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PERMANENT MISSION OF THE HOLY SEE
TO THE ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY
AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

STATEMENT OF THE PERMANENT MISSION OF THE HOLY SEE TO THE OSCE.

At the Second Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on Freedom of Expression, Media and Information. Session I: "Freedom of Expression and its Relation to Other Fundamental Freedoms"

Vienna, 22 June 2020

Mr. Moderator,

As this is the first time that the Holy See takes the floor during this 2nd Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting of 2020, allow me to thank the Albanian OSCE Chairmanship for organizing this SHDM with the support of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODHIR) and the Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM). My Delegation's gratitude goes also to the speakers for their thought-provoking contributions to our discussions.

To advance truth, freedom, justice and solidarity in society, the media – of whatever form – must be protected and granted the freedom that the international community has recognized. At the same time, there needs to be recognition that freedom of expression, as every human right, comes with responsibilities that cannot be ignored.

The role of the media in society should have a fundamental ethical basis: "The human person and the human community are the end and measure of the use of the media of social communication; communication should be by persons to persons for the integral development of persons", because "the media do nothing by themselves; they are instruments, tools, used as people choose to use them" 1 .

In order to improve ethical standards, and given the specific nature of the Holy See, my Delegation would briefly address the particular relationship between freedom of expression and freedom of religion.

Freedom of religion or belief does not preclude from critical debate or serious discussion about religion. However, it is not acceptable to hide behind Freedom of Expression as a justification for discrimination, hostility or violence against a religion or its members. Freedom of expression must allow a space to develop where both sides are able to express their views, with respect and without fear from the other, even when this goes counter current.

Nevertheless, the media have the responsibility to give a fair and accurate account of religious matters and to allow that members of religious communities are allowed to express their own views. To this end, my Delegation encourages the Representative on the Freedom of the Media and the ODIHR to develop specific guidelines for voluntary professional standards and self-regulation on promoting religious tolerance and non-discrimination in the media.

Mass media should be encouraged to provide a platform for a wide range of views, both politically, but also faith based, which will allow for a much richer and broader exchange of ideas and views. Indeed, as Participating States, we have committed to “favourably consider the interest of religious communities to participate in public dialogue, including through the mass media”² as well as to “encourage the inclusion of religious and belief communities, in a timely fashion, in public discussions of pertinent legislative initiatives”³.

Therefore, participating States are called upon to allow and encourage the representatives of religious communities to give their views – based on moral convictions deriving from their faith – and to contribute to debates about current issues. This will allow an alternative voice from the political mainstream to be heard and prevent these deeply held moral views from being disregarded or denigrated in the public discourse.

Special attention should be paid also to the use of the Internet, and especially to social networks, which play a key role in spreading disparagement of, or incitement against religious communities, including the promotion of irreverent treatment or provocative portrayal of religious symbols. Internet service providers and social networking services should be encouraged to adopt clear, transparent, and non-discriminatory standards, that prevents intolerant and inflammatory behaviour.

In conclusion, my Delegation notes how the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasised how inequalities in access to information places people in vulnerable situations at the greatest risk of suffering. The digital gap between the rich and poor could cost lives, especially when crucial information on COVID-19 is not timely, if received at all, in low-income communities. Without access to responsible, transparent, and updated information, a cacophony of unproven assumptions could eventually spread throughout poor communities. The risk is to create even wider inequalities amid extensive suffering. As Pope Francis recently pointed out: “This is the moment to see the poor.”⁴ Therefore, in accordance to the principle of indivisibility of fundamental human rights, we need to consider how social rights and economic development are essential in order to avoid that the existence of poverty inhibits the full and effective enjoyment of access to information.

Thank you, Mr. Moderator.

1 Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Ethics in Communications, nos. 4 and 21.

2 Concluding Document of the Vienna Meeting, principle 16.11.

3 Ministerial Council Decision, No. 3/13.

4 <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/time-great-uncertainty>