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Traditional values as an obstacle or chance for human rights

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Values and convictions as well as their anchoring in one's own culture are indispensable for one's self-identity. This, however, must not obscure the fact that cultural convictions may also obstruct respecting the dignity of individual human beings – and thus impede the promotion of human rights, as was emphasized at an international conference organized by the German Commission for Justice and Peace and the Jesuit Center for Theological Reflection JCTR in Lusaka (Zambia) in which participated, among others, the Vice-President of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar SECAM, Archbishop Gabriel Anokye (Ghana), the Archbishop of Johannesburg Buti Tlhagale (South Africa) as well as senior representatives of the United Nations and of the African system of human rights protection.

The experiences both in Europe and in Africa show that especially women suffer from different forms of discrimination due to traditional role patterns. The Church also played a role in this, but in many places nowadays strongly supports the struggle for the rights of women, said Auxiliary Bishop Dr Stefan Zekorn from Munster, who represented the German Bishops' Conference at the meeting. Particularly the experiences in Africa reveal the deeply rooted discrimination of women in social structures as Archbishop Tlhagale emphasized. "The traditional culture forms and the African belief-system have conspired to subdue women. Even though many cultural practices are falling into disuse, genuine cultural change takes place at a snail's pace." The importance of the right to changes must not be underestimated: "It is imperative that National governments incorporate into their Constitutions the Human Rights doctrine and commit them to implementing these rights", said the Archbishop.

After all, the commitment to human rights is one of the best values and traditions within the Church, which time and again have to be remembered in order to give effect to the social teaching. Archbishop Anokye reiterated the conviction that "human rights emanate from the fact that each and every one of us is made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26ff). To violate these rights means we are going against God's own design for the wellbeing of the person. Hence the everlasting fight to promote, defend and protect them."

In his résumé, Heiner Bielefeldt, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief and chairperson of the human rights section of the JP Commission, underlined that the evaluation of traditions must be oriented towards the human dignity. Insofar as traditions and cultural convictions encourage people to live a self-determined life with equal rights they represent an important source of motivation also for the commitment to human rights. "Human Rights must find an echo in people's everyday life-world, which is composed by various traditions. Otherwise they can't unfold their liberating power". Quite frequently, however, cultural practices and behaviour patterns conflict with the free development of a person and put limits on people. Referring to a lack of respect for human dignity, such traditions must be criticised as incompatible with human rights in all societies, Bielefeldt summed up.