

**INTERVENTION OF HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL CHRISTOPHE PIERRE  
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Your Eminence, dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Thank you for inviting me to this Symposium and for the opportunity to exchange views and experiences on the important subject of religious freedom. I wish to convey to you the spiritual closeness of Pope Francis, who eagerly supports the Churches and Christian communities working together to build bridges between peoples of faith and the wider society.

Although I will focus primarily on the development of Catholic teaching on freedom of religion over the past 80 years, allow me to highlight its roots in Sacred Scripture, and its historical development.

In the Old Testament, God urges—but never compels—the Chosen People to follow His commandments, presenting their positive reply as a path to life. Similarly, Jesus’ invitation to follow Him is universal. While He is saddened when His call is rejected, he always respects the freedom of each person to choose.

Regrettably, during the Middle Ages, this liberty was not always respected by either secular or religious institutions, including the Catholic Church. While the Popes consistently defended the *libertas Ecclesiae*—the Church’s freedom and independence from temporal authorities—the uniformity of society was often seen as an indispensable prerequisite for social stability and peace, forging a close alliance between throne and altar. Persons holding heterodox beliefs were not only heretics, but enemies of the State.

A shift began gradually, which does not mean peacefully, spurred by the rise of various Protestant ecclesial communities, wars in Europe, and the increasing need for tolerance in societies marked by religious diversity. The Peace of

Westphalia (1648) marked a turning point by allowing European princes within the Holy Roman Empire to choose their religion without imposing it on their subjects.

After initially opposing the terms of the Peace of Westphalia, popes eventually accepted the principle of religious tolerance as a practical necessity. The Church maintained that she alone possessed the fullness of Truth and that the state had a duty to protect and promote the Catholic faith, to recognize Catholicism as the state religion, and ensure that laws were aligned with its moral teachings.

Religious tolerance, however, was accepted as a concession and not the principle, particularly where Catholics lived as minorities in non-Catholic countries.

It is important to note that this principle was not unique to the Catholic Church. Almost all European countries—whether Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox—embraced similar frameworks for regulating religious life within their borders. Some, not even that.

The horrors of the first half of the 20th century, particularly the persecution of individuals, groups, and entire peoples for their race or beliefs under totalitarian regimes, shook the world to its core.

That shock, combined with ever growing religious pluralism, led some Catholic theologians to direct their research on the relation between religious freedom and the institutions of a modern state. Among them Father John Courtney Murray, an American Jesuit, has a special place.

It is not surprising that the rediscovery of biblical principles of religious freedom, rooted in the dignity of the human person, started in the United States of America. In this country—religiously so diverse from its beginning—society had to find a way for religions to coexist peacefully. The First Amendment, by separating Church and State, created a space where individuals could freely practice their faith.

However, Catholics in America found themselves in a peculiar position: in civil matters they were loyal citizens of the United States, and in religious ones

they obeyed the Pope and the hierarchy. That fact created a long-held anti-Catholic prejudice that questioned allegiance of Catholics to the Constitution.

Father Murray dedicated his life's work to reconciling Catholicism and participation of Catholics in public and political life with religious pluralism and freedom. He reasoned that religious freedom is not a concession granted by the state but a fundamental right stemming from human dignity. He argued that members of the Catholic Church should not seek to impose their beliefs and moral values on others but should instead actively engage in public debate. By doing so, they would deepen their religious commitments and safeguard American freedoms. In other words, they would be both good citizens respecting freedom of others, and good Catholics obeying God's commandments and the teachings of the Church.

As strange as it may sound to us today, Fr. Murray's thought was revolutionary and faced significant opposition from more conservative theologians within the Church. In 1954 Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani, Pro-Secretary of the Congregation of the Holy Office, instructed him to stop writing on the subject.

Therefore, it might seem ironic that Fr. Murray was later called to the second session of the Second Vatican Council to help with the drafting of the Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis Humanae*, which Pope Paul VI promulgated on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1965, at the conclusion of the Council. One cannot overstate the importance of this brief document, consisting of a mere 15 paragraphs, for the Catholic teaching on religious freedom. The Declaration, firmly rooted in Sacred Scripture, transformed the Church's approach to its relations with states, human rights, and interreligious dialogue.

The Council, in the second and most important paragraph of the document, asserts:

This Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits (*DH*, 2).

The council further declares that the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person as this dignity is known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself. This right of the human person to religious freedom is to be recognized in the constitutional law whereby society is governed and thus it is to become a civil right (*DH*, 2).

The paragraph summarizes three major points of the Declaration. The first point is that human dignity stems from the fact that every person is created in the image of God and endowed with reason and free will. Therefore, each individual must be free to act according to conscience in matters of religion.

The second point clearly states that no one should be forced to act against their conscience or compelled to practice a particular religion. Religious beliefs and practices must be embraced freely.

The third point defines the role of the state. Governments must protect religious freedom, ensuring that individuals and communities can practice their faith both publicly and privately. However, the state must not impose a specific religion or unjustly restrict religious beliefs or practices.

There is also a fourth point in the document, specifically directed to Catholics. The Council encourages them to witness to their faith and invite others to it while respecting their religious freedom. This must always be done with respect and charity, recognizing that conversion is a free act.

We can conclude that, from the Catholic point of view, freedom of religion is a fundamental human right rooted in the dignity of the human person. The Catholic Church teaches that every individual has the right to seek the truth about God, adhere to that truth once it is found, and practice their faith freely, without coercion or unjust interference, as long as the rights of others and the common good are respected.

