



Message of His Holiness Benedict XVI to H.E. Prof. Mary Ann Glendon President of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences on the Occasion of the 17th Plenary Session



To Her Excellency Professor Mary Ann Glendon
President of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences

I am pleased to greet you and the members of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences as you hold your seventeenth plenary session on the theme of *Universal Rights in a World of Diversity: the Case of Religious Freedom*.

As I have observed on various occasions, the roots of the West's Christian culture remain deep; it was that culture which gave life and space to religious freedom and continues to nourish the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of religion and freedom of worship that many peoples enjoy today. Due in no small part to their systematic denial by atheistic regimes of the twentieth century, these freedoms were acknowledged and enshrined by the international community in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Today these basic human rights are again under threat from attitudes and ideologies which would impede free religious expression. Consequently, the challenge to defend and promote the right to freedom of religion and freedom of worship must be taken up once more in our days. For this reason, I am grateful to the Academy for its contribution to this debate.

Deeply inscribed in our human nature are a yearning for truth and meaning and an openness to the transcendent; we are prompted by our nature to pursue questions of the greatest importance

to our existence. Many centuries ago, Tertullian coined the term *libertas religionis* (cf. *Apologeticum*, 24:6). He emphasized that God must be worshipped freely, and that it is in the nature of religion not to admit coercion, “*nec religionis est cogere religionem*” (*Ad Scapulam*, 2:2). Since man enjoys the capacity for a free personal choice in truth, and since God expects of man a free response to his call, the right to religious freedom should be viewed as innate to the fundamental dignity of every human person, in keeping with the innate openness of the human heart to God. In fact, authentic freedom of religion will permit the human person to attain fulfilment and will thus contribute to the common good of society.

Aware of the developments in culture and society, the [Second Vatican Council](#) proposed a renewed anthropological foundation to religious freedom. The Council Fathers stated that all people are “impelled by nature and also bound by our moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth” (*Dignitatis Humanae*, 2). The truth sets us free (cf. *Jn* 8:32), and it is this same truth that must be sought and assumed freely. The Council was careful to clarify that this freedom is a right which each person enjoys naturally and which therefore ought also to be protected and fostered by civil law.

Of course, every state has a sovereign right to promulgate its own legislation and will express different attitudes to religion in law. So it is that there are some states which allow broad religious freedom in our understanding of the term, while others restrict it for a variety of reasons, including mistrust for religion itself. The Holy See continues to appeal for the recognition of the fundamental human right to religious freedom on the part of all states, and calls on them to respect, and if need be protect, religious minorities who, though bound by a different faith from the majority around them, aspire to live with their fellow citizens peacefully and to participate fully in the civil and political life of the nation, to the benefit of all.

Finally, let me express my sincere hope that your expertise in the fields of law, political science, sociology and economics will converge in these days to bring about fresh insights on this important question and thus bear much fruit now and into the future. During this holy season, I invoke upon you an abundance of Easter joy and peace, and I willingly impart to you, to Bishop Sánchez Sorondo and to all the members of the Academy my Apostolic Blessing.