

'To Kill in the Name of God is a Great Sacrilege! To Discriminate in the Name of God is Inhuman'

In Tirana, Pope Francis stresses that religious freedom is "a safeguard against all forms of totalitarianism and contributes decisively to human fraternity"

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"Authentic religion is a source of peace and not of violence! No one must use the name of God to commit violence! To kill in the name of God is a grave sacrilege. To discriminate in the name of God is inhuman".

Pope Francis said these words today at the Catholic University of "Our Lady of Good Council" of Tirana during a meeting with representatives from various religious communities: Muslim, Bektashi, Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical and Jewish.

The university was established in 2004 and "Our Lady of Good Counsel" is the patron of Albania. Students from different faiths attend the athenaeum and it is run by a foundation headed by the religious congregation of the 'Children of the Immaculate Conception. Roughly 500 Italian professors teach at the university's schools of Economy, Pharmaceutical Studies and Medicine.

After recalling that Albania has been a witness of the violence and tragedies caused by the "forced exclusion of God from personal and communal life", the Pope added that "when, in the name of an ideology, there is an attempt to remove God from society, it ends up adoring idols, and very soon men and women lose their way, their dignity is trampled and their rights violated".

The deprivation of freedom of conscience and religious freedom, the Pontiff added, wounds and conditions "a humanity that is impoverished because it lacks hope and ideals to guide it."

According to Pope Francis, the return of religious freedom in Albania has made it possible for every community to "to renew traditions which were never really extinguished, despite ferocious persecution". He also said that it allowed for everyone to offer, according to their own religious convictions, "a positive contribution; firstly, to the moral reconstruction of the country and then, subsequently, to the economic reconstruction."

"Only faith," Pope John Paul II wrote in a message to the Albanian people, "reminds us that, if we have one Creator, we are therefore all brothers and sisters. Religious freedom is a safeguard against all forms of totalitarianism and contributes decisively to human fraternity".

To this, Pope Francis underlined that "intolerance towards those with different religious convictions is a particularly insidious enemy, one which today is being witnessed in various areas around the world."

For this reason the Bishop of Rome asked to focus on two points to move towards religious freedom and thus see "every man and woman, even those of different religious traditions, not as rivals, less still enemies, but rather as brothers and sisters" and the "work done in service of the common good".

"Whenever adherence to a specific religious tradition gives birth to service that shows conviction, generosity and concern for the whole of society without making distinctions, then there too exists an authentic and mature living out of religious freedom," he said.

The Pope explained that "this presents itself not only as a space in which to legitimately defend one's autonomy, but also as a potential that enriches the human family as it advances." He also stated that every religious tradition should give account to the other.

Departing from his prepared speech, the Pope said that "without identity, dialogue cannot exist. It would be a phantom dialogue." He warned that one cannot explain their own identity if they pretend to have a different one.

"That which brings us together is the path of life. It is the good will to do good for the brothers and sisters, he said the religious leaders. And each one of us offers the witness of their own identity to the other, and dialogues with the other."

The Pope drew some laughter when comparing having one side of Catholic bishops sitting in the room and the other side of all other religious leaders, which he looked like two soccer teams.

Pope Francis concluded his address by stressing the important role of men and women in shaping a society that guarantees religious freedom and social justice.

"Continue to be a sign for your country, and beyond, that good relations and fruitful cooperation are truly possible among men and women of different religions," he said.

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