

Speech of Cardinal Vinko Puljić, Archbishop of Sarajevo, to the “Exchange on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue” of the Council of Europe. Sarajevo, 3 November 2015

Your Excellencies,
The Authorities of the Council of Europe
Dear Friends,

It is, to me, an honor to have a word in this conclusive session of these days in which we reflect on the role which religious communities and non-religious organizations can play in the construction of inclusive societies and in combating the phenomena of violent extremism and incitation of hatred, to which unfortunately we are all witnesses.

The contribution that I would like to give this morning is very simple and can be summarized in the following affirmation: The construction of inclusive societies requires, as its condition, an inclusive comprehension of the human person.

It is crystal clear that human beings can feel really accepted in the social context in which they live only when they are known and accepted in all the dimensions which constitute their identity, including the religious dimension with all its peculiar forms of expression: beliefs, rites, and practices, both individual and communal.

In the context of growing pluralism, it is not easy to act always in favour of the full understanding of the other. Sometimes, in order to favour the integration, there can be a temptation to set aside those aspects of personal or communal identity which appear very characterizing and divisive, that is, which are linked with either national or religious identity. Unfortunately, an integration pursued in this way reveals itself as very fragile, simply because it is based on oblivion of ourselves and of our past instead of the purification of the memory and the search of the real encounter. The result is not the inclusion but rather a sense of exclusion and of frustration.

The acceptance of the other based on the “inclusive” comprehension is really constructive and capable of both yielding fruit of reconciliation and of consolidating our societies. Certainly, it is very demanding for religious communities as well as for public authorities.

As far as for religious communities are concerned: the acceptance of the other in the inclusive manner means, first of all, accepting the fact of living in a pluralistic society in which your convictions cannot be imposed on others, and therefore are meant to co-exist with those of others, all being on equal footing and of equal dignity. The absolute rejection of any form of violence or incitation to hatred, especially those which are conducted in the name of God or of religion, is the immediate consequence.

The inclusive and integral vision of the human being on the other hand, is a sign of respect and opens the way to the dialogue, especially that of life and fraternity, be it with members of other religious communities or with the persons who claim to have a non religious vision of life. We can build profound relations even if our views of the world and our comprehension of the human being remain far from each other.

The experience of our country attests to it: Our history shows luminous times of cohabitation and fraternity, but also tragic moments of violence. We clearly understand the difficulty of living together, but we have also learnt to uphold the richness of a society composed of different identities. This was clearly mentioned by Pope Francis during his visit to this City, last 6 June. He said, “Cordial and fraternal relations among Muslims, Hebrews and Christians, and other religious minorities, take on an importance that goes beyond the boundaries (of this country). These initiatives offer a witness to the entire world that such cooperation among varying ethnic groups and religions in view of the common

good is possible; that a plurality of cultures and traditions can coexist and give rise to original and effective solutions to problems; that even the deepest wounds can be healed by purifying memories and firmly anchoring hopes in the future". (Pope Francis to the Authorities of Sarajevo, 6 June 2015).

In favoring this itinerary of dialogue, it can be of big help the common task of building a democratic society, open to the contribution of all and respectful to the rights of all, especially of the weakest.

From this point of view, the "democratic citizenship" which we hope for and which we would like to build together, is not the convergence on abstract principles, forgetting our different identities, but rather a style of relations in which everyone is valued for what he/she is, even in his/her religious dimension. It would be an absurdity that believers, of any religion, should renounce their faith in order to become an active part of the society in which they live.

Let us have a look now on the second aspect: Also for the civil authorities and international organizations, the task of building inclusive societies implies the necessity to be led by the inclusive comprehension of the human being, the conception that recognizes the religious dimension (or the non religious options) as one of the constitutive elements of the identity of many citizens.

We are dealing here with a concept which may be difficult to understand for some sectors of the western societies, which for a long time now, are used to a higher level of secularization. Surely, single national communities, based on its history and traditions, can have a wide margin of discretion in regulating the presence of religion in the public sphere. However, the future of the societies of the Old Europe, marked by a worrisome demographic situation and by the deep mixing- up of the population, will depend on the capacity of the public authorities to create inclusive environments under the specific profile of the religious dimension.

In this regard, the principle supreme regulator should be that of full respect of religious freedom, as guaranteed, among others, by the art.9 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Religious freedom is the fundamental condition in order for everyone to feel accepted and it is a better antidote to the phenomenon of violent extremism.

Allow me to bring forth the reflection of Mons. Paul Gallagher, Holy See's Secretary for Relations with States, on the occasion of the seminar organized last June in Strasbourg in preparation for this encounter, which has been put at our disposal.

I hereby underline the fact that in the context of the growing multi-polarity, religions are an unavoidable subject for the realization of the true intercultural dialogue. In fact, an inclusive society can only be built "together" as the title of our meeting says. Therefore, it is essential that religious communities, as well as the organizations of civil society, be considered by national authorities and international organizations as a partner of the dialogue.

Lastly, I am convinced that religions could be invited to offer a specific contribution to the development of the culture of human rights. In fact, this is not abstractly determined once and for all, but is an on-going process, fed by the different worldviews and by the different comprehension of the human being.

In this regard, the Catholic Church is always committed to promoting the anthropology based on the transcendent dignity of every human being, created in the image and likeness of God, on the inviolability of his life from the moment of his conception up to his natural death. From this derive the duty in favor of the poor, the migrants, attention to social rights, as well as the rejection of any form of violence and the promotion of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue. We are quite aware of the fact that the Christian understanding of the human person is not shared by all, but we still see it as fundamental that this vision can have right to citizenship, and that it can continue to enter into dialogue with other worldviews, religious and non-religious. Even when the positions remain distant, we can always learn from one another and this contributes to the building up of a truly inclusive society.