



THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Speech by H.E. Mgr. Theodorus C.M. Hoogenboom Auxiliary Bishop of Utrecht and Member of COMECE

at the First Annual Colloquium on Fundamental Rights in the EU
*“Tolerance and respect: preventing and combating anti-Semitic
and anti-Muslim hatred in Europe”*

Palais d'Egmont, Brussels, 1-2 October 2015

On behalf of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (COMECE) I would like to thank the First Vice-President of the European Commission, Frans Timmermans, for the invitation to be present at this important colloquium and present a contribution to it.

The starting and opening remark I would like to make is that the Catholic Church condemns (and encourages to condemn) all instances of anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim hatred without any hesitation or ambiguity. The Church stands ready to voice its unequivocal support for the affected religious communities and understands their sense of grievance.

The foundation of the Catholic Church's contribution in this area is the transcendent human dignity belonging to each human being as created in the image of God. Both religion and freedom of religion should be regarded as positive elements, although no coercion should be associated with it. Considerations concerning religious freedom are also rooted in the concept of human dignity. The full guarantee of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion in all its aspects (individual and collective, private and public, institutional) is the basis for a peaceful coexistence and rich cooperation among citizens, religions and religious communities in European societies. With more specific reference to the issue of security for these communities in Europe, a trustful environment is essential.

The Catholic Church plays a relevant and important role in the whole structure of social harmony and she is ready to contribute and to provide her views on the subject of this colloquium, especially in the context of dialogue on the basis of Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

Another issue mentioned in the public consultation related to this colloquium is 'hate speech' and freedom of speech: for the Catholic Church it is clear that there is not a 'right to insult religion' as correctly highlighted by Pope Francis. In a homily, Pope Francis has recalled the Letter of the Apostle James, who says that *“ships are guided by a rudder and people are guided by their tongue. So if someone “is unable to control his tongue he or she is lost”. This is men's weakness.”*¹

¹ Pope Francis, Morning meditation in the chapel of the Domus Sanctae Marthae, Thursday, 13 June 2013, Osservatore Romano, Weekly ed. in English, n. 25, 19 June 2013, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francescomobile/en/cotidie/2013/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20130613_law-docility.html

Of course, there is a right to freedom of expression, including critical dispute, humour and artistic expression, but not to offend or to harm. There must be a rejection of any presumed “right” to insult religious communities or members of those communities for their membership, and their sacred beliefs and symbols. On the other hand, freedom of expression should not be further restricted to meet increasing excessive sensitivity of certain religious groups.

Interreligious dialogue is another key element. Interreligious dialogue is important for social peace, not only for peace between religions and religious communities. Steps are taken to foster such environment: e.g. the work done by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Commission of the Holy See for Religious Relations with the Jews. The Church's full involvement in the refugee crisis is also an opportunity for Christian/Muslim encounter.

Please allow me to conclude with a citation from Pope Francis, who reminded all of us that *“We have to bring up our young people to think and speak respectfully of other religions and their followers, and to avoid ridiculing or denigrating their convictions and practices”*².

² *Message to Muslims Throughout the World for the End of Ramadan (‘Id Al-Fitr)*, 10 July 2013, available at the link https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130710_musulmani-ramadan.html.