

OSCE Conference on Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination: Oral Introduction

I bring to this topic a sense of humility - it is so complex and important. I also bring a sense of gratitude. I live in the state of Maryland—the first place in the English-speaking world enacting religious freedom. It was a beacon of hope to many in the faith and helped prepare the way for religious liberty in 1639 and 1649. In addition, my life and ministry have been greatly enriched by dialogue with sisters and brothers who express their faith in different ways.

However, in the United States, racism and discrimination have divided our nation, wounded our Church and diminished so many lives. At its core, the sin of racism dwells within the temptation of the human heart to discard the God-given dignity that belongs to each human being.

Pope John Paul II recently addressed the treatment of migrants and refugees who are vulnerable to the most terrible forms of racism and xenophobia in his Message for the 89th World Day of Migrants. Increased mobility of migrants and refugees can transform our societies into multi-ethnic and multi-cultural communities. Such changes can have a positive impact by bringing renewed diversity, vitality, and greater awareness of ethnic and religious pluralism. They also heighten the need for improved understanding of relations and dialogue among people of different faiths and backgrounds.

On the other hand, such shifts can lead the majority to feel threatened and can make them resistant to a sense of welcome and accommodation to those “from outside.” In an atmosphere of fear and suspicion, newcomers are seen as a challenge to the status quo, threatening existing political, social and economic arrangements. Too often, religious identities and prejudices can be manipulated to draw people into ethnic or nationalistic conflicts or to intensify existing ones. Pope John Paul II has repeatedly urged us to resist the tendency to turn in on ourselves, inviting us instead to “discern in people of other cultures the handiwork of God.”

Societies today not only face new tensions resulting from migration but also from internal longstanding racial, ethnic and religious differences that diminish human dignity, and in some tragic instances, lead to violence and even armed conflict. We must be constantly vigilant to see the signs of this sickness within ourselves and our societies while working ever more diligently to build genuine dialogue and respect among diverse communities.

I want to lift up two particular themes: the positive role that religion can play in public life and a renewed spirit of interreligious encounter. First, governments and elected officials have an important role to play in valuing and safeguarding the proper place of religion in public life, where religion can make positive contributions. While the state and religion clearly differ in their roles, they share a goal of building up the common good for the benefit of the entire society. Though religion may be misused — even tragically at times — or distorted, it can offer positive values to society and can be a major force for healing the infection of racism and xenophobia. The political order subverts its own best hopes by confining religion to the margins and mistakenly thinking that the way to preserve peace is to deny space in the public square to religious believers and communities. Faith should be respected and welcomed in public life, and the particular character of religious communities should be valued along with other forms of association and civic engagement. Societies in which faith is marginalized and impoverished are diminished societies.

Second, the strength and persuasiveness of our religious call to overcome racism, bigotry, prejudice and discrimination will require greater understanding and cooperation among religious leaders and communities themselves. The path to greater respect and dignity requires a real change of heart, which cannot be achieved through political or legal m