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## Vatican: Muslim and Christians nurturing the new Arab world



(Vatican Radio) The need to nurture a "culture of democracy" in the Middle East is of great importance, the Vatican's newly appointed secretary of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, Fr. Miguel Ayuso, told participants at a 2 day International interfaith conference in Istanbul, on Saturday.

However the Spanish Comboni missionary added: "Each country convulsed by the 'Arab Awakening' will have to develop its own model of political governance, resisting any such model imposed from outside".

Hence the call for Muslims and Christians, as believers, to enlighten those who bear the heavy responsibility of leading societies to discern the degree of humanity of their decisions.

**Below the full text of Fr. Ayuso's intervention:**

### "The Arab Awakening and Peace in the Middle East: Muslim and Christian Perspectives"

International Conference

Istanbul, September 7-8, 2012

Address of Rev. Father Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot

Secretary

Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue

Vatican City

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to thank Professor Kenan Gürsoy, Ambassador of the Republic of Turkey to the Holy See for the invitation to this International Conference on "The Arab Awakening and Peace in the Middle East: Muslim and Christian Perspectives". Thank you also for the kind remarks and warm welcome and for the work done to make this encounter possible in such an important historical city for Christians and Muslims alike. My gratitude goes as well to the Marmara University Institute for Middle East Studies and the Center for Islamic Research for their invaluable help in organizing and supporting this event.

I have been asked, as the invitation noted, to "add the voice of the Holy See to those that support peaceful and orderly transition in the region as well as the legitimate aspirations of the people of the Middle East and in particular North Africa for freedom, dignity and democracy". It seems best to begin with the words of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI as a useful synthesis of the Holy See's view of all that has taken place in the Arab world in 2011 and its continuing effects. In his address to the Diplomatic Corps this January 2012 Pope Benedict spoke about the source of the unrest which has spread across North Africa as coming from a sense of uncertainty about the future felt by the young, due to poverty and unemployment, prompting them to launch the call for reforms and "a more active share in political and social life". Despite an initial optimism, the Holy Father noted the resulting violence and the fear that this unrest has become a means for maintaining or seizing power, rather than the recognition of the "inalienable dignity of each human person and of his or her fundamental rights." He called on the international community to help build "stable and reconciled societies" ending discrimination, especially religious discrimination.

Pope Benedict has often suggested that the promotion of human rights is the most effective strategy for obtaining the common good that is the basis of social harmony. Democracy presumes its foundation on a respect for human rights. In the growing efforts to enable democracy to take hold in the fabric of society in the Arab world, the hope is that it will lead to greater consideration of these basic rights. As this city itself testifies, an important element of the fabric of society is religion and its values. Indeed, as Pope Benedict has stated in many different situations, religious freedom is an intrinsic human right and it would be "inconceivable, then, that believers should have to suppress a part of themselves - their faith - in order to be active citizens." Christians in the Arab world, alongside their fellow Muslim citizens, are ready to play their part as citizens who together strive to build societies that respect the human rights of all citizens, acknowledging that "a vision of life firmly anchored in the religious dimension can help to achieve this, since recognition of the transcendent value of every man and woman favours conversion of heart, which then leads to a commitment to resist violence, terrorism and war, and to promote justice and peace."

As we all know, the first fruits of the Arab Awakening have been victories of Islamist political parties in Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt. While it is clear that this has been the exercise of democracy through the holding of electoral contests, there now needs to be a follow-up to further develop and nurture a 'culture of democracy' that includes developing a clear rule of law, where all are equal before the law, as well as developing needed state institutions which are at the service of all citizens. The holding of democratic elections has been an important first step in establishing the legitimacy of those who now must speak on behalf of the people. Let us not forget the danger, however, that democracy potentially could be used to legitimize extremist and fundamentalist ideologies. Such ideologies with their beliefs and practices represent a fundamental threat not only to religious minorities in the region, such as Christians, but also to Muslims who would identify themselves as 'moderate'. They too are fearful of religious extremism and the imposition of *Shariah* as the exclusive source of law.

Nurturing a 'culture of democracy' will take time, effort, patience and education. There needs to be a real effort on the part of civic and religious leaders to educate towards the respect for basic freedoms, such as freedom of religion, freedom of expression, etc., as the guarantee of fundamental human freedoms, particularly for religious minorities. The new leaders of the Arab world need to respond to the real and concrete problems of unemployment and economic disadvantage of the masses, which goes hand-in-hand with efforts to develop a 'culture of democracy'. If the new Arab leadership, self-described as 'moderate Islamists', fails to address such economic issues, it will only strengthen the position of the more fundamentalist Islamists.

As we have seen, the Islamist parties that have come to power in Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt, have for the most part adopted the language of pragmatism and moderation which appears as a positive first step, although, in some quarters, a certain skepticism exists. Many of the key actors that have come to prominence in the "Arab Awakening" have previously had the experience of living in the milieu of western democracies. Unfortunately, their appreciation for western democracy has been often dampened by what they would regard as the excesses of western society such as immorality, the rejection of religious values, consumerism and so forth, not to mention the perceived attempts of western democracies to impose aggressive, secularist ideologies which are contrary to Islamic and Arab culture. This has created a kind of collateral damage to the civil groups in Arab countries that have championed the values of western secular democracies; they are easily dismissed as 'godless', or un-Islamic, and even non-Arabic. The affiliation of such groups with Western organizations opens them up to being called instruments of western imperialism.

