



***The Centesimus Annus Foundation
International Conference***

Vatican City, 18 – 20 May 2017

***The Holy See's Action to protect Christians and other
religious minorities in different parts of the world***

H.E. Archbishop Paul R. Gallagher
Secretary for the Holy See's Relations with States

20 May 2017

Distinguished guests,

Dear Friends,

Following our meeting last year, it is a pleasure to be with you again this morning and to have the opportunity to present the Holy See's action to protect Christian and other religious minorities in different parts of the world. As you know, in the global turmoil, the fate of the Christians, particularly in their ancestral territories in the Middle East, where Christianity was born, is a priority for the Holy See. In presenting you the situation, I hope not only to update you with a vision of the Holy See's line of action, but above all, to encourage you to consider ways in which *you might* intervene, within your own spheres of activity and influence, to support and protect Christians and other religious minorities.

I would like to begin by recounting the recent meeting that I had here in the Vatican with **Nadia Murad Basee Taha**, the Yazidi survivor and United

Nations Goodwill Ambassador for the victims of human trafficking. During our meeting, she recounted the barbarous evil that had been visited upon her family and the Yazidi people by the so-called Islamic State. After witnessing the murder of her six brothers and mother, she was, along with thousands of other Yazidi women and young girls, imprisoned and used as a sex-slave by ISIS terrorists. She came to the Vatican to meet Pope Francis, not only to seek his spiritual support for the suffering of her people, but also to thank him and the Holy See for having spoken out about the atrocities, not just against Christians but also against the other ethnic and religious minorities, including the Yazidi, who were subjected to unspeakable and horrendous crimes after the invasion of the Nineveh plain, the heartland of Iraq's religious and ethnic minorities, by the so-called Islamic State in early August 2014. As you recall, within days of that invasion, the Holy Father wrote to the Secretary General of the United Nations appealing to the International Community to take urgent action to end the humanitarian tragedy and the Permanent Observer of the Holy See in Geneva raised those concerns with the Human Rights Council of the United Nations. In this, as in many other cases, the Holy See sought to be the voice of the voiceless. Last Sunday, at the Regina Coeli prayer, upon his return from Fatima, Pope Francis entrusted to Mary, the Queen of Peace, all those who have been afflicted by wars and conflicts, particularly in the Middle East, specifically mentioning Muslims, Christians and minorities, such as the Yazidi, who have suffered tragically from violence and discrimination. In expressing his solidarity and prayers for them, he gave thanks for all those who have helped those in need of humanitarian aid.

Over the past few years, there has been a growing concern from the International Community and from many Christians in the West about the fate of Christianity in the Middle East. Unfortunately, such concern has arisen because of the atrocities that had forced hundreds of thousands of Christians

and other minorities to abandon their homes and flee for their lives, seeking refuge in precarious conditions and with much suffering, both physical and moral. Many have been killed and kidnapped because of their religious faith. What is at stake are fundamental principles such as the right to life, human dignity, religious freedom, and the peaceful and harmonious coexistence between persons and peoples.

We are well aware that Christians are not the only ones who suffer persecution in the world. There are many religious communities, including minority groups who experience persecution or repression, that may be state sponsored or societal in nature. There is a case, however, to focus on the persecution of Christians because, unfortunately, it seems to be on the rise. A number of studies have suggested that Christians are the victims of 80% of all acts of religious discrimination in the world.¹

However, given the existential threat to their continued survival, in dealing with our topic this morning, I would like to focus on the situation of Christians and other ethnic religious minorities in the Middle East. The very fact that several countries and international bodies have passed resolutions describing the threats against Christians and other ethnic religious minorities by the so-called Islamic State as genocide prioritises our attention and concern for the Middle East, particularly in Syria and Iraq, but not only. In Egypt, the recent terrorist attacks against Christians that were carried out by returning ISIS fighters underline the global reach and phenomenon of ISIS. Such events are a worrying indicator that the retaking of the principal cities under ISIS control, Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq, will not defeat terrorism but merely displace it as Islamic State ‘foreign fighters’ return to their countries of origin in Europe, Asia, Africa and elsewhere. Indeed, this is

¹ Cf. International Society for Human Rights and the Pew Research Center.

one of the challenges already facing the international community, particularly in light of the terrorism in Europe and elsewhere in the past few years.

