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Cindy Wooden

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Full recognition of religious freedom must include recognition of the right of believers to conscientiously object to participating in activities that violate their religious beliefs and religiously inspired moral values, said the International Theological Commission.

"The church expects that its members can live their faith freely and that their conscience rights will be safeguarded," the document said. "Living the faith can sometimes require conscientious objection."

Recognizing the right of everyone to believe or not believe, to join a religion, change religions, worship and behave publicly in accordance with their beliefs flows from a recognition that true faith always is a gift that must be freely chosen, the commission said in "Religious Liberty for the Good of All."

Members of the International Theological Commission are appointed by the pope and, in conjunction with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, study issues of contemporary concern to the church. Members approved the religious freedom document in late 2018 and, after Pope Francis authorized its publication, the text

was posted online in Italian in late April.

The commission members called for what now-retired Pope Benedict XVI had called a "healthy secularism," a form of separation of church and state in which the government does not interfere in religious matters and no religion expects or demands special treatment, but where both religion and government cooperate to promote the common good.

The document defined as "soft totalitarianism" modern forms of liberal democracy that profess to be neutral in the sphere of religion, but in fact tend to "consider professed faith and religious belonging as an obstacle for admittance to the full cultural and political citizenship of individuals."

And, it said, when a political culture attempts to construct a form of justice that removes any reference to ethical judgments, especially ones inspired by religion, "it shows a tendency to elaborate an ideology of neutrality that, in fact, imposes the marginalization if not exclusion of religious expression from the public sphere."

"Safeguarding religious liberty and social peace presupposes a state that not only develops a logic of mutual cooperation between religious communities and civil society," it said, but is capable of promoting a culture where religions can thrive.

And, the document said, since Christianity and many other religions are lived not only within the walls of a church, mosque or temple, but motivate their members to undertake works of social good, "there is no true religious freedom" in states that would make it difficult or impossible for believers to carry out their good works.

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The Catholic Church's recognition of religious freedom as a universal human right — for Catholics and for all people — is a position that matured over time and is based on respect for human dignity and the mysterious ways God acts within the human conscience, the commission said.

Acknowledging how the Catholic Church once recognized the religious rights only of Catholics and how, in some places, it even exercised governing power, the document said a deeper understanding of the faith and of human dignity has led, especially over the past 50 years, to a recognition that the religious rights of all

must be respected.

The church teaches that "the right to religious freedom is rooted in the dignity of the human person as a spiritual and rational being open to the transcendent," it said. "Therefore, it is not a right reserved only to believers but to all."

"A lack of respect for religious liberty at any level of individual, community, civil or political life offends God, human dignity itself and creates situations of social disharmony," the document said.

Respecting the religious freedom of others does not mean renouncing the church's obligation to share the Gospel, it said.

In fact, the commission said, the Second Vatican Council's "prophetic" declaration on human dignity and religious freedom gave the church more "credibility and appreciation, which enormously facilitated its evangelical witness in the context of contemporary society."

"The church's missionary form, inscribed in the very order of faith, obeys the logic of gift, that is, of grace and freedom, and not that of a contract or imposition," the document said.

The church is committed to a style of missionary proclamation "absolutely respectful of individual freedom and the common good," it said. "This style, far from weakening fidelity to the salvific event, which is the theme of the proclamation of faith, must make increasingly transparent its distance from a spirit of domination interested in the conquest of power for itself."