



Universal Rights in a World of Diversity. The Case of Religious Freedom



Plenary Session 29 April-3 May 2011 – The 17th Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences is the first of two Plenaries to be dedicated to the analysis of developments affecting areas of Catholic Social Teaching that are likely to come under review as the Church prepares for the 50th anniversary of *Pacem in Terris*. In that historic 1963 encyclical, Pope John XXIII meditated on the requirements of the universal common good in an increasingly interdependent world where new patterns of relations among peoples and states were emerging. The Church, for her part, has deepened her engagement with the human rights project, supporting its aspirations for the protection of human freedom and dignity, while calling attention to developments that threaten the realization of those ideals. In 1979, Pope John Paul II praised the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as “a real milestone on the path of the moral progress of humanity” (*Address to the United Nations*, 1979, 7), yet in 1998 he warned of “certain shadows...consisting in the reservations being expressed in relation to two essential characteristics of the very idea of human rights: their universality and their indivisibility” (*World Day of Peace*, 1998, 3). Pope Benedict XVI took the occasion of the Declaration’s 60th anniversary to credit its framers with having enabled “different cultures, juridical expressions and institutional models to converge around a fundamental nucleus of values and hence of rights”, but expressed concern about the growing tendency to deny its universality “in the name of different cultural, political, social and even religious outlooks”. The time seems opportune, therefore, for the Academy to examine the current challenges to the ambitious modern human rights project and to explore the principal schemes that have been developed or proposed to overcome those challenges. In the 2011 Plenary, we will do so by focusing on religious freedom as a case in point. Religious freedom claims the Academy’s attention not only because it is central to Catholic thought, but because the dilemmas and controversies in that area are illustrative of the current crisis of the entire human rights project. Explaining the Church’s wholehearted affirmation of the right to religious freedom in the Second Vatican Council, the Council Fathers said that all people are “impelled by nature and also bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth”, but that human beings “cannot discharge these obligations in a manner in keeping with their own nature unless they enjoy immunity from external coercion as well as psychological freedom” (*Dignitatis Humanae*, 2). The close relation of religious freedom to other basic rights was emphasized by Pope John Paul II. Today, nearly every nation in the world is officially committed to freedom of religion as a fundamental human right. Yet, as Pope Benedict XVI has observed, “those who expected that with this fundamental ‘yes’ to the modern era all tensions would be dispelled and that the ‘openness towards the world’ accordingly achieved would transform everything into pure harmony, had underestimated the inner tensions as well as the contradictions inherent in the modern epoch. They had underestimated the perilous frailty of human nature which has been a threat to human progress in all the periods of history and in every historical constellation. These dangers, with the new possibilities and new power of man over matter and over himself, did not disappear but instead acquired new dimensions: a look at the history of the present day shows this clearly” (*Address to the Curia*, December 22, 2005). As even a

cursory survey of the contemporary landscape reveals, the religious liberty of individuals, families, associations and institutions is under growing threat from many different directions. Flagrant violations abound. Tensions are mounting between the claim of universality and the diversity of practices and interpretations. Religious freedom is often attacked in the name of other rights and values. There is increasing conflict and confusion about the relations among the various bodies responsible for implementing human rights at local, national, and supranational levels. The problem of fostering habits of respect and tolerance for the religions of others remains acute. And religion continues to be used by some as a pretext for violence. The Academy will begin its exploration of the topic with a series of presentations on the uneasy progress of the concept of religious freedom: its gradual acceptance in religious and political settings; and the persistent lack of consensus on its meaning, foundations, and relation to other rights. These introductory sessions will be followed by overviews of the varied cultural and political contexts for religious freedom issues, provided by experts on religion and society; the distribution of religions in the world today; and the current state of religious freedom worldwide. The second day of the Plenary will be devoted to the principal contemporary challenges to religious freedom, and to models for addressing those challenges. In the morning session, speakers will examine the problem of how a universal right to freedom of religion can be understood in the light of manifest differences among religions, cultures, nations, schools of interpretation, formulations of rights, and modes of implementation. The presenters will deal with, *inter alia*, the challenges posed by claims of “new rights”, by militant secularism, and by religions that lack internal resources for religious tolerance. The proceedings will then take a more practical turn as speakers from diverse regions and cultures discuss what can be learned from the experiences of various societies in dealing with their principal trouble spots. The second day will conclude with a panel discussion of the key question of whether there can be a legitimate pluralism in forms of freedom, and if so what is its scope and what are its limits. On the third day, the Plenary will turn to the relation between religious freedom and public authorities. *Pacem in Terris* states that “One of the fundamental duties of our government...is the suitable and adequate superintendence and co-ordination of men’s respective rights in society. This must be done in such a way that the exercise of their own rights by certain citizens does not obstruct other citizens in the exercise of theirs” (62). Speakers will reflect upon the great variety of attempts to solve that problem within various political systems. They will seek to identify successful models of tolerance and accommodation. They will explore such questions as: What should be the limits of tolerance and accommodation? What models are available for determining the scope and limits of freedom to practice one’s religion, the freedom of religious institutions to govern themselves, and managing conflicts between freedom of religion and other rights? Looking toward the continuation in 2012 of its studies on themes of *Pacem in Terris*, the Academy will devote the final day of the Plenary to religious freedom as a global project.

Today, where human rights are concerned, there is intense debate about what such an environment should look like. What should be the relationships among the various institutions and entities engaged in protecting human rights – at local, national, regional, and international levels? Accordingly, topics on the fourth day of the Plenary will include presentations on the role of institutions like the UN with world-wide scope, and a presentation on Europe as a museum of the tensions between human rights ideas and the various mechanisms for their implementation at the national, regional, and international levels. The Plenary will conclude with a series of presentations on the great challenge of creating a culture of respect for freedom of religion. Speakers on this topic will consider the roles of education and the media, the lessons that may be drawn from practical experiences, and the responsibilities of religions themselves in promoting peaceful interfaith relations.

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