In focussing on the Middle East region, I begin by stressing that the Holy See's efforts in that region are guided by the principle of defending the human rights of all people, regardless of race, religion or ethnic identity. While a particular concern and affinity for our Christian co-religionists is perfectly understandable and, indeed, is necessary for spiritual solidarity, it should not blind us to concern for the suffering and persecution of other groups. Threats to one or another group are a threat to all ethnic and religious minorities. Thus, I want to speak **firstly** about Christians in the Middle East; **secondly**, about the actions of the Holy See, both diplomatic and humanitarian, and **thirdly**, on the challenges for the future of ethnic and religious minorities of the Middle East.

I. Christians in the Middle East

For centuries, Christians have lived side-by-side with various diverse ethnic and religious groups in the Middle East. This diversity has constituted a distinctive feature of the social fabric of the region – a mosaic of different peoples and religions – even if at times there were sporadic episodes of conflict and tensions between them. What we have seen in recent years, however, threatens the survival of a Middle East that is a place of peaceful coexistence of peoples with diverse religious and ethnic identities. The ideology unleashed by the so-called Islamic State seeks not only to change the borders of the Middle East but its very nature by eradicating Christians and other minorities who are an intrinsic part of its identity. Indeed, as Pope Benedict XVI wrote in the Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente*, “*a Middle East without Christians, or with only a few Christians, would no longer be the Middle East, since Christians, together*

with other believers, are part of the distinctive identity of the region.”² Indeed, Pope Benedict acknowledged that the distinctive identity of the region is formed by Christians *together with other believers*, thus acknowledging that religious pluralism is not something to be imported into or imposed on the Middle East from outside, but a reality that already has a millennial existence there and which is intrinsic to its identity. This is the truth, the reality of the Middle East. The atrocities of the past few years, however, underline the heroism and courage required to give witness to this truth. When I met with **Nadia Murad Basee Taha** recently I saw at first hand such heroism and courage but I have seen it also in countless others who, despite their suffering, remain steadfast in their desire to defend the ethnic and religious pluralism of the Middle East.

The situation of Christians in the Middle East has been particularly desperate since the proclamation of the Caliphate of the Islamic State in Mosul in June 2014. In his letter to the Secretary General of the United Nations, in August 2014, the Holy Father called upon the international community to help Christians and others who had fled the barbarism of ISIS to return safely *“to their cities and their homes”*. Since last autumn, most of the territory in Northern Iraq occupied by ISIS has been retaken, including the Christian villages of the Nineveh plain. Unfortunately, despite their desire to return, very few Christians or other groups have been able to do so.³ Homes, schools and churches that would receive them continue to lie in ruins. Although liberated from the enemy, much still needs to be done to help Christians and other minorities to return safely *“to their cities and their homes”*. Constructing new buildings is perhaps the easier part; rebuilding

² Pope Benedict XVI, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente*, n. 31.

³ A recent survey conducted by the Chaldean Church noted that **1300 out of 1667 families, currently in Iraqi Kurdistan, wanted to return to their villages**, but their return continues to be delayed because the villages need to be de-mined, security measures need to be put in place as well as basic services such as water and electricity, as well as reconstruction.

Iraqi society and laying once again the foundations for harmonious and peaceful coexistence is the more difficult task.

