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"Dialogue, tolerance and education: the concerted action of the Council of Europe and the religious communities"

Seminar organised by

The Commissioner for Human Rights, Mr Alvaro GIL-ROBLES

Kazan, Russian Federation, 22-23 February 2006

C o n c l u s i o n s

Since the year 2000 the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe has organised a series of seminars to examine the role of the principal European monotheist religions in spreading and promoting human rights on our continent. These meetings have brought together representatives of the main religions traditionally present in Europe, representatives of the authorities of the Council of Europe's member states, academics and politicians. They have helped to establish a genuine dialogue and provided opportunities for exchanges and discussion.

The seminar in Kazan, on "Dialogue, Tolerance and Education: the concerted action of the Council of Europe and the Religious Communities", concludes this cycle. The Commissioner and the participants wish to express their thanks to the Russian authorities and the local organisers for their warm welcome and the constructive working atmosphere they managed to create in this multicultural and multiconfessional city.

In an age more than ever marked by the circulation of stereotypes and rising resentment in certain fringe groups within Europe's, the question of the deficit in ethical training and knowledge of the Other - his religion, his culture and his traditions - is central to the debate. The participants emphasised that mutual respect is based on the recognition of the fundamental dignity of all human beings. They affirmed that an understanding of the Other is essential to this respect. They consequently reiterated the efforts that religious communities and the educational establishment must make to ensure the teaching in state schools of "religious facts", in other words teaching about religions, including how they see themselves and other religions, and the human relations they induce.

In the majority of Council of Europe member states the new generations do not even receive an education in their own religious heritage, much less that of others. For this reason, it had previously been suggested to establish up an Institute capable of contributing to the development of teaching programmes, methods and materials in the member states. At the same time this Institute would serve as a research centre on these matters. It should also be a training centre for instructors, a meeting place and a forum for dialogue and exchange. Course content should be defined in close collaboration with representatives of the different religions traditionally present in Europe.

The discussions in Kazan once again pointed to the need to forge ahead and make this project a reality. It was suggested that the teaching should focus on the customs, rites and culture upheld by the basic tenets of the religion concerned. This training in spiritual, moral and civic values should strengthen public democracy and responsible citizenship based on respect for human rights. It is not intended to replace existing confessional religious education, but to supplement it. In more general terms the Institute would need to work in synergy with the institutions, higher education establishments and international organisations already active in this field.

The Council of Europe is a suitable structure to accommodate this initiative, which could become an essential part of its efforts to foster intercultural dialogue and European citizenship education as defined at the Third Summit in Warsaw. Within the framework of the Council of Europe, the Institute would be able to develop its activities with the requisite independence, in consultation with the religious communities traditionally present in Europe and other communities of conviction.

The participants hoped that the Institute would soon be a reality. Discussions accordingly focused on arrangements for setting it up and the organisational structures to be set in place. In particular, it was agreed that a steering committee was needed. It would define the institute's general strategy, while assigning the practical implementation of the project to a select operational committee, made up of members of the steering committee and experts selected for their particular fields of expertise.

The participants noted that the Council of Europe has played a pre-eminent role in defending human rights on our continent over the past sixty years. It has sought to protect the fundamental freedoms of Europe's citizens in the presence and with the active participation of civil society. This presence and this co-operation make the Council of Europe representative. These efforts need to be taken further, however, and for this it would be very useful if the religious communities were represented

in the Council of Europe, in order to contribute their support, their experience and their thoughts on the development of society and the protection of human rights.

Also in this vein the participants called for a broadening of the co-operation which already exists between the religious communities traditionally present on the European continent. In particular, thought could usefully be given to setting up an advisory body of the religious communities to work with the Council of Europe. The participants accordingly asked the members of the Committee of Ministers present at the conference to relay what had been said to the Committee of Ministers and encourage it to make arrangements for such an advisory body.

The participants welcomed the undertaking by the new Commissioner for Human Rights, Mr Thomas Hammarberg, to continue the work of Mr Alvaro Gil-Robles.