



THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Speech by H.E. Mgr. Jean Kockerols

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at the Ad-hoc high-level meeting in the framework of art. 17 TFEU

"The persecution of Christians in the world - A call for action"

European Parliament, Brussels, 1 December 2015

- CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY -

Honourable members of the European Parliament,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies & Gentlemen

It is an honour for me to represent the Commission of Catholic Bishops Conferences (COMECE), of which I am a Vice-President, at this conference on a theme, which is very close to all our hearts. I am grateful to Vice-President Tajani for his kind invitation and I welcome the opportunity to contribute to your reflection, in the context of the Article 17 dialogue between the churches and the EU institutions.

It may seem strange to you, but there is a convincing evidence to show that it is Christianity which is the most persecuted religion in the world. Christians are being deliberately persecuted because they are Christian – sometimes being killed or treated with unacceptable cruelty – or are being forced to convert, marry or move home, all too often with the connivance of public authorities. It is much frequently the case that Christian churches or places of worship are deliberately vandalised or destroyed.

Extremist Islamist groups are threatening the survival of Christian communities in many parts of Africa, such as Nigeria and Cameroon, and the Middle East. Due to a sustained policy of targeted expulsions, Christianity may totally disappear from Iraq within five years. In China and North Korea, Christians are victimised because of suspected links with the West. To say nothing of what is happening in Pakistan and in some regions of India.

The treatment of Christians is a matter of concern to all Christian denominations. There is wide consensus on this matter. Pope Francis has not been slow to draw the public's attention to the plight of Christians enduring sustained persecution and discrimination in many parts of the globe. He has challenged the international community to see to it that persecution of Christians cease, that minorities receive the protection to which they are entitled, and that their rights enjoy the same protection as that extended to all other peoples, cultures and faiths.

It is important to disabuse the public of the idea that Christians are intruders in those parts of the world where Islam is now the majority religion. The Christian presence in the Middle East and in the Indian sub-continent goes back centuries beyond the beginnings of Islam. One example is enough: Christians were living in Iraq and Iran, in long-established communities,

already in the 2nd century AD. There were Christian missionaries in China long before Marco Polo, and their presence is a matter of historical record, as early as the 7th century.

The rise of political Islam in the Middle East has put the future of the region's Christian communities at grave risk. A century ago 20% of the population of the Middle East was Christian. Now it is 4% and going down. In Syria and Iraq there is a serious risk that Christianity may totally disappear. This represents a defeat for the ideal of religious freedom and diversity, values particularly cherished in the West, supported and promoted as a matter of principle by the EU! It represents a defeat too for religious and cultural identity. It is an attack on a cultural heritage, which belongs to the whole of mankind.

Objective social analysis demonstrates clearly that Christians contribute hugely to the life and wellbeing of e.g. Middle Eastern societies. The higher the number of Christians, the less the risk of radicalization! As Christians leave the Middle East, often forced from their homes, they take with them so much of the talents and good work they do for the benefit of the whole of society. Schools, hospitals, clinics – staffed and run by Christian teachers, scholars and medical personnel – are all forced out of existence. One example of Christian presence suffices: before 2003, 3 - 5 % of the Iraqi population was Christian, but *40% of doctors and engineers were Christian.*

It is important not to forget the key role Christians are playing in the Holy Land as a bridge, as a mediating third party, between Muslims and Jews.

I should like to finish my introductory remarks with three pleas:

- Christians in those parts of the world where they suffer and endure persecution need specific international solidarity measures. They need their property restored, their places of worship defended, and where there has been internal displacement, measures to help them return to their homes and re-integrate into society. They want to contribute to the societies which are *their* home.
- War crimes and crimes against humanity, sometimes amounting to genocide, of which countless Christians have been victim, must be punished and perpetrators of such crime endure the due process of law.
- International peace programmes must include Christians, so that in those areas torn apart by war and internal conflict, Christians may be able to play their part – with their rights and entitlements duly protected – in creating a secure, safe, stable society. The EU guidelines on freedom of religion and belief are a vital instrument in the achievement of this policy objective.

This morning's important meeting promises to raise awareness of the plight of Christians enduring persecution in many areas of our world. Let us hope too that some solutions to this troubling phenomenon may emerge. We want our fellow Christians to feel at home and secure wherever they live. This is especially the case in their historic homelands, in those very regions where Christianity was born!

Thank you for your attention.

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