

Vatican foreign minister says religious freedom an “indispensable” element to conflict resolution

One of the Vatican’s top diplomats has affirmed the importance of religious freedom in promoting peace and resolving global conflicts, during an official visit to Australia.

His Excellency Archbishop Paul Gallagher, who is Secretary for the Relations with States and International Organizations for the Holy See, gave a lecture on religious freedom at Australian Catholic University’s North Sydney campus.

The event coincided with Archbishop Gallagher’s visit to Australia to mark the 50th year of diplomatic relations between Australia and the Holy See. It was also his first visit to ACU since receiving a Doctor of Laws (*Honoris Causa*) from ACU in Rome in 2019.

During his lecture on 6 November, Archbishop Gallagher said the question of religious freedom and respect for religion was “a hidden and often forgotten aspect” despite being at the heart of nearly every conflict witnessed in recent times.

“Sadly, throughout history and continuing into the present day, religion, instead of being a harmonious force, has become a driving force in many political disputes,” Archbishop Gallagher said.

However, a true understanding of religious freedom encouraged unity and diversity, rather than division.

“Here, a fundamental principle emerges: religious freedom is not merely a human right but also a transcendent, practical path toward healing divisions, promoting dialogue, and forging a more peaceful and harmonious global community,” Archbishop Gallagher said.

“When individuals are free to worship and engage in religious activities without interference, it becomes easier for others to see that religious differences do not inherently make someone an enemy. Instead, they are one defining aspect of an individual’s identity.

“As Pope Francis aptly suggests in his *Evangelii Gaudium*, what is needed in this era is “a healthy pluralism, one which genuinely respects differences and values them as such, without privatizing religions or relegating them to enclosed precincts of churches, synagogues, or mosques” (EG n.255).

“It is from this perspective that the Holy See has often been obligated to defend this fundamental human right, as it is foundational to each person’s identity and to the free exercise of one’s liberty for the integral development of each person and of society as a whole.”

The Catholic Church, through continued diplomatic relations with nations and international bodies, “tirelessly advocates” for religious freedom and human rights as a doorway to peace and conflict resolution, Archbishop Gallagher said.

“By emphasizing religious tolerance, advocating for legal protections, and participating in international forums, the Holy See contributes to the discourse on religious freedom and plays a pivotal role in advocating for peace, reconciliation, and non-violent conflict resolution, addressing the human consequences of conflicts and promoting understanding and respect for diverse religious traditions,” Archbishop Gallagher said.

In responding to Archbishop Gallagher’s lecture, PM Glynn Institute director Dr Michael Casey said over the course of history, humanity has used many things to justify conflict and division, including religion.

“Human beings of course are capable of using anything to justify conflict and division, from the noblest principles to the basest instincts, but it is a particular cause for scandal and shame when religion serves, or is made to serve this purpose, precisely because it is meant to be a source of peace, harmony, and justice,” Dr Casey said.

Dr Casey said Archbishop Gallagher’s observations about virtues and attributes shared by many religions, such as hope, empathy and compassion “highlights what should be the natural disposition of religious communities to peacemaking, mutual understanding, and healing”.

MEDIA RELEASE

7 November 2023



Despite the good that can come from religion, religious freedom “is more likely to be misunderstood than almost any other fundamental right”. Dr Casey argued that one reason for this is that in Western, technocratic societies, the religious dimension of human life is not taken seriously.

Archbishop Gallagher, born in Liverpool in 1954, has worked in the Holy See's diplomatic service since 1984, holding positions in Africa, South America, Asia, and Australia.

Prior to his appointment as the Vatican's equivalent foreign minister, Archbishop Gallagher was Papal Nuncio to Australia, or the Holy See's diplomatic representative.

Following his visit to ACU, Archbishop Gallagher will meet key with other key Australian political and religious leaders, including the current Apostolic Nuncio in Canberra, and Foreign Minister Penny Wong.

ACU Vice-Chancellor and President, Professor Zlatko Skrbis, said ACU was honoured to host Archbishop Gallagher to deliver a lecture with such a timely and important message.

“ACU is one of the few higher education institutions in this country with faith at the core of its mission and identity,” Professor Skrbis said.

“As such, we make a conscious effort to provide opportunities for topics like religious freedom to be discussed openly, with a view to promoting unity rather than division.

“It was a delight to welcome Archbishop Gallagher back to ACU here in Sydney, to speak on the fundamental and essential human right of religious liberty.”

Media Contact: Emilie Ng, 0475 963 606, emilie.ng@acu.edu.au