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Permanent Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations
and Other International Organizations in Geneva
at the 7th Annual Interfaith Dialogue on
*The Role of Faith in the fight against poverty
during health crises*
Geneva, 11 February 2022

Dear friends,

At the outset, allow me to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to Mr. Nikhil Seth, UN Assistant Secretary General and Executive Director of UNITAR; to His Excellency Walid Khalid Obeidat, Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Jordan to the United Nations in Geneva; and to all the participants at this Annual Interfaith Dialogue.

It is an honor and a privilege for me to join you as we gather for the 7th time as people of diverse faith traditions with a common interest and conviction: that through sincere dialogue, the richness of our beliefs might have a positive impact on the world in which we live. Each of us knows, from personal experience, the value and importance of our own religion in our lives. Like other interreligious dialogue meetings, this annual conference allows us, in a spirit of trust and fraternity, to learn from one another, help one another and grow together in mutual respect.

In a particular way, I would also like to thank Mr. Alex Mejia for organizing this event and for the theme that was chosen, “*The role of faith in the fight against poverty during health crises*”. We all know how devastating the coronavirus pandemic has been. What seemed at first to be a relatively isolated epidemic, quickly blew out of all proportions into the most expansive global health crisis experienced over the past century, and it continues to affect every aspect of our lives since its outset, over two years ago. Almost 6 million people have lost their lives; countless others are suffering severe health crises; businesses have been closed around the world; national economies have been devastated; production has been brought to a standstill; in many places, education has been reduced to virtual learning or has ceased altogether; and situations of poverty have been pushed to the breaking point.

The theme chosen for today’s Interfaith Dialogue draws particular attention to those in the most vulnerable situations, as well as to migrants, refugees, indigenous peoples, and people in zones of conflict. Among them are many children, mothers,

elderly people and the poor. If the pandemic has had a negative impact on the world as a whole, it is generally these who have paid the dearest price. Innumerable persons who were in a state of dire poverty before the outbreak of the pandemic have since died from starvation. These people, just as much as those who have contracted the virus, must be counted among the victims of this bitter moment.

Unfortunately, in the midst of the current global health crisis, rather than drawing together to help one another through the manifold challenges that have arisen, all too often individuals, societies and nations have turned their attention inward, in an attempt to protect themselves from the consequences of the health emergency. This has resulted in policies of vaccine hoarding and ineffectual travel bans, which place additional, and sometimes undue burdens on the poorest and on those most in need of solidarity and fraternal good will. Differing approaches to the Covid-19 pandemic have exacerbated strains and divisions even within families and amongst friends.

Which brings me to the value and role of faith in addressing the challenges of global health crises, particularly in favor of the poor and those in vulnerable situations. I would like to reflect briefly on three important aspects: faith as a cohesive force; faith as a prophetic voice; and faith as galvanizing operational network.

In the midst of the isolationist and divisive tendency mentioned above, faith has the power to act as a ***force of unity and cohesion***. The etymology of the word *religion* derives from the Latin verb *religare*, which means to bind or to unify. At its roots, religion, and the faith that undergirds it, has as its goal to create bonds of *communion*. First and foremost, religion seeks to unite the person of faith to God, in acts of worship, prayer and thanksgiving. At the same time, however, religion creates bonds between individuals. In recognizing and honoring our connection to the Almighty, we also acknowledge our connectedness to and responsibility towards our fellow human beings. Such a connection transcends cultures, epochs, political perspectives and current circumstances, including global health crises. As Pope Francis wrote in his Encyclical letter *Fratelli tutti*, it is a recognition that we are all part of the one human family, all brothers and sisters. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, this means that “no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together”¹ Being firmly rooted in a perspective of faith implies the recognition that we are all equal in the eyes of God and, through our communion with the Almighty, we are also united to one another.

This brings us to the second aspect of the role of faith that I would like to mention, ***faith as a prophetic voice***. Indeed, convinced of our common humanity and our connectedness through our relationship with God, people of faith have a unique role and responsibility to identify and address those areas in our societies and our world that do not correspond to this reality. As such, our respective faiths can and should

¹ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*, 3 October 2020, n. 32.

inspire us to be actively engaged in responding to the inequalities that have been exacerbated by the current global health crisis. Both individually and as communities, in efforts within our faith traditions and between them, we have a responsibility to speak out against injustices and work actively towards addressing them.

This is where the role of *faith as a galvanizing operational network* reveals its value. Many faith traditions have a presence all over the world, transcending social and economic stratifications. As such, through coordinated intra- and inter-faith activities, faith groups have the capacity to recognize situations of poverty and vulnerability. They also have the ability to coordinate efforts to come to the aid of those in need. This may occur through the provision of basic social services, including healthcare, education, spiritual and psychological support. It may also involve the collection of funds from wealthier communities to provide for the needs of poorer ones.

These principles, among others, have undergirded the activity of the Catholic Church in its response to the current pandemic. As mentioned earlier, in the midst of the current global health crisis, Pope Francis issued the Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*, which expresses in an eloquent fashion a call to unity and human fraternity, reminding us all of our common humanity and our specific responsibility to help those in need.

Over the course of these past two years, the Pope has spoken out on a number of occasions, insisting on the importance of ensuring equitable access to basic healthcare, including Covid-19 vaccines. He has also referred to being vaccinated and observing public health measures as an “act of love” towards one’s neighbor.

At the outset of the pandemic, the Holy Father instituted a Vatican Covid-19 Commission, charged with the objective of analyzing the impact of the current global health crisis on the pursuit of integral human development for all people. This task force continues to conduct studies to better understand and respond to the pandemic, while providing aid to those in need.

Here in Geneva, the Permanent Mission of the Holy See has been actively engaged in discussions within the World Health Organization and the World Trade Organization to promote a more adequate response to and preparedness for global health emergencies. Much work has also been done within the International Organization for Migration and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to help ensure that the rights of people on the move are not further threatened by such health crises.

The Catholic Church also owns and operates over 20,000 hospitals and dispensaries around the world, many of which are in developing countries and serve many people who would otherwise not have access to basic healthcare. Additionally, numerous Catholic organizations around the world, such as *Caritas Internationalis*, raise funds and implement projects to respond to the concrete needs of persons in need all around the world.

These are just a few examples from the Catholic-Christian tradition of how faith can play an active role in alleviating suffering in the midst of global health emergencies.

Dear friends,

Allow me to finish by echoing the words that His Holiness Pope Francis addressed to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See earlier this year. He said that our response to the pandemic: *“calls for a manifold commitment on the personal, political and international levels [...] Each of us has a responsibility to care for ourself and our health, and this translates into respect for the health of those around us. Health care is a moral obligation. [...] We can only note with regret that, for large areas of the world, universal access to health care remains an illusion. At this grave moment in the life of humanity, I reiterate my appeal that governments and concerned private entities demonstrate a sense of responsibility, developing a coordinated response at every level (local, national, regional, global), through new models of solidarity and tools to strengthen the capabilities of those countries in greatest need.”*²

With their *cohesive force, prophetic voice and operational network*, faith traditions play a fundamental role in strengthening the local, national and global response to global health crises, so that no one is left behind in the recovery from the pandemic.

Thank you.

² Pope Francis, Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, 10 January 2022.