



Statement at the Third Committee General Debate
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Seventy-fifth Session of the United Nations General Assembly
Third Committee General Debate
United Nations, New York, October 6, 2020

Introduction

Madam Chair,

Allow me to begin by congratulating you and the bureau on your election and assure you all of the Holy See's support during the work of this main session.

The 75th anniversary of the United Nations is an opportune time to recall its fundamental assertion that “we the peoples are determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war” and “to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.”[1] Each and every person within the family of nations deserves to have his or her rights acknowledged, protected, treasured and advanced.

This is even more urgent today, as the international community faces a global crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As Pope Francis said in his address to the General Assembly, it is “painful to see the number of fundamental human rights that in our day continue to be violated with impunity. The list of such violations is indeed lengthy, and offers us a frightening picture of a humanity abused, wounded, deprived of dignity, freedom and hope for the future.” My Delegation's hope is that, during this 75th Session, the Third Committee will recognize that working together and striving for consensus must be our goal.

As its contribution to this General Debate, my Delegation would like to intervene on agenda items 26, 27, 68, 69, 70, 72 and 111.

Promotion and Protection of Human Rights [agenda item 72]

An integral vision of the human person can be only grounded on the “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family.”[2] Efforts aimed at the promotion and protection of human rights must begin with a correct understanding of these rights and the broad impact that respect for human rights has on society. Such rights are universal,

indivisible, interdependent and interrelated as also recognized by the Vienna Programme of Action.[3] The Holy See is deeply concerned over growing pressure to reinterpret the very foundations of human rights and to compromise their inner unity so as to move away from the protection of human dignity and to satisfy political and economic interests. This approach creates a hierarchy of human rights by relativizing human dignity and assigning more value and additional rights to the strong and healthy, while discarding the weak.

Such a tendency is particularly apparent in the refusal to recognize the inherent value and dignity of each and every human life at every stage. This failure to understand the nature and reality of human rights leads to grave inequalities and injustices, such as ignoring children in the womb and treating the lives of the elderly and persons with disabilities as insupportable burdens on society. Just as there is no right to abortion, there is also no right to euthanasia: “laws exist, not to cause death, but to protect life and to facilitate co-existence among human beings.”[4]

The Holy See firmly believes that human life is sacred and deserves respect. It also believes that this dignity is not lost even after the commission of very serious crimes. Pope Francis has therefore emphasized that the legislative and judicial practice of the State authority must always be guided by the “primacy of human life and the dignity of the human person.”[5] This is exactly why the Holy See believes that “the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person”[6] and works with determination for its abolition worldwide. Effective systems of detention have been developed, which ensure due protection of citizens without definitively depriving the guilty of the possibility of a second chance.

The Holy See is especially concerned by maneuvers to suppress the place of religion in public life. This flows from a reductive notion of the human person, but it also stifles the development of authentic peace and justice. Freedom of religion is an inalienable and universal human right, as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights attests. Freedom of religion has never been and can never be a “concession” or “privilege” – to be retracted at will – by the State. We therefore note with concern the attempts of some to circumscribe or ignore this right and the obstacles placed before those who wish to profess and practice their faith freely, including for Christians.

Respect for human rights, and the guarantees they provide are measures of the common good. Indeed, the promotion of human rights remains the most effective strategy to eliminate inequalities between countries and social groups, and to increase security. Instead, approaches that create a hierarchy of human rights by relativizing human dignity, only lead to grave inequality and injustice.

Social Development [agenda item 26]

Pope Francis recently reminded us that “the dignity of every human being has serious social, economic and political implications.”[7] It is essential that the world community commit to advancing those conditions that allow the human person to flourish, including by addressing the particular challenges faced by those on the margins and on the peripheries, including the poor, the needy and those deprived of rights and justice.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on the “broader social ills” that ignore the dignity and relational nature of the person and that “at times looks at others as objects, to be used and

discarded.” This careless view of the human person has dramatically impacted the life of the elderly and of persons with disabilities. The pandemic has shown that society has often not been prepared to meet their needs. Such expendability is evident where social protection systems, including social security, are inadequate and do not meet their basic needs.

Both persons with disabilities and older persons are disproportionately impacted by the burdens of poverty, illness, social isolation, violence, abandonment, abuse, and lack of access to adequate food and shelter, quality healthcare, reliable communication, supportive companionship, and effective support in times of social unrest and disaster. During these months of lockdown, this reality has been exacerbated and left many of the elderly and persons with disabilities isolated from their family members and without social support.

