



Statement by His Eminence, Cardinal Pietro Parolin
Secretary of State of His Holiness

**Remarks at the International Conference on Religions and the Sustainable Development
Goals**

New Synod Hall
Vatican, 7 March 2019

Your Eminences,
Excellencies,
Dear Friends,

- I. I am pleased to have this occasion to provide a few remarks at the opening of this three-day International Conference on Religions and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). At the outset, I wish to thank Cardinal Peter Turkson for the kind invitation to take part in this event, as well as the staff from the Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development for their diligent and dedicated work in organizing this event. A special welcome to all of you, in particular the participants and representatives of other religions, of various international organizations, of Governments, and of NGOs committed to the common good and to human integral development.
- II. When the international community adopted the ambitious set of SDGs in September 2015, along with the whole package of the 2030 Agenda, there probably was not a great deal of attention given to the topic that is under consideration for this Conference. In fact, the SDGs, which followed and were built upon the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of the year 2000, seem to avoid any consideration whatsoever of the role of religion in their creation or in their implementation or realization. This may be an important oversight on the part of the international community, an omission that is slowly being overcome with an increasing recognition, even in the setting of the United Nations, of the part that religions and religious leaders can play in promoting peace, dialogue and the common good. The role of the religious dimension in accomplishing the SDGs is central because of the undeniable religious dimension of the human person, regardless of their particular religious affiliation or creed. Rather than being apologetic for, or even trying to hide, the place that religion holds in the public square, there should be ever-greater recognition of this in ethical, cultural, social and international settings. Given that the reflections during these days will focus upon the consideration of the role of religions in the SDGs, please allow me to offer some thoughts from a particularly Christian perspective.
- III. The Christian approach is based essentially on an integrated vision of the human person, created in the image and likeness of God, in particular, the transcendental aspect of the human person, a rational nature, with a beginning and an end that is supernatural. From the Christian perspective, human life is a gift of inestimable value such that it forms the

foundational right upon which are based all other fundamental human rights. As Pope Francis recently recalled, unfortunately in our day, too often the gift of human life is viewed from a materialistic or consumeristic perspective that renders it something that can be “thrown away”, even to the point of making the destruction of innocent life a “right in itself”.¹

- IV. A constant threat, among others, is falling into one or another form of the ancient fallacy of Manicheism, the idea that the material and the spiritual worlds are not compatible, or worse yet, that they are antithetical to each other. From its earliest centuries, the Church has sought to overcome this fallacy. St. Augustine, for example, dedicated much of his time and energy to preaching and writing against the various forms of philosophical and anthropological dualism in his day. In our own day, very strong tendencies toward dualism remain in our culture, and these almost always manifest themselves in extremes of exalting the body or disrespecting the body of the human person. It is interesting to note that, unlike other heresies of the Church, many of which were very short-lived after the Magisterium had officially pronounced against them, Manicheism, in some form or another, has tended to “stick around”, perhaps because it is so closely linked the body/soul composite that makes up the human person.
- V. From the Christian perspective, human nature, that beautiful and mysterious composition of body and soul, of matter and spirit, is essentially good because it comes from the Creator. The transcendent dimension of the human person, of enjoying reason, and the power to choose, also brings with it free will, and thus the possibility of choosing good or evil. If this choice is made without a truthful moral responsibility and personal accountability for actions, there is the risk to cause a rupture in the original relationship of humanity with God and the rest of creation, and thus usher in sin, injustices, and inequalities that were never intended by the Divine Creator. Is it not true that many of these objectives of the SDGs are goals that attempt to bring about a harmony among peoples and nations, to overcome injustices and inequalities, and to promote a concrete and responsible realization of human solidarity aimed at helping those most in need?
- VI. Mentioning this Christian approach/perspective of the human person has everything to do with the implementation of the SDGs, because how we see and understand the human person can and should color the way we approach the achievement of the SDGs. Indeed, through this anthropological approach, Christians see the seed of the eternal in the human person, and as members of the same human family, we are able to quickly perceive and recognize the bonds – in space and in time – that tie us together and truly make us brothers and sisters, since we are sons and daughters of the one Creator.
- VII. Indeed, the points made so far are quite similar to elements also found in the teachings of other religions. What makes the Christian approach unique is the transformation that comes about because of the Incarnation of the Son of God into time, into our world,