An important and significant intervention of Pope Francis, motivated in part by the events of the summer of 2014, was his letter to the Christians in the Middle East shortly before Christmas 2014.⁴ I think that it is worth reflecting a little on this letter. On the one hand, the Holy Father writes as a religious leader to the Christian communities of the Middle East, while on the other, he also uses the letter to make an appeal to the international community to address the needs of Christians and *“those of other suffering minorities, above all by promoting peace through negotiation and diplomacy”*. Even though only one paragraph of the letter is explicitly addressed to the international community, the remaining paragraphs of the letter reflect the principles at the heart of the Holy See’s diplomacy in defending Christians and religious minorities in the Middle East by affirming that they are integral members of those societies who have the right, and the duty, to contribute to the common good. Thus, he reminds Christians of their unique and specific vocation to be the leaven in the dough of the societies and communities to which they belong: *“Your very presence is precious for the Middle East. You are a small flock, but one with a great responsibility in the land where Christianity was born and first spread. You are like leaven in the dough. Even more than the many contributions which the Church makes in the areas of education, healthcare and social services, which are esteemed by all, the greatest source of enrichment in the region is the presence of Christians themselves, your presence.”*

In his letter, the Holy Father described the unique role and vocation of Christians in the Middle East: *“Dear brothers and sisters, almost all of you*

⁴ Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Christians in the Middle East, Fourth Sunday of Advent, 21 December 2014.

are native citizens of your respective countries, and as such you have the duty and the right to take full part in the life and progress of your nations. Within the region you are called to be artisans of peace, reconciliation and development, to promote dialogue, to build bridges in the spirit of the Beatitudes (cf. Mt 5:3:12), and to proclaim the Gospel of peace, in a spirit of ready cooperation with all national and international authorities.”

Although the letter was addressed to Christians, the Holy Father was not silent about the suffering of other religious and ethnic groups: “*Nor, in writing to you, can I remain silent about the members of other religions and ethnic groups who are also experiencing persecution and effects of these conflicts*”. This illustrates perfectly the unique character and voice of the Holy Father in the international forum as the Church’s Supreme Pastor and Diplomat par excellence.

II. The actions of the Holy See: diplomatic and humanitarian

The primary diplomatic actor of the Holy See is the **Holy Father**. It is to the Holy Father that the world turns to, and it is his words and actions that inspire and animate the diplomatic activity of the Holy See. The Holy Father has various means at his disposal to exercise his unique and diplomatic role in the world. It is unique, primarily because the Holy Father speaks not simply as a world leader, but primarily as a religious leader. Indeed, his principal interventions come in the context of his *Urbi et Orbi* Messages at Christmas and Easter, the Sunday Angelus and his weekly Wednesday audiences with pilgrims who come to Rome, where he regularly appeals to the international community on the most pressing issues of the day. The Message for the World Day of Peace, on 1st January, and the annual New Year’s address of the Holy Father to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, are privileged

occasions for the Holy Father to speak to the international community and set forth the Holy See's principal concerns and priorities.

The Holy Father's international trips abroad are also privileged moments of the diplomatic activity of the Holy See because they allow the Holy Father to speak to the world of politics and the leaders of civil society, which was particularly evident during his recent visit to Egypt. These are some of the primary means through which the Holy Father exercises his unique mission to the world. All other diplomatic activity of the Holy See flows from the ministry of the Holy Father and is exercised primarily by the **Secretariat of State** and the network of **Papal Representatives** throughout the world, some of whom are in countries at war and in conflict, literally on the frontlines, giving witness to the Holy Father's concern for the suffering of peoples afflicted by wars. In recognition of such dedicated service, the Holy Father raised Archbishop Mario Zenari, the Apostolic Nuncio to Syria, to the rank of Cardinal.

Priorities and actions of the Holy See's diplomacy

The priorities of the Holy See, which are grounded in the dignity of the human person, include the common good of society, promoting peace and justice, so that the followers of different faiths may live together in peace and harmony. With regard to the protection of Christians and minorities in the Middle East, the Holy See's primary response **has been to raise awareness about the humanitarian emergencies** and crises that inevitably arise from wars and conflicts, including direct appeals to the parties of such conflicts to respect international humanitarian law by ensuring all necessary humanitarian relief is given to those who need it.

