

Holy See firmly condemns desecration of religious symbols

In a statement at the 53rd Regular Session of the Human Rights Council on the recurrent desecration of the Quran in some countries, Vatican representative Monsignor David Putzer reaffirms that freedom of expression must never be used as an excuse to despise others.

Lisa Zengarini, *Vatican News*, 14 July 2023

The Holy See has strongly condemned “the desecration, destruction or disrespect for religious objects, symbols and places of worship”, reiterating that these acts are an abuse of “the precious gift of freedom of expression”, which “feed hatred, intolerance, and create greater polarization in society”.

Speaking earlier this week at the 53rd ordinary session of the UN Human Rights Council, the Chargé d'Affaires of the Permanent Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva, Monsignor David Putzer, said that “to wilfully insult religious beliefs, traditions or sacred objects constitutes an attack on the human dignity of the believer.”

The session debated the recurrent desecration of the Quran in some European and other countries and approved a resolution urging member states to firmly prosecute acts of religious-based antagonism.

The document also referred to the incident in Stockholm, Sweden, on 28 June, when a man staged the burning of pages of the Muslim holy book outside a mosque, spurring worldwide condemnation, including that of Christian Churches.

The UN resolution called for the perpetrators to be held to account, in accord with “international human rights law.”

Noting that the “appalling” act “is particularly troubling”, as it also denigrated the first day of the Muslim feast of Eid al-Adha, in his statement Monsignor Putzer recalled Pope Francis’ words in his recent interview to the United Arab Emirate's daily 'Al-Ittihad.

In the interview published on 3 July, the Pope said he was “outraged and disgusted” by the desecration, remarking that: “Any book considered sacred by its people must be respected out of respect for its believers, and freedom of expression must never be used as an excuse to despise others, and to allow this, must be rejected.”

“People of faith play an important role in constructing a world that upholds human dignity, protects human rights and promotes the common good.”

The Vatican representative concluded his statement with Pope Francis’ words: “Today we need builders of peace, not makers of weapons; today we need builders of peace, not instigators of conflict; we need firefighters, not arsonists; we need advocates of reconciliation, not people who threaten destruction.”

The UN Human Rights Council resolution, passed on 12 July with 28 votes in favor and 12 against, calls on member states to “examine their national laws, policies, and law enforcement frameworks” to identify and rectify “gaps that may impede the prevention and prosecution of acts and advocacy of religious hatred.”

It was backed by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, but was opposed by the delegations of the United States and of other Western nations, including France and Germany, arguing on the grounds of freedom of expression.