Freedom of religion, therefore, is not about relativism or indifference to truth but about respecting the individual's journey to discover and respond to God. This freedom is seen as essential for fostering peace, justice, and authentic human development in society. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states:

The right to religious liberty is neither a moral license to adhere to error nor a supposed right to error, but rather a natural right of the human person to civil liberty, i.e., immunity, within just limits, from external constraint in religious matters by political authorities (CCC, 2108).

The Declaration changed the approach of the Catholic Church to other Christian Churches, ecclesiastical and religious communities: from a defensive and closed stance before the Council to an open Church in dialogue with all people of good will. Pope Paul VI reformed the Roman Curia and established two Pontifical Councils, today Dicasteries, tasked specifically with promoting dialogue: the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity and the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue. Both institutions, during more than sixty years of their work, have organized countless encounters, working commissions, and meetings to promote better understanding, to find common ground, and to define areas of cooperation in advancing peace and tolerance in the world.

All the recent Popes reaffirmed the doctrine of the Second Vatican Council in their teachings. Allow me a somewhat longer quote from Saint John Paul II from his Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*. The Pontiff, in the context of the fall of communism, points out that religious freedom is the source and synthesis of all other human rights. He says:

Following the collapse of Communist totalitarianism and of many other totalitarian and “national security” regimes, today we are witnessing a predominance, not without signs of opposition, of the democratic ideal, together with lively attention to and concern for human rights. But for this very reason it is necessary for peoples in the process of reforming their systems to give democracy an authentic and solid foundation through the explicit recognition of those rights. Among the most important of these rights, mention must be made of the right to life, an integral part of which is the right of the child to develop in the mother’s womb from the moment of conception; the right to live in a united family and in a moral environment conducive to the growth of the child’s personality; the right to develop one’s intelligence and freedom in seeking and knowing the truth; the right to share in the work which makes wise use of the earth’s material resources, and to derive from that work the means to support oneself and one’s dependents; and the right freely to establish a family, to have and to rear children through the responsible

exercise of one's sexuality. In a certain sense, the source and synthesis of these rights is religious freedom, understood as the right to live in the truth of one's faith and in conformity with one's transcendent dignity as a person (CA, 47).

It is not surprising, then, that the defense of religious freedom is at the heart of the modern diplomatic efforts of the Holy See. It is not a fight for privileges or special treatment, but a fight for human dignity in which all of the world's major religions must take part. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI:

Religion is defended by defending the rights and freedoms of religious communities. The leaders of the great world religions and the leaders of nations should therefore renew their commitment to promoting and protecting religious freedom, and in particular to defending religious minorities; these do not represent a threat to the identity of the majority but rather an opportunity for dialogue and mutual cultural enrichment. Defending them is the ideal way to consolidate the spirit of good will, openness and reciprocity which can ensure the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms in all areas and regions of the world (*Religious Freedom, the Path to Peace*, Message of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, 1 January 2011).

In this way, religious freedom not only creates a space for the peaceful coexistence of believers of different religions, each living in their own space without interaction with others, but also enables collaboration in the authentic promotion of human dignity and the common good.

This is precisely what Pope Francis has been advocating for since the beginning of his pontificate. Building on the teachings of his predecessors, the Holy Father decided to publish, on October 3, 2020, the Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* on human fraternity. It was inspired by the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, also known as the Abu Dhabi Declaration, which Pope Francis co-signed with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar in 2019.

The letter could not be more timely, as we witness the ever-growing violence and conflict in the world, where others are not seen as brothers and sisters with the same dignity as ourselves, but as enemies to be defeated. Therefore, Pope Francis declares: "The adoption of a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual

cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard” (*Fratelli Tutti*, 285).

We can summarize Pope Francis’ teaching on religious freedom and interreligious dialogue in *Fratelli Tutti* in four key points:

The Holy Father highlights that religious freedom is a cornerstone of human dignity, a requirement for fostering fraternity among all people, and a basis for peaceful coexistence. He says:

A journey of peace is possible between religions. Its point of departure must be God’s way of seeing things. God does not see with His eyes; God sees with His heart. And God’s love is the same for every person, regardless of religion (*Fratelli Tutti*, 281).

Pope Francis, recalling the Second Vatican Council’s Declaration *Nostra Aetate* on the relation of the Church with non-Christian religions, reminds Catholics that the Church values all that is positive in other religions, and that this common ground allows for collaboration in promoting peace and the common good:

The Church esteems the ways in which God works in other religions, and rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She takes sincere and respectful steps towards non-Christians, seeking common ground and cooperation (*Fratelli Tutti*, 277).

The Holy Father also raises his voice against the abuse of religion to spread violence or persecute religious minorities—not only Christian ones, but all. He writes: “There are those who feel encouraged, for various selfish reasons, to sow division, hatred, and violence. Religious persecution and the denial of religious freedom must be condemned and eradicated” (*Fratelli Tutti*, 274).

Finally, Pope Francis affirms that religion must have a place in the public sphere and in societal debates. Political leaders are therefore called to hear the voices of the faithful, as they are citizens of their respective societies and may have legitimate concerns or unique contributions to make in building a just society: “Authentic social dialogue involves the ability to respect the other’s point of view

and to admit that it may include legitimate convictions and concerns” (*Fratelli Tutti*, 203).

Allow me to conclude by emphasizing that while religious freedom is an immense good that flows from human dignity—enabling not only peaceful coexistence but also cooperation in many areas—it remains under threat in various parts of the world. It is our responsibility, as those who recognize its value, to promote and defend it.

Thank you.