The pandemic caused hardship for other persons in situations of vulnerability as well. Those whose access to social support and healthcare was already limited, experienced additional hardship as these resources became even more scarce. Waves of unemployment and underemployment have threatened the ability of many to provide for their families with basic dignity. Indeed, many, including the young, look to the future with trepidation, not knowing when and how life will return to cities, farms, villages, schools, places of worship, business centers, community institutions, and cultural treasures.

To support individual people in need, we must encourage and assist families and the many intermediary organizations, including faith communities and faith-based organizations, that are already addressing the above mentioned gaps with their irreplaceable work.

Advancement of Women [agenda item 27]

This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing Conference on Women. Guided by the principles of the UN Charter, which reaffirms the equal rights of men and women, the Beijing Conference accelerated a process that would yield unprecedented opportunities for the world's women. At every level of society, women play an important role, offering their singular, unique contribution and courageously promoting the common good.

One of the greatest achievements of Beijing was to focus the world's attention on violence against women and girls.

Violence against women remains a global emergency that impedes the full exercise of women's unique and irreplaceable role in the world and brings serious negative consequences not just for the health and lives of women and girls, but also for families, communities and society.

This intolerable phenomenon is ultimately the result of a degrading and dehumanizing vision of the human person that denies women's full and inalienable dignity. Many women today, as Pope Francis underlines, “are continually insulted, beaten, raped, forced to prostitute themselves and to suppress the life they bear in the womb.”[9] Victims of the disturbing hedonistic and commercial culture that encourages the systematic exploitation of sexuality, women are reduced to sex objects and their bodies to consumer products, as happens in pornography, prostitution, surrogacy and human trafficking.

The coronavirus has exacerbated violence against women. Emerging data shows that since the outbreak of COVID-19, violence against women and girls, and particularly domestic violence, has increased. The prevalence of violence during pregnancy is of special concern due to the negative consequences to both mother and child. The pandemic has limited the availability of social support for women and their children and has made reporting difficult. Furthermore, in some regions, home confinement and social isolation, combined with widespread economic insecurity and lost livelihoods, are slowing efforts to end harmful practices such as the mutilation of the female body and child marriage, as well as to prevent and cure obstetric fistulas. The Holy See urges greater determination and commitment to fight violence and to prevent the isolation and marginalization of women and girls. The Catholic Church, through its numerous institutions, many of which are run by women religious, vigorously works to reach women suffering violence and degradation offering them shelters, free access to healthcare and education and facilitating the integration in their communities.

Promotion and protection of the rights of children [agenda item 68]

Children are among those most in need of care and protection. Their dignity and rights must be protected by legal systems as priceless treasures of the whole human family.

Pope Francis has recently underlined that the COVID-19 crisis is having devastating effects on children. For unaccompanied migrant and refugee children, who are often exposed to dire living conditions, the pandemic constitutes an additional threat to their wellbeing in situations where basic health and hygiene measures are inadequate. Migrant children and their families have also been threatened with violence upon returning to their communities, and migrant reception and transit centers have been threatened or attacked.

Violence against children, including the horrible scourge of child abuse and pornography, has also dramatically increased. The COVID-19 pandemic is worsening the incidence of online sexual abuse, exploitation, peer-to-peer violence and cyber-bullying.

Millions of children are presently unable to return to school. Girls constitute the majority of the children not enrolled in primary education. In various parts of the world, this situation risks to further exacerbate chronic social ills such as child labor, child marriage, exploitation, abuse and malnutrition.

The Holy See is deeply concerned that “some countries and international institutions are promoting abortion as one of the so-called ‘essential services’ provided in the humanitarian response to the pandemic. It is troubling to see how simple and convenient it has become for some to deny the existence of a human life as a solution to problems that can and must be solved for both the mother and her unborn child.”[10]

Therefore, my Delegation urges civil authorities to be especially attentive to children denied their fundamental rights and dignity, particularly their right to life and to education. In doing so, civil authorities must not forget that the first teachers and caregivers of every child are his or her mother and father, within the family, which the Universal Declaration of Human Rights accurately describes as the “natural and fundamental group unit of society.”[11]

Many families have been exposed to great hardship during the pandemic. The economic crisis, high levels of unemployment and social isolation have constrained families from providing that essential care to some of their loved ones during this time. It is therefore of utmost importance, as we rebuild better societies, to design policies that support the family and its members and to combat isolation and social fragmentation.

Rights of indigenous peoples [agenda item 69]

“Protecting indigenous peoples and their lands represents a fundamental ethical imperative and a basic commitment to human rights.”[12] In many parts of the world, the human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous peoples continue to be violated. Unfortunately, inadequate access to justice and education, displacement due to wars or natural disasters, arbitrary arrests of indigenous leaders, and the denial of their cultural rights and their right to self-determination over their territories are increasingly commonplace.

