

ROME

Religious freedom in crisis

GOVERNMENTS should exercise “a detached neutrality” towards religions, the Vatican’s secretary for relations with states told a conference last week, *writes Patrick Hudson*.

Speaking at the Order of Malta’s headquarters in Rome during a discussion of religious freedom and integral human development, Archbishop Paul Gallagher said all individuals and religious groups should enjoy “an equal right to the public manifestation of their religious convictions”.

However, he said that 4.9 billion people – more than 60 per cent of the world’s population – “are currently prevented or harmed in the exercise of their rights in matters of conscience”.

The conference considered the “global crisis of religious freedom” in the terms of integral human development, the Catholic concept of individual and communal growth advanced by the French Dominican Louis-Joseph Lebreton and employed in Paul VI’s 1967 encyclical *Populorum Progressio*.

Gallagher argued that freedom of conscience, was “arguably the most fundamental” human right, because it limits the state’s authority and so “ensures that fundamental rights are not violated”.

PORTUGAL

Lisbon WYD made €35m

WORLD YOUTH DAY 2023 in Lisbon made a surplus of €35 million (£29.5 million), according to official accounts published on 31 May, *writes Filipe Avelaz*.

According to the outgoing president of the WYD 2023 Foundation, which organised the event, this exceeded even the most optimistic predictions.

“I had hoped we might end with a positive result of maybe three or four million,” said Cardinal Américo Aguiar, who was made Bishop of Setúbal after organising the event as a Lisbon auxiliary. He attributed the surplus to a higher-than-expected number of pilgrims (more than 400,000), to the €11 million of donations made by individuals and private companies, and to meticulous management by the foundation. The foundation undertook to invest its surplus to fund projects for Portuguese youth and children.

VIEW FROM ROME

Joseph Tulloch



WHEN YOU think about Saudi Arabia, “interreligious dialogue” is probably not the first phrase that springs to mind.

Public expression of any religion other than Sunni Islam is banned in the Gulf state, and apostasy is punishable by death.

In 2009, though, Saudi Arabia joined the Vatican, Spain and Austria in founding KAICIID, an international forum dedicated to interfaith dialogue. The organisation – officially the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue – hosts frequent conferences bringing together high-level religious and political leaders. I attended one of these meetings recently in Lisbon. There was an impressive lineup of speakers, including the Grand Imam of Mecca, the Patriarch of Constantinople, and three former European heads of state. For two days, participants – more than 100 in total – gathered in a conference room on the Tagus river, discussing the dangers of religious extremism and the need for faith actors to combat climate change.

It’s easy to be cynical about this kind of initiative. The huge amount of money the forum has – we were put up in luxury hotels for three days – attracts many participants with a keener interest in the catering than in the promotion of interfaith understanding. And two years ago, KAICIID was forced to transfer to Lisbon from its original base in Vienna after a campaign against it by a number of politicians and activists concerned about Saudi Arabia’s poor human rights record.

These concerns are legitimate. I was impressed, though, by the KAICIID staff I met, who were drawn from a variety of countries and religious backgrounds, and were clearly genuinely committed to dialogue. There were some great speakers, too – I particularly enjoyed the talk by the Chief Rabbi of Poland, Michael Schudrich. At this delicate moment in the world’s history, we need as many opportunities as possible for dialogue, however imperfect they might be.

LAST WEEK, Pope Francis met with academics, policymakers and religious leaders who had been participating in a Vatican conference entitled Addressing the Debt Crisis in the Global South. The Pope told participants – including the finance ministers of Brazil and Spain and the Nobel-Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz – that the pandemic, wars, and a “mismanaged globalisation” had led to a debt crisis causing “misery and distress” in the global South, “depriving millions of people of the possibility of a dignified future”. He suggested – as Pope John Paul II had, back

in 2000 – that the upcoming Jubilee Year would be a good opportunity for developed countries to reduce or outright cancel the debts owed to them by poorer nations. (The Catholic Church celebrates a Jubilee Year every quarter of a century, a practice with roots in the ancient Jewish tradition of the Jubilee, when slaves would be freed and debts forgiven.)

An official at the Vatican’s Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, which handles these matters, told me that they don’t expect Francis’ appeal to be as successful as his predecessor’s. Since 2000, they said, a lot of debt has moved from public to private hands, and debt cancellation has accordingly become a lot less likely. Perhaps it’s fortunate, then, that debt was not the only item on the agenda. One of the conference participants was Fernando Haddad, Brazil’s left-wing finance minister, who has been making waves recently for his advocacy of a global minimum tax on billionaires. His country currently holds the rotating presidency of the G20, and Haddad has been using this position to promote the policy. He said that the conference in the Vatican was an “appropriate place” to advocate for the idea.

A LITTLE over 80 years ago, on 4 June 1944, Allied troops liberated Rome from Nazi occupation. A week later, on the 12th, a detachment from the British Army’s 38th (Irish) Brigade was received by Pope Pius XII. They were some of the first soldiers to enter the Vatican since the occupation of Rome nine months prior – German soldiers had surrounded the city state, but not ventured within its borders.

Later, Brigadier Pat Scott – a Protestant – described being “led by gorgeously dressed officers through courtyards and ante chambers” to meet the Pope, who “gave an excellent address in English”. After his speech, Scott wrote, Pope Pius spoke to many of the men, and “thoroughly enjoyed” the tunes performed for him by the Brigade’s pipers.

The Brigadier’s account ends on a serious note. He expresses his concern that, after the end of the war, Ireland would be remembered only for its neutrality, and not for the thousands of men – from both the North and the South – who volunteered to fight in the British army. “It is sometimes overlooked that the services of every Irishman from any part of Ireland are given of their own free will for the good of the cause,” he writes, “be they fighting men or those priests, who helped the English prisoners in Rome.”

Joseph Tulloch is a writer and journalist based in Rome.