Similarly, the immediate appeals of the Holy See, in the summer of 2014, for example in the abovementioned letter of the Holy Father to the Secretary General of the United Nations, and constantly renewed since then, included calls to the international community to guarantee **the right of refugees and internally displaced persons to return in safety to their homes**. As I have already mentioned, the persons displaced by ISIS in the summer of 2014 are still waiting to return to their homes.

In these last few years, the gravest threat to Christians and to the survival of Christianity in the Middle East has been **terrorism, particularly, terrorism motivated by religious extremism**. Thus, the Holy See, in the various spheres of its diplomatic activity has not tired in highlighting this particular heinous evil and the specific responsibility of religious leaders to confront it and to affirm constantly that there can be no religious justification for any form of violence. Being both religious leader and diplomatic actor par excellence, the Holy Father has a unique voice on the world's stage and thus he is singularly placed to bridge the gap between religious leaders and civil authorities on that stage.

During his meeting, on 9 January last, with the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, Pope Francis devoted his speech to the theme of security and peace, underlining and renewing his personal firm conviction *“that every expression of religion is called to promote peace.”*⁵ Unfortunately, in the times in which we live, there has been no shortage of religiously motivated acts of violence that have caused countless innocent victims in various parts of the world. When we consider the great number of religiously inspired works that contribute to the common good through education and

⁵ Cf. *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See for the traditional exchange of New Year greetings*, 9 January 2017.

social assistance, especially in areas of poverty and conflict, it is particularly repugnant and offensive to all sincere religious believers that religion can be used to foster hatred, violence and death. For this reason, Pope Francis renewed his appeal *“to all religious authorities to join in reaffirming unequivocally that one can never kill in God’s name.”*⁶ A message reaffirmed during his recent Apostolic Visit to Egypt and in his meeting with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Dr Ahmed Al Tayyeb. On that occasion, he invited religious leaders: *“Let us say once more a firm and clear ‘No!’ to every form of violence, vengeance and hatred carried out in the name of religion or in the name of God.”*⁷

Understanding the motivations that lie at the root of terrorism and religiously motivated acts of violence is complex and requires careful reflection and analysis, all the more so when there is a religious dimension to it. Religious leaders are uniquely placed to offer such reflection. Pope Francis has helped to open up spaces for this reflection to occur so that religious leaders are able to contribute to the sensitive debate about religiously motivated terrorism. In this context, it is important to acknowledge the many initiatives and declarations of Muslim religious leaders to condemn those who use the teachings of Islam to justify violence and terrorism. For example, Sunni Islam’s most prestigious centre of learning, the University of Al-Azhar, has on many occasions, organised seminars and conferences in which it has condemned the use of religion to justify violence. Some recent examples include the seminar in Cairo last February, at which the President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, participated and, more recently, the International Conference for Peace

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Cf. *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Participants in the International Peace Conference*, Al-Azhar Conference Centre, Cairo, 28 April 2017.

organised on the occasion of Pope Francis's visit to the University of Al-Azhar last month.

Acknowledging explicitly the religious dimension of violent extremism is fraught with danger, and we can understand the reluctance of governments and international bodies to do so. Thus, the most important contribution of religious leaders to this debate is to help people understand that acknowledging the religious dimension of violent extremism, or rather the manipulation of religion for violent ends, does not mean equating religion, or a particular religion, or an entire religious community, with violence.