The political upheavals in North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula have not yet found their natural political equilibrium. Indeed, it may be sometime before such balance can be found, underlining the need for the international community to direct its every effort to ensure that the period of political transition now underway does not degenerate or provoke a further instability within the society itself or its political structure. Since the political turbulence of 2011, with its protest movements and political activists, there has been a search as to which political models to follow among various ones being presented. Ultimately, each country convulsed by the 'Arab Awakening' will have to develop its own model of political governance, resisting any such model imposed from outside.

In North Africa we see two basic models taking shape: first of all the incremental development of a constitutional monarchy in Morocco in which political power is shared rather than devolved and secondly the emergence of parliamentary governance in Tunisia where the new interim President has ceded much of his executive powers to a Prime Minister who commands a parliamentary majority. Such a development, while at base more democratic, risks descending into a negative form of "majoritarianism". It remains to be seen what Egypt will choose as its form of government. It may move from a presidential style government to a parliamentary government.

Al-Azhar University issued several documents in response to the "Arab Awakening" which are an important initiative, although it is still unclear as to the impact these documents will have in shaping political life in Egypt. The document on Fundamental Freedoms offers a reflection on the fundamental relationship between Islam and the State at a time of delicate political transformation in Egypt. The documents support the establishment of a democratic and constitutional form of government elected by universal suffrage that guarantees and respects individual freedoms. This is in harmony with traditional Islamic teaching, which, as indicated in the Al-Azhar document, has never sanctioned or practiced theocratic rule. Instead, traditional Islamic jurisprudence and systems of governance have been based on respect of *Sharia* law as one of the principal sources of legislation. Citizenship, rather than religion, is underlined as the sole criterion for participation in the responsibilities of society. The Al-Azhar document also affirms the principles of dialogue, tolerance and respect (no one should be accused of being an atheist) and rejects the instrumentalisation of religion as a tool to create discord among the various components of the nation. The document affirms four basic freedoms as the foundation of a democratic and constitutional system of government:

1. Freedom of Belief;
2. Freedom of Opinion and Expression;
3. Freedom of Scientific Research;
4. Freedom of Literary and Artistic Creativity.

In supporting these four basic freedoms the Al-Azhar document rejects the fundamentalist approach.

As we meet together today, the tragedy of the situation in Syria is not far from our minds and hearts. From the very beginning of the crisis in Syria, the Holy See, and many times the Holy Father himself, has condemned the violence and terrible loss of human life. The Holy Father, affirming the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people, has repeatedly called upon all those in authority or in positions of responsibility, to end the violence and rather to enter the path of dialogue as the true means to address such concerns.

The position of the Holy See regarding Syria has been: 1) to call for an immediate end to violence from whatever part; 2) to dialogue towards reconciliation as the necessary path to respond to the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people; 3) to preserve the unity of the Syrian people regardless of ethnicity and religious affiliation; 4) to ask Syria, as a member of the family of nations, to be also cognizant of the legitimate concerns of the international community; and finally, 5) the Holy See appeals to the international community to dedicate itself to a process of peace in Syria and the entire region for the benefit and well-being of all humanity.

Christians in Syria seek to live in peace and harmony with their fellow Syrians. They are naturally fearful that the growing violence, destruction and displacement, the continuing loss of life, endangers not just Christians but all Syrians, regardless of their ethnicity or religion. The spectre of what has happened to Christians in Iraq hangs heavily over the Christian communities in Syria. Christians do not want to be marginalized in Syria nor do they wish to seek partisan advantage. Rather they want to be in the service of the common good, to be points of reference, or bridges with, and between, all communities. It would be regrettable if the choice of Christians to avoid partisan politics should be interpreted as cowardice instead of courage. The choice to

be open to all communities, to transcend partisanship, requires perhaps a greater courage. Christians have as their mission to be builders of peace, harmony and unity, among all Syrians, regardless of ethnicity or religious affiliation, as the way of living in the difficulty of the struggle of their nation. As believers, Muslims and Christians have to enlighten those who bear the heavy responsibility of leading societies to discern the degree of humanity of their decisions. If we recognize the singularity of the human person, his or her vocation, we are all compelled, leaders and ordinary people, to ask if politics, economy, laws are at the service of the human person, created by God who wants humanity to be a family. We have to indicate, not only in words but by deeds, that a society can only be built and thrive by recognizing the legitimate rights of its people, each person's human dignity, freedom to worship and finally to contribute his or her gifts to the society in which each lives, regardless of race, religion or ethnic base. This is true of established societies as well as those in profound transition as we see in the countries of the so called "Arab Awakening". I believe this addresses the question of our conference: to find the true path to "peaceful and orderly transition ... for freedom, dignity and democracy."

Thank you.

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