



WORDS OF DOCTRINE - Rev Nicola Bux and Rev Salvatore Vitiello

Vatican City (Fides Service) - Religious freedom. Today we start a new weekly feature «Words of Doctrine» and our first topic is a timely theme the focus of debate in the present day international situation.

Religious freedom has its roots in the past where it was described as the believer's claim to the right to profess his or her faith.

Ancient civilisations knew nothing of the demand for a distinction between the civil sphere and the religious sphere. The sovereign coincided with divinity and created a point of convergence between the sacred and the profane, civil and religious. This philosophical-religious understanding will continue even in the juridically evolved Roman civilisation, in which the imperial claim to divinity will represent a legal-moral obligation for the people, in relation to loyalty to the state.

The Jewish culture was among the first to introduce the distinction between obedience to a constituent power which claimed a divine prerogative and obedience to one's conscience. A complete novelty in the historical, philosophical and juridical panorama, Christianity claimed the right not to burn incense to the emperor and to profess faith in Jesus Christ.

Tertullian writes with, with singular incisiveness: «Make sure it is not already a crime of foolishness to deny men freedom of religion and prohibit their choice of gods. That is not to allow man to honour whom he wishes to honour» (Apologeticum, XXIV, 6).

The principle of distinction between the civil and religious spheres was introduced in the history of humanity by Jesus Christ who said: «Give to Cesar what is of Cesar and to God what is of God » (Mt 22, 21).

The witness of Christian martyrs in the first three centuries of our era was one of the most significant pages of the history of religious freedom which must be defended and claimed at any cost in history in which religious freedom and freedom of conscience although philosophically distinct are interwoven showing two concepts inseparable in relation in a clear circle of reciprocal justification.

Religious freedom presents itself as a constitutive element of the human person, inborn and natural human rights, which cannot be affected by any external impediment of either state of public character or of a relational-interpersonal nature. The sole «conditioning » tolerated by religious freedom is that of obedience to and coherence with conscience, in harmony with the correct use of reason which searches for the truth and lives according to found truth and with respect for public order. Integral part of this «order» are respect for others and the known principle of reciprocity.

The juridical positivisation of religious freedom has seen in our day a flourish of international documents, state constitutions in which it is affirmed as an inalienable right. The ideologies of the 20th century, the resurgence of religious fundamentalism and a certain widespread mentality ideologically rooted in secular positions incapable of authentic dialogue, are a framework in which even at the heart of so called «post-modernity» it is possible to experience serious violation of religious freedom, demonstrating how the latter is always a principle to defend with indomitable vigilance.

The ample treatment of the theme in the declaration *Dignitatis humanae* issued by Vatican II (AAS 58-1966, 929-946), which roots religious freedom in the dignity of the human person and demands its full recognition for individuals and for communities in juridical acts of society, represents an essential contribution for understanding the very nature of religious freedom. However the Conciliar text must be understood in the light of a precise historical circumstance (the condition of Christians persecuted by the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century) and an essential theological condition: the exclusion of any form of theocentric pluralism which tends to put all religions on the same level with regard to the truth. If the men and women who profess them have the same rights and dignities, the question of the truth can never be evaded. The pontificate of Benedict XVI is happily focussing on the «dialogue of truth». This dialogue is necessarily based on the common recognition - against any relativist

pretext - that the Truth has been revealed and has made Itself known to believers. (Agenzia Fides 23/2/2006 - righe 55, parole 723)