Indigenous communities safeguard 80 percent of the world’s biodiversity.[13]. Since they have a special relationship with the land and treat it with great care, they offer a different model of development. Their land, they believe, is not a mere commodity but rather “a gift from God [...], a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values.”[14]

Indigenous peoples, however, often witness the destruction of their natural surroundings, impacted by “norms, public policies, and practices favoring the expansion of areas of natural resource extraction and infrastructural mega-project developments, which exert pressure on ancestral indigenous territories. This is accompanied [...] by the grave and widespread impunity [...] regarding human rights violations and obstacles to obtaining justice.”[15]

The COVID-19 pandemic has only increased the challenges and the struggles faced by indigenous peoples. Due to the restrictions on their freedom of movement, many suffered lack of access to medical supplies and increased food and water insecurity. In addition, many of the indigenous peoples employed in the informal economy were hit hard, particularly women. We must find ways, by means of stronger national and international legislations, to restore justice for indigenous people and protect them from land expropriation and economic exploitation.

The current crisis is a wake-up call for all of us. As indigenous peoples teach us, we are not the owners of nature, but caretakers. As we recover from COVID-19 and start to rebuild, we must therefore look to establish development policies at international, regional, and local levels that truly involve indigenous people and respect their identity and culture.

Elimination of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance [agenda item 70]

The deep scars of racism continue to mark our world. Men and women who belong to particular racial or ethnic groups often suffer from increased violence, intolerance and discrimination. The worrying resurgence of aggressive nationalism, ethnic violence and the widespread phenomena of racial discrimination seriously undermine human dignity by firmly rejecting the principle that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”[16]

The Holy See is not indifferent to the gravity of these phenomena and strongly condemns every form of racism and racial discrimination. Recently Pope Francis called racism a “disease” that along with injustice and indifference “disfigure the face of our common family.”.[17] He also urged us “not [to] tolerate or turn a blind eye to racism and exclusion in any form.”[18]

During the COVID-19 pandemic, all regions have seen incidents of discrimination, xenophobia, racism and attacks against people supposedly deemed responsible for spreading the virus. Many persons and communities that are regularly subject to violence, intolerance and discrimination are experiencing more frequent attacks during the pandemic. People on the move across the world are facing loss of jobs, discrimination and difficulty in returning their home countries due to border closures. Thousands have also been pushed back or deported since the crisis began, often in clear violation of the principle of non-refoulement. Refugees, IDPs and migrants find themselves in overcrowded, unsanitary and insecure spaces with limited access to healthcare and are particularly vulnerable to infection. Undocumented migrants are afraid to seek healthcare because they fear being detained or deported. Migrants returning home may face stigma as a supposed COVID-19 health risk.

Racial, ethnic and religious minorities, often relegated to lower socio-economic status and subjected to entrenched discrimination, have been rendered particularly vulnerable by these factors to higher rates of infection and mortality, to harsh treatment by law enforcement in the context of emergency measures, and to unequal access to adequate medical care. Pope Francis has urged: “The time has come to put an end to age-old prejudices, preconceptions and mutual mistrust that are often at the base of discrimination, racism and xenophobia. No one must feel isolated, and no one is authorized to trample on the dignity and rights of others.”[19] In fact, to tread on the inalienable dignity of others is to tread on our own dignity.

Our world needs to be reminded that humanity exists as one human family, where the concept of racial superiority has no place. We must invest heavily in educating our people of the values that exalt the dignity of the human person and safeguard his or her fundamental rights. We must be sensitive to feel for our brothers and sisters in their suffering, attentive to their situation and stand in solidarity to solve each other’s problems.

Crime prevention and criminal justice [agenda item 111]

Crime prevention and criminal justice mechanisms are essential for the advancement of the rule of law at national and international levels and for the realization of universal human rights.

My Delegation would like to focus its attention on three specific forms of transnational and national crimes with a significant impact on human dignity: human trafficking, illicit drug trade and corruption.

Trafficking in persons is “a shocking offence against human dignity and a grave violation of fundamental human rights.”[20] It does not have borders and violates human rights without discrimination, ensnaring children, women and men around the globe. It is inextricably linked to statelessness, conflict, misery, corruption, a lack of education as well as migration and smuggling. Sadly, recent statistics[21] have shown large discrepancies in the numbers of victims of human trafficking and the number of traffickers prosecuted each year. There are 41 million trafficking

victims around the world, but fewer than 12,000 traffickers were prosecuted in 2018.[22] Despite the best efforts of the international community, including through innovative national and international regulations to combat trafficking in persons, resources are in short supply, due to the endless economic crises and the socio-political instability faced by many States. Moreover, criminal justice systems are often not well funded, increasing the risk of criminals continuing their heinous activities. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified and multiplied the existing challenges. Therefore, countries must keep shelters and hotlines open, safeguard access to justice and prevent people in vulnerable situations from falling into the hands of organized crime.

