

Mobilising faith communities in ending sexual violence



His Eminence

Cardinal Vincent Nichols addressed the Inter-faith Consultation Conference on mobilising faith communities in ending sexual violence in conflicts on 9 February 2015 at Lancaster House.

The Cardinal spoke firmly against sexual violence in warfare as "a deliberate and ordered tactic of oppression, domination, destruction". Saying that war is not an excuse, he said, "sexual violence is always a crime; it is always an immoral act."

Echoing the words of Pope Francis, the Cardinal said that "sexual violence as an instrument of warfare and conflict is a deep wound in the body of humanity", and "that it is as old as humanity is a cause for our lasting shame."

Cardinal Vincent also paid tribute to the work of "religiously motivated people in the fight against sexual violence in warfare". He especially recognised all the religious sisters who "have dedicated themselves to this work, without seeking reward or praise".

The conference was organised by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the We Will Speak Out coalition.

Full Text

The full text of Cardinal Vincent Nichols' address follows:

Thank you for this opportunity to have a part in this important Conference - indeed a most enjoyable part.

The stated aim of the Conference is to mobilise the faith communities in the fight against sexual violence especially in conflict situations. I welcome that intention, because the role of faith in our world and in this struggle is so important. At the first PSVI Conference, also organised by the Foreign Office, I heard the testimony of so many, victims and activists, that it was their faith, above all else, that strengthened them for this struggle. This conviction was repeated at a different conference here, in December, on combatting human slavery, a further area in which the Government deserves real credit for its leadership.

The horror of sexual violence, used as a part of conflict and warfare, literally defies description because of the radical and permanent damage done to the very essence, the personal sense of being, of its victims. It also defies description because of the numbers of its victims and the unbelievable spread of this evil in so many parts of our world. This horror defies description because it is not the random act of men who have, for a while, lost all sense of decency, but a deliberate and ordered tactic of oppression, domination, destruction. It is to humanity's shame that the systematic use of sexual violation is still, in some places, considered as a duty of soldiers, an order that they must carry out. It also defies description in that the stigma attached to sexual violation falls on the victim and not on the perpetrator. What terrible collusion is indicated by that fact? This public acceptance inverts the principles of human decency and reinforces so many other daily forms of oppression and of disregard for the moral standards which underlie mutual respect and the rights of the person.

So a crucial starting point for this struggle against sexual violence is the recognition that every human activity is subject to moral principles and judgment. If this principle is put to one side, then not only do human actions lose their truly human character but they risk sinking into the realms of the amoral. This principle applies to situations of warfare and conflict. No declaration of war - legitimate or not - excuses those who fight from the demands and observance of this fundamental principle of our behaviour: to preserve our humanity there are moral norms we must observe. Reflecting on behaviour in war, Catholic teaching states: 'Actions contrary to the law of nations and to its universal principles are crimes, as are the orders that command such actions. Blind obedience does not suffice to excuse those who carry them out' (2313). In other words, war is no excuse. The demands of justice remain in place. A crime is a crime, whether committed in the context of conflict or not.

And sexual violence is always a crime; it is always an immoral act.

A second point is also vitally important. We have to have some structured understanding of the meaning and place of human sexuality if the full horror of sexual violence is to be really appreciated.

Human sexuality is a strong and vital component of our humanity and of each one's personality. The exercise of that sexuality, in sexual relations, is something that touches the deepest aspect of our identity and personhood. A fundamental aspect of Catholic teaching about sex is that sexual acts must always take place within the context of authentic freedom. This is because, properly understood, human sexuality has the capacity to unite two people, body and spirit, at the deepest level, in a

completeness of self-giving that has within it the call to a permanent commitment between them and which, of its nature, is open towards the creation of new human life. This makes clear that there is no place in sexual relations for domination, aggression, instrumentalisation or any kind of de-humanisation of the person. Any such behaviour is deeply destructive of our humanity.

For these reasons, sexual behaviour is so often the key litmus test of the honour and respect given to women in any society, either in conformity to moral standards or in defiance of them.

These reasons also make clear the grounds on which the Church wholeheartedly backs every initiative to prevent sexual violence being perpetrated against anyone, anywhere and under any circumstances.

I am proud today to be able to point to the significant work carried out by many religiously motivated people in the fight against sexual violence in warfare. I salute especially the work of religious sisters, in many countries, who for decades have dedicated themselves to this work, without seeking reward or praise. They do so as part of their commitment to justice in our world today. And we are richer for their efforts, along with the efforts of many others, too. This enterprising work generates the kind of wealth without which our world cannot survive. They are, in my view, at the top of the world's rich list!

Finally, there is another point at which the role of faith is particularly important. It is in the question of human rights.

In these efforts, indeed often, we rightly speak of wanting to protect the human rights of everyone, especially the most vulnerable. In order for this language of human rights to be robust, we are helped by clarity about its foundations. The entry of human rights into the international legal framework is largely welcomed. But human rights themselves do not derive from a legal system, or from a political authority, or from a state. The dignity of every person, and the pattern of rights which flow from that dignity, are inherent in the person herself or himself. They are inalienable. So what exactly is their foundation?

The dignity of every person arises from within their nature and that nature is most clearly understood as deriving from its Creator, from the mystery of God. This is an important contribution of religious faith. It sharpens our rational understanding and deepens our sense of who we are and the dignity which is properly ours. Within this God-given dignity, the right to life itself and the right to bodily integrity are fundamental, as first gifts of the Creator, as is the right to religious freedom within which we express and develop our relationship with the Creator. Thus the violation of that bodily integrity in sexual violence is a most fundamental denial of human dignity and a most gross offence of a person's human rights. It is an offence against the Creator and cries to heaven for judgement.

Sexual violence as an instrument of warfare and conflict is a deep wound in the body of humanity, to borrow a phrase of Pope Francis. That it is as old as humanity is a cause for our lasting shame. I hope that this Conference plays its part, along with the PSVI, in engendering a common will to say 'no more, never again'. And I state with confidence that in this struggle faith is not a problem to be solved but a powerful resource to be discovered.

I congratulate all involved and I thank you for your attention.

Cardinal Vincent Nichols

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