An essential element of eradicating terrorism is addressing the root causes, whether they be social, political or economic. Indeed, social poverty has been identified as a driver of terrorism. However, there are many forms of poverty. Indeed, Pope Francis has noted that religiously motivated fundamentalist terrorism *“is the fruit of a profound spiritual poverty, and often is linked to significant social poverty. It can only be fully defeated with the joint contribution of religious and political leaders. The former are charged with transmitting those religious values which do not separate fear of God from love of neighbour. The latter are charged with guaranteeing in the public forum the right to religious freedom, while acknowledging religion's positive and constructive contribution to the building of a civil society that sees no opposition between social belonging, sanctioned by the principle of citizenship, and the spiritual dimension of life. Government leaders are also responsible for ensuring that conditions do not exist that can serve as fertile terrain for the spread of forms of fundamentalism. This calls for suitable social policies aimed at combating poverty; such policies cannot prescind from a clear appreciation of the importance of the family as*

the privileged place for growth in human maturity, and from a major investment in the areas of education and culture.”⁸

In citing the aforementioned remarks of Pope Francis, I wish to underscore the importance that the Catholic Church gives to the role of religion and education in preventing radicalization that leads to terrorism and extremist violence in contributing to the debate about terrorism and how to confront it. A better understanding of the role of religion and education can bring about the authentic social harmony needed for coexistence in a multicultural society.

As I mentioned above, the diplomatic activity of the Holy See flows from the person of the Holy Father and it is exercised on a daily basis by the Secretariat of State through the network of papal representatives throughout the world. The Missions of the Holy See at the United Nations, particularly in New York and Geneva, are particularly engaged in the diplomatic efforts to support Christians and other persecuted minorities. The Holy See also participates in many international conferences. I mention just a few as a way of illustration.

Paris, 8 September 2015: International Conference on the Victims of ethnic and religious violence in the Middle East.

United Nations – Geneva, 7 March 2017: the Holy See Mission to the United Nations in Geneva organised a high level parallel event on the occasion of the 34th Session of the Council for Human Rights. The event, entitled *“Mutual Respect and Peaceful Coexistence as a Condition of Interreligious Peace and Stability: Supporting Christians and other Communities”* was organised by the Holy See Mission, together with the Missions of the Russian Federation, Lebanon and Armenia and was co-sponsored by Brazil, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary and Serbia. Moreover,

⁸ Ibid.

numerous other delegations attended the event, including Saudi Arabia, Azerbaijan, Brunei, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Pakistan, Palestine, Syria as well as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.

Brussels, 5 April 2017: The “*Supporting the future of Syria and the region*” Conference took place with its twofold aim to reconfirm the humanitarian commitments that the international community made in London in 2016 and to look at the best ways to support a lasting political solution to the Syrian crisis.

Madrid, 24 May 2017: Follow-up Conference to Paris Conference on the Victims on ethnic and religious violence in the Middle East: “*Protecting and promoting pluralism and diversity.*”

Humanitarian activity of the Holy See

From the very beginning of the humanitarian crises in Iraq and Syria, the Church, through its various structures and entities, has been playing its role in responding to the humanitarian needs of all the people affected. Dioceses, religious congregations and the various Catholic charitable agencies on the ground have distributed this humanitarian aid without regard to religious or ethnic background. This humanitarian assistance depends not just on the generosity of donors but also on the many volunteers who so generously give of their time. In support of this activity of the local church, I would like to mention the annual meetings on the humanitarian crisis in the Middle East, organised since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, and coordinated, up to last year, by the Pontifical Council *Cor Unum*. In September 2014, the “*Catholic Aid Agencies Information Focal Point for the Iraqi-Syrian Humanitarian Crisis*” was established as a means to facilitate greater cooperation and exchange of information among the various Catholic agencies involved in delivering humanitarian assistance in Iraq and Syria.

This focal point has also enabled us to have a clearer and more comprehensive picture of the humanitarian response of the Holy See and the Catholic Church. In 2016, according to the most recent data compiled by *Cor Unum*, the Holy See and the Catholic Church, through its network of charitable agencies, contributed to providing USD 200 million of humanitarian assistance of direct benefit to more than 4.6 million people in Syria and the region. In distributing aid, Catholic agencies and entities make no distinction regarding the religious or ethnic identity of those requiring assistance, and seek always to give priority to the most vulnerable and to those most in need. This approach was demonstrated also through the opening in January of a Caritas point in the Muslim area of East Aleppo and the “*Open hospitals*” project that seeks to open the Catholic hospitals in Aleppo and Damascus and render them fully operative for the needs of the local populations, especially the poor and disadvantaged. Such an approach is essential to Catholic charitable giving but it also bears remembering that, for many people in need of assistance, their first contact with the Church and Christianity is through the humanitarian assistance that they receive.

