

FORUM ON MINORITIES ISSUES

Agenda Item 5: Promotion of Constructive Interfaith Dialogue, Consultation and Exchange

(27th November 2013)

Madame Chair,.

Italy is convinced that interfaith dialogue must be part of any strategy aiming at promoting peaceful coexistence, protecting human rights and preventing conflicts. Mutual acknowledgment is indeed crucial for mutual respect. This is why we welcome the paragraphs of draft recommendations document devoted to this issue.

Within the country, Italy has promoted interfaith dialogue by setting-up many institutional frameworks and launching numerous ad hoc tools. At international level, Italy has taken several initiatives in order to stimulate dialogue and mutual understanding among cultures and religions. In February 2013, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized a workshop entitled "Promoting religious freedom and peace through cross-cultural dialogue", in which academics and media operators from all over the world participated. The debate, reflected in a summary report, was extremely rich and innovative. Some ideas that emerged during the workshop seem relevant to our discussion, though they do not necessarily represent Italian views:

- Today, different conception of religious experience coexist: religion may be primarily conceived as a matter of conscience and individual choice, or as something to which individuals belong to, something akin to family, ethnicity, or nationality. Such as- coexistence may create tensions that need to be managed. However, in the current situation of cultural tension and growing religious intolerance, religion itself

does not represent the main problem. On the contrary, religion can and should be part of the solution;

Therefore, more cross-cultural and interfaith dialogue is needed to combat cultural misunderstanding and mistrust, and strengthen peaceful coexistence. In this respect, the role of academy and media is extremely important. Religious literacy

should be promoted among journalists to improve the representation of religions in the media, including at national level, since the media affect the way religious minorities are viewed. (As to this topic, Italy recalls that Council's resolution 24/15, that we promoted with other countries, established that the focus group of the third phase of the World Programme of Human Rights Education are media professionals and journalists, with special emphasis *inter alia* — on intercultural and interreligious dialogue);

Freedom of religion or belief, especially for minorities, cannot be ensured without freedom of expression and vice-versa: freedom of expression grants religious minorities the right to manifest their conception of life and world. In broader terms, freedom of religion and belief and freedom of expression are located on a legal continuum rather than opposition to each other: being central components of a democratic and pluralistic society, they may reinforce each other. Furthermore, legal protection of both freedoms can only be effectively implemented when an atmosphere of mutual respect is established.

I. thank you.