General Assembly, „the activity of the United Nations in recent years has ensured that public debate gives space to viewpoints inspired by a religious vision in all its dimensions, including ritual, worship, education, dissemination of information and the freedom to profess and choose religion”<sup>18</sup>.

#### WOLNOŚĆ RELIGIJNA ZA PONTYFIKATU BENEDYKTA XVI. 7 LAT INTERWENCJI PRZED NARODAMI ZJEDNOCZONYMI

**Streszczenie.** Artykuł przedstawia najważniejsze aspekty interwencji dokonanej przez przedstawicieli Stolicy Apostolskiej przed Narodami Zjednoczonymi zmagającymi się z zagadnieniem wolności religijnej, w siedem lat po tym jak Benedykt XVI został wybrany papieżem. W wielu częściach świata, trudności związane z wolnością religijną wzrosły lub nabrały nowych form. Interwencje odnoszą się do tych zagadnień podczas debaty w każdej sprawie i w konkretnym momencie. Niemniej jednak, oznaczają niezwykłą spójność i pomagają zrozumieć jak dyplomacja papieska promuje prawo do wolności religijnej między 2005 a 2012 rokiem i wyraża myśli i priorytety Benedykta XVI jako Głowy Kościoła Katolickiego na poziomie międzynarodowych relacji.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wolność religijna, Narody Zjednoczone, prawa człowieka, Benedykt XVI, wolność wyznania, dyskryminacja

<sup>17</sup> Civilizations and the challenge for peace: obstacles and opportunities, Informal Thematic Debate of the U.N. General Assembly, Panel on: Religion in Contemporary Society, New York, 10 May 2007; Prospects for Cross-Cultural and Inter-Religious Relations in Contemporary Society, H.E. Mrs. Mary Ann Glendon, President, Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences (Vatican City), Professor of Law, Harvard University.

<sup>18</sup> Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI, Meeting with the members of the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization, New York, 18th April 2008.