In addition, it is undeniable that the problem of drugs is part of the “throwaway culture” that deprives the human person of his or her dignity and hope. The Holy See is concerned about the ever-growing spread of drug abuse and illicit trafficking in narcotics and psychotropic substances. Preventing and fighting the consumption of such drugs is key to preventing and fighting their production and trafficking. The Holy See also opposes legalizing drug use as a means of fighting drug addiction. In light of the expected changes in drug trafficking and drug markets due to COVID-19 mobility restrictions, it is also important that Member States, in close cooperation with relevant United Nations entities, closely monitor developments and address the challenges in countries of supply, transit and destination as a common and shared responsibility. Drug trafficking remains an international responsibility, as most of the demand for internationally trafficked substances comes from countries other than those countries producing those substances, and most of the profits are generated in destination countries. While aggressively pursuing those involved in the crime of drug trafficking, our concern for human dignity must also include tangible measures to support and rehabilitate those who have been ensnared in the trap of illegal drugs – a trap brought on by such a deadly trade.

Finally, corruption degrades the dignity of the individual and shatters all good and beautiful ideals. Society as a whole is called to commit itself concretely to combating the cancer of corruption in its various forms. For this reason, the Holy See ratified the United Nations Convention against Corruption. The common good constitutes a resource that must be protected for the benefit of all, the State is called upon to perform an indispensable supervisory function, duly sanctioning unlawful conduct. As we face an unprecedented health crisis, there is reason to be concerned that the vast amount of funds released for COVID-19 pandemic recovery has already attracted criminal activities. There is a risk that those most in need of financial support will remain without the urgently necessary help. It is therefore necessary to seek new and innovative solutions to counter corruption, means that are not divisive, politicized or partial but truly seek the common good and the integral human development of all. The Holy See looks forward to next year’s Special session of the General Assembly against corruption. It will provide the international community with a unique opportunity to discuss challenges and measures to prevent and combat corruption and strengthen international cooperation.

Conclusion

During and after the pandemic, all States should see to it that the elementary conditions needed to ensure dignified and free life exist. This includes protecting and putting into practice the fundamental rights of all persons.

At the same time, human rights will never be fully recognized and universally acknowledged unless all States, especially those in conflict, engage in good faith and integrity with this international organization, working together to reach this goal. International consensus requires setting aside ideological conflicts and also conceptions of the human person in which the dignity, rights and freedoms of the other are not respected.

This is the commitment that the international community, through the work of this Committee, should strongly reaffirm as we mark this institution's 75th anniversary.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

[1]*Charter of the United Nations*, Preamble.

[2]*Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Preamble.

[3]Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, 25 June 1993, 5.

[4]Letter *Samaritanus Bonus* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the care of persons in the critical and terminal phases of life, 22 September 2020

[5]Pope Francis, *Address to the Delegates of the International Association of Penal Law*, 23 October 2015, nos. I and IIb.

[6]New revision of number 2267 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on the death penalty – Rescriptum “ex Audentia SS.mi,” 02.08.2018.

[7]Pope Francis, General Audience, Wednesday 12 August 2020.

[8]Ibidem.

[9]Pope Francis. Homily on the occasion of the Solemnity of Mary Mother of God, Vatican Basilica, 1 January 2020.

[10]Cfr. Pope Francis, *Address to the Seventy-fifth Meeting of the General Assembly of the United Nations*, 25 September 2020.

[11]*Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Preamble.

[12]Preparatory Document for the Synod on the Pan Amazon Region, N.5.

[13]<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/indigenouspeoples>.

[14]Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si'*.

[15]Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, Post-synodal apostolic exhortation.

[16]*Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Art. 1.

[17]Pope Francis, Message to the Catholic Media Conference sponsored by the Catholic Press Association, Vatican, 30 June 2020.

[18]Pope Francis, General Audience, 3 June 2020.

[19]Ibidem.

[20]Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Archbishop Jean-Luis Tauran on the occasion of the international conference "Twenty-first century slavery - the human rights dimension to trafficking in human beings,"* Vatican, 15 May 2002.

[21]2020 *Trafficking in Persons Report*, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/2019-Trafficking-in-Persons-Report.pdf>.

[22]*Ending child labour, forced labour and human trafficking in global supply chains*: International Labour Organization, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, International Organization for Migration and United Nations Children's Fund, 2019.