III. Challenges for the future of ethnic and religious minorities of the Middle East.

At the diplomatic level, the Holy See has always insisted upon the fundamental right of Christians and other religious minorities to *be* in the Middle East. The conflicts, wars and extremist terrorism, however, have contributed to the mass displacement and immigration of such minorities to other parts of the world for many decades. Indeed, it has been a constant preoccupation for the Holy See during all that time. The barbarity and cruelty of ISIS sponsored terrorism has only brought that worry into sharper relief. Can Christianity survive in the Middle East without Christians? We are facing a profound existential crisis and no effort must be spared in addressing this

crisis. This crisis is not new; it existed long before a self-proclaimed Caliphate of the Islamic State installed itself in June 2014. Even though much of the ISIS-controlled territories in Iraq and Syria have been retaken, Christians and other minorities have yet to return, not least because their homes still lie in ruins or it is not yet safe to go back. And yet, even if those homes and towns were miraculously rebuilt overnight, given the traumatic experiences of these past three years, would Christians and other minorities, who genuinely fear that what has happened to them may happen again, return to those homes? Christians do desire to return to their homes and villages because their identity is deeply rooted in their ancestral lands. The greatest challenge, therefore, is creating the conditions – social, political, economic – that will bring about a new social cohesion that favours reconciliation and peace and give Christians and other minorities the confidence to overcome such fears. As I mentioned earlier, constructing new buildings is perhaps the easiest part; the more difficult task is rebuilding society and laying once again the foundations for harmonious and peaceful coexistence.

So what are the foundations necessary for guaranteeing the future of Christians and other minorities in the Middle East? In the west, we take such concepts of the ‘rule of law’, ‘law and order’, ‘peace and security’ for granted, but the experience of what has happened in Iraq and Syria, where a terrorist organisation succeeded in taking control of large swathes of territory and declaring itself to be State. In the coming weeks, it is expected that the so-called Islamic State will be finally vanquished. But what will replace it? Will the root causes for its rise be addressed? The international community and diplomacy needs to help broken countries of the Middle East to answer these questions by insisting on some fundamental principles. Hand in hand with the ‘rule of law’ is the unequivocal respect of human rights, in particular freedom of religion and of conscience. In this regard, it is important to insist

on religious freedom, including the right to follow one's conscience regarding religious matters. In many countries of the Middle East, there are limits on the right of religious freedom. In expanding religious freedom, members of the various religious communities, regardless of their relative size in the overall population, will be able to recognise themselves as equal partners with their fellow citizens contributing to the common good. Christians and other minorities do not want to be 'protected minorities' who are benevolently tolerated. They want to be equal citizens whose rights, including the right to religious freedom, are defended and guaranteed through guaranteeing and defending the rights of all citizens.

Some concerted State-building is required in the Middle East in cooperation with the populations of those countries concerned. A proper functioning State that works for the common good is the ultimate prerequisite for protecting Christians and minorities in the Middle East and guaranteeing them a future there. However, more than that is required. Given the theme of your meeting "*Constructive alternatives in an era of global turmoil: Job creation and human integrity in the digital space – Incentives for solidarity and civic virtue*", I would like to recall that one of the final conclusions of the last meeting on the humanitarian crisis in Syria and Iraq, held under the auspices of the Pontifical Council Cor Unum last September, concerned the urgent need to promote initiatives for job creation in the Christian communities throughout the Middle East.

In conclusion, I renew my opening invitation to you to consider ways in which *you might* intervene, within your own spheres of activity and influence, to support and protect Christians and other religious minorities who are in need of protection.

Thank you for your kind attention.