



Statement by His Excellency Archbishop Ivan Jurković  
Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the UN and Other International Organizations in Geneva  
at the 37th Session of the Human Rights Council  
High-Level Panel: 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights  
28 February 2018

Mr. President,

The seventieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights represents a *unique* opportunity to reaffirm its pivotal importance as a reference point for global and cross-cultural discussion on human rights, fundamental freedoms and human dignity. The Declaration was not formulated as an abstract philosophical or legal construction. Rather, it was “the outcome of a convergence of different religious and cultural traditions, all of them motivated by the common desire to place the human person at the heart of institutions, laws and the workings of society”<sup>1</sup>. The human family had been left demoralized before the mass graves in the extermination camps and haunted by the destruction of human life and property by the use of atomic bombs. Those crimes against human dignity motivated the United Nations Organization to formulate “one of the highest expressions of the human conscience of our time.”<sup>2</sup>

The UDHR represents a fundamental act through which peoples, states and international institutions affirm that the “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world”<sup>3</sup>, “without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”<sup>4</sup> Worldwide, “men and women of conviction and courage have appealed to this Declaration in support of their claims for a fuller share in the life of society”<sup>5</sup>. Throughout the Declaration, we find a clear statement of the primacy of freedom against oppression, and of the unity of the human family despite racial, religious, ideological and political differences.

This document constitutes “a milestone on the long and difficult path of the human race” (...) since it “has struck a real blow against the many deep roots of war, since the spirit of war, in its basic primordial meaning, *springs up and grows to maturity where the inalienable rights of man are violated.*”<sup>6</sup> However, as Pope Francis emphasized, even after

---

<sup>1</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the United Nations General Assembly, 18 April 2008

<sup>2</sup> Pope John Paul II, Address to the United Nations General Assembly, 5 October 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Preamble Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 10 December 1948.

<sup>4</sup> Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Pope John Paul II, Address to the United Nations General Assembly, 5 October 1995.

<sup>6</sup> John Paul II, Address to the United Nations General Assembly, 2 October 1979.

seventy years, it is “painful to see how many fundamental rights continue to be violated today”<sup>7</sup>.

As expressed in article 28, the concept of peace, affirms that “*Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.*” Peace is not only conceived as an absence of violence but also includes cooperation and solidarity. In order to promote, or to reestablish peace, it is necessary to restore the order of justice, which begins with the proper exercise of one’s freedom with respect for others’ freedom and in a spirit of solidarity. These moral values must prevail because they stem from the notion of human dignity as the basis of any right.

On the other hand, the failure to recognize and acknowledge our common nature, the bedrock upon which all rights are founded, is the main cause of their violation. The fundamental rights of the human person are indivisible and universal because they are not conceded by anyone. From conception to natural death, human rights stem from the dignity of the human person and from the unity of human nature, preceding the positive laws that acknowledge them. Removing human rights from this context would mean restricting their range and casting them off to a relativistic sphere, where the meaning, application and interpretation of any right would diverge into inevitable contradictions. The denial of the universality of human rights promotes division. As Pope Francis recently recalled “there is a risk that, in the very name of human rights, we will see the rise of modern forms of *ideological colonization* by the stronger and the wealthier, to the detriment of the poorer and the most vulnerable.”<sup>8</sup>

Freedom of religion or belief is the *litmus test* with respect to all other human rights and fundamental freedoms; it is their synthesis and keystone. The transversal nature of religious freedom demands equal and effective protection under the law especially for persons belonging to religious minorities, who have the right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion ... in private and in public, freely and without interference or discrimination.

Mr. President,

The Holy See believes it to be of the utmost importance that the international community and governments should focus their policies and activities on the protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms of every person and community. Indeed, the rule of law and international human rights instruments are the sentinels that protect the dignity of every person. Even from the perspective of politics and law, these systems of values and principles are efficient only when they ensure the protection of persons and communities.

Thank you, Mr. President.

---

<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, 8 January 2018.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*