

Vatican still working out clear policy on reciprocity, cardinal says

ROME - While the Catholic Church recognizes the religious freedom of all believers and insists that Catholics be able to worship wherever they live, the Vatican does not have clear guidelines for applying the principle of reciprocity to relations with other religions, said the cardinal in charge of interreligious dialogue.

Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and Francesco D'Agostino, a Catholic professor of the philosophy of law, discussed the legal and theological implications of reciprocity at a conference March 26 in Rome.

"Reciprocity is a concept present mostly in the field of international law, particularly in relations between states," the cardinal said, opening the conference on religious freedom and reciprocity at Rome's Pontifical University of the Holy Cross.

In international relations, reciprocity is an agreement that rights or obligations guaranteed in one state also will be guaranteed in states where an agreement of reciprocity has been reached, he said.

One of the clearest cases where reciprocity is lacking, he said, is in the field of religious freedom. For example, while Muslims generally are free to build mosques and worship publicly in predominantly Christian nations, Saudi Arabia still refuses to allow Christians there to build churches or worship publicly.

Cardinal Tauran said that Pope Paul VI was the first pope to discuss reciprocity in relation to interreligious dialogue. In a 1964 encyclical, the pope wrote that dialogue with other religions is possible "and we will not fail to offer opportunities for discussion in the event of such an offer being favorably received in genuine, mutual (reciprocal) respect."

The cardinal said the statement made it clear that "the church proposes to dialogue with humanity; it is an offer whose possibility is based on reciprocal and genuine respect; (and) the pope implies that the church can also not offer to dialogue where

those conditions are not expressly present.”

Pope John Paul II’s speeches and encyclicals made it clear that the church’s dialogue with Muslims requires respect and “reciprocity in every area,” especially in the area of religious freedom, Cardinal Tauran said.

But the cardinal said the greatest emphasis on reciprocity has come in the speeches of Pope Benedict XVI, who has said that “the only path that can lead to peace and brotherhood is that of respect for the convictions and religious practices of others so that, in a reciprocal way, in every society each person is truly guaranteed the ability to exercise his or her freely chosen religion.”

Nevertheless, Cardinal Tauran said, the pope and the church have not elaborated “a systematic treatment of the principle of reciprocity” nor provided “concrete indications for its application.”

Mr. D’Agostino, a professor at Rome’s Tor Vergata University and a member of the Pontifical Academy for Life, told the conference that from a philosophical point of view reciprocity can be symmetrical or asymmetrical.

A sales contract that stipulates a seller will be paid only when the requested goods are delivered is an example of symmetrical reciprocity, as is the Old Testament adage of “an eye for an eye,” he said.

The reciprocity of the relationship of a mother and a nursing baby is an example of asymmetrical reciprocity, Mr. D’Agostino said. Another example is Jesus telling his disciples, “Love one another as I have loved you,” rather than telling them to love him the way he loved them.

“When reciprocity is rigidly symmetrical – I give to you because you give to me – the mechanism is purely calculated. The other will use a scale to measure exactly what is owed,” he said.

Rather than requiring all parties to stick to the strict “tit for tat” of formal reciprocity, reaching out to another with a gift or with an offer of friendship seems to spur both parties to find creative ways to explain themselves, their beliefs and, therefore, their needs, he said.

Mr. D'Agostino quoted a saying of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke: "Love your enemies, do good and lend, expecting nothing in return."

"This is not an invitation to squander your patrimony in foolish loans, but a precious indication for someone who wants to be recognized as a brother or sister rather than as a creditor," he said.

After his speech, Mr. D'Agostino told Catholic News Service that refusing to dialogue with Muslims unless they promise to pressure Saudi Arabia to respect Christians' right to worship or threatening to block the building of mosques in Europe until a church is built in Saudi Arabia "is perfect reciprocity, but it is a cold reciprocity."

It would have been just to tell the Muslim community they could not open a mosque in Rome until a church was opened in Saudi Arabia, he said. But when the mosque was allowed to open in Rome, it was a demonstration of brotherhood that opened the possibility of a new relationship, he said.