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STATEMENT

BY

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to the United Nations

**THIRD INFORMAL THEMATIC DEBATE OF THE SIXTY FIRST SESSION OF
THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY:
CIVILIZATION AND THE CHALLENGE FOR PEACE: OBSTACLES AND
OPPORTUNITIES**

Religion in Contemporary Society

New York, May 10, 2007

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Mr. Chairman,

The distinguished members of this Panel are as acutely aware as I am that, in a world where more and more peoples of different religious and cultural backgrounds are living together, it is crucial that social policies encourage religious and cultural interactions in a free, respectful and tolerant environment.

True coexistence between social groups is only possible if everyone recognizes some fundamental ethical values. Today, as we witness unprecedented levels of interdependence between civilizations, it is imperative and urgent to arrive at a universally shared recognition of some basic ethical criteria.

It is precisely this awareness that gives the Order of Malta confidence to hold its Christian origin and ethos firmly and positively, while reaching out in service and in membership to peoples of other religious, cultural and ethnic identities. As underlined by our Grand Master in his address to the Diplomatic Corps last January, members of the Order experience their faith not as an instrument of evangelization or proselytism but as a way of living in the service of others, of the poor and the sick, in an authentic spirit of humanity that recognizes the image of God in the person who suffers, *regardless of their race, origin, or religion.*

It is with these considerations in mind that the Order of Malta wishes to take part today in our dialogue focusing on religion in contemporary society, and offer a few comments.

Mr. Chairman,

It is appropriate to recall, in the light of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, the two basic reasons for the struggle by the Catholic Church, in close alliance with the other Christian churches, for the promotion of human rights, and particularly, religious freedom. These are: THE EMINENT DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN BEING and THE NECESSARY INTERPERSONAL SOLIDARITY BASED ON OUR UNIVERSAL FRATERNITY.

It is noteworthy that the international community has continuously shown interest in the last decades in protecting human rights and fundamental liberties, including respect for freedom of conscience and of religion, in major documents such as: the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; and the Final Act of the Conference on European Security and Cooperation.

Furthermore, regarding “contacts among persons” the participating States to the Final Act “confirm that religious cults, and religious institutions and organizations acting within the constitutional framework of a particular State, and their representatives, may, within the field of activity, have contacts among themselves, hold meetings and exchange information”.

Public space for meetings of minds, public space for dialogue...the concept was precisely what His Royal Highness Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan had in mind in his recent address in Brussels on the subject of the coexistence of civilizations. He suggested that change should be sought “from the bottom up...motivating the silenced majority” to help build a new international order. Above all, an important part of this is “putting yourself in the shoes of the other”. My hope is that we could all adopt the same attitude.

Mr. Chairman,

A significant cause of religious problems, which needs to be addressed, is the social polarity between the rich and the poor. In this area, Governments and religious groups as well must recognize that development, peace and security, and human rights are interlinked. The world’s agenda is also the agenda of the world religions. It is in this spirit that the Catholic Church emphasizes education and proposes to all religions and faiths that they promote the “integral development of man” and the “development of the whole man”, according to the famous statement by Pope Paul VI in the Encyclical “Populorum Progressio.”

Mr. Chairman,

We all know that religious and cultural interactions will not bear fruits without a free, respectful and tolerant environment. We welcome the fact that the United Nations has long been involved in the question of elimination of all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief. Far from being the opiate of the people, authentic Religion places human objectives in their true proportions and stimulates

respect of basic ethical values that are indispensable to coexistence among peoples. Learning respect for others and for dialogue is an essential element of human education. In this context allow me to remind us that the distinguished Theologian John Courtney Murray, SJ, said once that intolerance was a terrible vice, but that toleration was not much of a virtue. We must go far beyond tolerance. He knew that the greatest outrages in the last century were committed not by religious communities, but by secular totalitarian regimes of the Right and Left that murdered tens of millions of people.

Our world still suffers from war and armed conflict, continually wounded by major injustices. Cultural and religious interactions will not survive if we do not pay more attention to the human person, to his or her intrinsic value and destiny. The person is in ever greater danger of being lost in solitude, in emptiness. This dignity of the human person is a basic ethical value that must be universally recognized

Let us remember George Washington's declaration in his farewell address: "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and Morality are indispensable support."

Thank you, Mr. Chairman