

Third International Conference on Religious Freedom and Human Rights: Unity, Diversity and Pluralism.

Globalization, forced and voluntary migrations, economic crises and geopolitical rivalries are deeply transforming the wider Mediterranean socio-economic, political and religious landscape, posing new challenges to our social fabrics. Growing distrust and polarization are among the most evident consequences produced by this profound arch of change and transformation. The cohesiveness and stability of most societies on both shores of the Mediterranean Sea are currently challenged and under pressure. Socio-economic and political crises are widening inequalities, fostering destabilization and disfranchisement that in turn are frequently manipulated in order to advance exclusionist and cynical visions that blame and claim diversity to be the main culprit of the present arch of crisis.

The reinforcement of the pillars of justice and peace in a violent and changing world can be achieved through education and common religious teachings that guarantee the dignity and rights of others. This may lead to the establishment of authentic plurality and diversity.

At the same time, growing interconnectivity and globalized communication and information are proving to be far more than neutral means and avenues of grassroots empowerment and free expression, showing an increasing number of blind spots that contribute to blurring the lines traditionally separating quasi-universal concepts like minority and majority, national and transnational, rights and duties.

In this framework, religious beliefs and affiliations are frequently interpreted as mobilization ideologies, sources of legitimization and identity tainted and manipulated to advance specific agendas, drastically limiting the room for coexistence in today's societies. Nowadays, the manipulation and exploitation of religious beliefs and affiliations does not only characterize the extreme level of violence perpetrated by militant radicals and jihadists, but also occurs at subtler levels permeating our daily lives and public spaces, as evidenced by the marginalization, defamation and labeling as apostate and infidel any form of dissent or diversity.

This dynamic of contestation and polarization structurally undermines our society and polity from within, dividing it into segmented groups opposed to each other. The Other tends to be perceived with suspicion and fear or, worse, frequently depicted as a rival to be contained and marginalized.

While it seems clear that the present arch of crisis is determined by structural socio-economic factors, it is necessary to enlarge our field of vision, concretely tackling the growing cultural and religious crisis that is affecting our present societies and that exacerbates social, political and economic exclusions.

It is therefore necessary to go beyond the rhetoric of the importance of defending diversity and plurality in order to put effort into defining such concepts and their role in our contemporary societies and to single out the elements that make them fundamental values for preserving the unity and cohesiveness of our countries.

Religious pluralism and inter- and intra-religious diversity should be defended in our public spaces. This is of primary importance in developing a “legal and civic culture” regarding the importance of religious pluralism and diversity, but also in establishing firm roots for their role and contribution as shared values in every country and society. Therefore, the present challenges are not merely related to defusing tensions and fighting discriminations, but require transforming our public domains into inclusive spaces where diversity and plurality can meet and coexist on the basis of the principles of religious freedom, defense of human rights and mutual respect, rather than considering the public domain as an arena of polemical and violent confrontation to be “conquered”, controlled or securitized. Indeed, present challenges require not only efforts in managing diversity, but a more profound rethinking of how to engage positively with diversity at both the individual and community levels.

There is a need to develop the present debate on diversity, not simply as an abstract value per se but as an essential factor in knowing oneself and one’s polity and society. The present initiative aims to foster debate on how to holistically consider how to develop an effective framework able to engage with diversity and plurality, especially at inter and intra-religious levels, on a national and international level.

The initiative aims to stimulate a non-rhetorical and open discussion of these aspects, inviting high-level officials, religious associations, journalists and practitioners to share ideas about how to develop an affirmative culture based on mutual respect and responsibility, without running the risk of securitizing these fields and thereby producing new forms of discrimination instead of recognition.

Therefore, the initiative aims to approach the topic of diversity and plurality in our societies in a dynamic and engaged perspective. The objective is not just to list the issues, problems and challenges, but to share positive experiences and propose complementary solutions on the basis of the initiatives and the projects that are currently developing or are under discussion.