¹ Cfr., Pope Francis, Discorso ai Membri del Consiglio Direttivo del Movimento per la vita italiano (2 febbraio 2019): “Dove c’è vita, c’è speranza! Ma se la vita stessa viene violata nel suo sorgere, ciò che rimane non è più l’accoglienza grata e stupita del dono, bensì un freddo calcolo di quanto abbiamo e di ciò di cui possiamo disporre. Allora anche la vita si riduce a bene di consumo, da usare e gettare, per noi stessi e per gli altri. Come è drammatica questa visione, purtroppo diffusa e radicata, presentata anche come un diritto umano, e quante sofferenze causa ai più deboli dei nostri fratelli!”

taking on our human nature with a mandate to restore what was lost through human sin and to bring it to a perfection that far surpasses the original creation. In the Incarnation, the beauty of the human person is reaffirmed in that God himself assumes our human nature, showing us a more perfect way to live in this life, a way that gives precedence to the principle of self-giving love of God and of others and to the principle of human fulfillment and happiness in the next life, which, through our good deeds, already can be experienced in the present life.

- VIII. For Christians, these spiritual realities shape the way life is understood and lived, in particular, the way we relate to others. The fundamental principle of Christianity, of our faith in Christ, is that of charity. Indeed, the Church and its members practice this virtue in numerous ways, through charitable activities, such as provision of education and healthcare to people in need, regardless of race, ethnicity or religion. In some sense, it could be said that the Church has sought to fulfill the SDGs even before the SDGs were defined as such in 2015, because Christians have always sought to build up the common good of all of humanity throughout the twenty centuries of the Church's existence.
- IX. Reflection on the role of religion and the SDGs necessarily must include some discussion on interreligious dialogue and cooperation among religions in making the world a better place. The common values of brotherhood, solidarity and equality in the eyes of God and the desire for peaceful coexistence, all undergird the three monotheistic religions. Thus, these values serve as a reliable foundation upon which to build inter-religious dialogue and collaboration. During his recent trip to the United Arab Emirates, Pope Francis stressed this important issue: "If we believe in the existence of the human family, it follows that it must, as such, be looked after. As in every family, this happens above all through a daily and effective dialogue. This presupposes having one's own identity, not to be foregone to please the other person. But at the same time it demands the courage of otherness, which involves the full recognition of the other and his or her freedom, and the consequent commitment to exert myself so that the other person's fundamental rights are always affirmed, everywhere and by everyone. Without freedom we are no longer children of the human family, but slaves. As part of such freedom, I would like to emphasize religious freedom. It is not limited only to freedom of worship but sees in the other truly a brother or sister, a child of my own humanity whom God leaves free and whom, therefore, no human institution can coerce, not even in God's name."² In this respect, I would also encourage all present here to read "A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together" which was signed on 4 February by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyib.
- X. In this context, I would like to highlight an important point in the relationship between religion and "religious actors" and the United Nations, as well as with other international institutions. As mentioned earlier, while there has been a growing awareness of the importance of the role of religion in promoting the objectives of the family of nations, the international community should also strive to respect the freedom of religions, in particular, to respect their autonomy in voicing their beliefs and in exercising their convictions and thus to avoid usurping or exploiting their unique independence. Indeed,

² Pope Francis, Interreligious Meeting at Founder's Memorial, Abu Dhabi, 4 February 2019.

religions can, and indeed must, do all they can to promote peace, but this should not be under the aegis of an outside authority, including the international community.

- XI. On numerous occasions and by various stakeholders, great concern has been expressed within the United Nations about the slow implementation of the SDGs, due, in part, to lack of political will and to a scarcity of resources, human, financial and otherwise. This should not be an occasion to become depressed or downcast. On the contrary, and in accord with an important virtue for many religions, including Christianity, we must not lose hope. Indeed, the road is long and arduous as we strive to achieve the ambitious SDGs, and a conference such as this can be a “spark” to help encourage not only religious leaders, but also the international community at large, to recommit themselves and their efforts in this regard. As Pope Francis stated in his Message for the World Day of Peace this year: “Everyone can contribute his or her stone to help build the common home. Authentic political life, grounded in law and in frank and fair relations between individuals, experiences renewal whenever we are convinced that every woman, man and generation brings the promise of new relational, intellectual, cultural and spiritual energies.”³
- XII. In conclusion, it is my hope that these days of reflection on the role of religion in the implementation of the SDGs may be fruitful not only to all participating, but may also be a catalyst, and a useful source of material for reflection, for all members of the international community.

Thank you for your attention.

³ Pope Francis, Message for the 52nd World Day of Peace, 1 January 2019.