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VATICAN - WORDS OF DOCTRINE rev. Nicola Bux and rev. Salvatore Vitiello - "Ecumenical dialogue and religious freedom"

Vatican City (Agenzia Fides) - "Ecumenical dialogue and religious freedom" - Over the past few days the Holy See has made several calls to nations with regard to the urgency to show respect for religious freedom "the foundation of every other freedom", as John Paul II so often said. The matter concerns however not only 'Muslim' countries but also certain countries where Orthodox Christians are the majority. This week the Italian Catholic weekly magazine Famiglia Cristiana published a statement by the Latin Archbishop of Athens Nikolaos Foscolos: "I doubt that better general relations with Orthodox Christians would improve the situation of Catholics in Greece". There followed a list of facts: Greeks Catholics are considered foreigners in their own country; to build a church it is necessary to have the permission of the local Orthodox archbishop; Catholics who marry must sign a document in front of a notary that their children will be baptised into the Orthodox Church. All this while in Italy and elsewhere in Europe Orthodox Christians are given churches for worship and missionary activity. Then as soon as you enter one of these churches, for example one in Calabria, you find a sign saying: "this is the true Church of Christ" and a list of differences to put the Catholic Church in a bad light.
We are all familiar with the objections and claims on the part of Orthodox Christians with regard to "proselytising" as they call the presence of Catholic dioceses in Orthodox Christian majority areas, and "Uniatism", or the presence of Eastern Catholic Churches in the communion of the Catholic Church.
These objections have been the subject of various studies for example by Adriano Garuti and David Jaeger. It would seem that, always in the perspective of the Truth, attention must focus on the question which we might call 'prejudicial' in this context namely the human right to freedom of conscience and religion which, as Vatican II teaches, is rooted not only in divine natural law, but also in the revealed Truth. It is known in fact, also on instances of the separated ecclesial Communions of the West, that this Council teaching has been regarded as closely connected with the teaching on ecumenism. In fact for dialogue in Truth to be credible, the parties must first of all recognise the human conscience's freedom from any merely human restriction in the search for the Truth. Such recognition is incompatible with a view which sees people as subjects bound to belong to a certain confession determined by territory, parentage, nationality or culture. Just as inadmissible is the idea, albeit implicit, that relations among Churches include division of land and people, as if souls were almost the "property" of one or the other ecclesiastical organisation. Even those who disagree with the decision of certain groups of Christians of "Eastern" rite and culture to be in full communion with the Church of Rome, cannot fail to recognise the full legitimacy of their adhesion and accept it from the point of view of religious freedom; just as, from the same point of view, they cannot expect the Catholic Church to refrain from being present and active everywhere.
It is true that the Orthodox Churches have not had the benefit of the doctrinal and theological development achieved by and in connection with the Second Vatican Council, which is why today they lack still the necessary links in their teaching. Precisely for this reason it would be most opportune, perhaps even necessary, for new and deeper specifically theological dialogue with the Orthodox Churches to focus first of all on these premises, the only ones which can lead us out of the apparent blind alley of bitter argument about "Uniatism" and "proselytism". These Churches could be gently invited to examine from the same point of view their own behaviour including the creation of various dioceses and other forms of their pastoral presence "in the West", con relative joining of "westerners" and the benevolence with which these forms of presence are received by society and by the Catholic Church herself.
What has been said with regard to ecumenical dialogue, particularly with the Christian Orthodox world, is just as true for inter-religious dialogue (despite the impossibility to refer questions directly to revealed Truth). In this context all the more obvious would appear the need in dialogue to give pride of place to the question of human rights, considering it the priority and primary subject for dialogue, and above all the most fundamental right of all,

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the right to freedom from any sort of merely human pressure in matters of conscience or religion. This would be especially, although certainly not only, valid with regard to dialogue with the Muslims and also with the Jews in Israel. Not rarely still today in “Muslim” countries the presence and witness of believers in Christ within the national community is denied legitimacy. Also in Israel it is not yet sufficiently understood by all that a person can be a loyal citizen of a nation and at the same time a believer in Jesus Christ. Not by chance in fact in history making agreements respectively with Israel (1993) and with Palestine (2000), the Holy See has put at the top of the list the obligation to recognise freedom of religion and conscience. It is true the agreements were “political”, they were not statements on inter-religious dialogue, but even then there were people who saw in them a profound significance for more specifically inter-religious relations. (Agenzia Fides 26/5/2006 - righe 60, parole 846)

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