

# Vatican official calls for better protection of religious freedom

VATICAN CITY – The increasing incidence of religious intolerance in many parts of the world makes it clear that governments and international organizations need to step up protection of the basic right of religious freedom, a top Vatican official said.

Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, the church's representative to U.N. organizations in Geneva, said that many problems stemming from religion-based conflict could be controlled by existing national and international legislation. In an address March 23 to the U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva, he suggested the revival of an old idea of creating a specific convention protecting freedom of religion.

In his address, Archbishop Tomasi lamented “increasing instances of ridiculing religion, of lack of respect for religious personalities and symbols, of discrimination and killings of followers of minority religions, and a generalized negative consideration of religion in the public arena” which he said can “damage the coexistence of religious minorities and the community of believers and faith.”

Laws in individual countries should not favor one religion over another, he said. It is essential to enforce the international and national norms already in place, which, “if properly applied, can remedy the gratuitous offense to religions and belief,” he said.

The archbishop urged member countries of the council to “transform unfortunate incidents of religious intolerance and the culture that underlies them into an opportunity for a new engagement to dialogue and the reaffirmation of the right and value of belonging to a community of faith or belief.”

In an interview the following day with Vatican Radio, Archbishop Tomasi was asked about one such recent incident: the March 22 death by burning of Rashid Masih, a Catholic, in Rawalpindi, Pakistan.

Initial reports from the missionary agency Asia News said that Rashid, a father of four, had been set on fire by Muslims because he refused to convert to Islam. The Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, also reported this version of events.

A conflicting report from the Asian church news agency UCA News said Rashid he had set himself on fire in desperation after police allegedly tortured his wife, also a Christian, who had been accused of stealing.

The man's death provoked three days of protests by Christians, who constitute a poor and often discriminated minority in Pakistan.

Archbishop Tomasi told Vatican Radio that religious freedom was "repeatedly violated by prejudice, discrimination and violence" and that governments and international organizations need to protect it in a more systematic way.

Education is essential, he said, and children in schools should not be exposed to texts that incite hatred for other religions. Religious tolerance can be developed at school, but also through the media, "creating a sense of reciprocal acceptance to promote a public space in which all can seek the truth together," the archbishop said.

He said that Western countries tend to protect the rights of individuals, while countries that are predominantly Muslim give more weight to the community. In this case, he warned, "there is the risk of discrimination against minorities" who find themselves in a "position of submission" with respect to the majority group.