



Intervention by H.E. Archbishop Fortunatus Nwachukwu, Apostolic Nuncio,
Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International
Organizations in Geneva at the **International Seminar:**
"The Catholic Church towards the problem of smoking harm reduction"
Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, 25 May 2022

Excellencies,
Distinguishes participants,

My most cordial regards from Geneva. I am grateful to the Organizing Committee for extending this kind invitation to participate in this important international seminar. The topic chosen for my intervention is “the importance of the Catholic Church's voice in international organizations (e.g. WHO) in the context of reducing the effects of smoking”.

As you may know, these days in Geneva we are presently engaged in annual World Health Assembly organized by the World Health Organization. As much as I would have liked to join you in person in Rome, I must remain here in Geneva since I have been appointed to lead the delegation of the Holy See to this Assembly. Indeed, it is truly important for the Holy See to be present and raise its moral voice on issues that affect human activities and in particular human wellbeing, such as the challenge of reducing the harm caused by smoking.

This year's topic for the World Health Assembly is particularly relevant: “Health for Peace, Peace for Health”. Just like peace is not merely the absence of war, the absence of diseases does not automatically mean good health. In this regard, we may wish to recall two principles articulated in the Constitution of the World Health Organization:

- Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.
- The health of all peoples is fundamental to the attainment of peace and security and is dependent on the fullest co-operation of individuals and States.

Yesterday, while delivering the Holy See's statement to this year's World Health Assembly, I recalled the Holy Father's appeal, made earlier this year to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See: "... a comprehensive commitment on the part of the international community is necessary, so that the entire world population can have equal access to essential medical care and vaccine [...] and governments and concerned private entities [need to] demonstrate a sense of responsibility, developing a coordinated response at every level [...], through new models of solidarity and tools to strengthen the capabilities of those countries in greatest need."¹ Indeed, to achieve true and long-lasting peace, we must allocate appropriate resources to integral human development, particularly to education, and health.

Dear participants,

Today's seminar revolves around a topic that is not discussed enough as it should be. Smoking is recognized as one of the most serious public health problems worldwide. We are all familiar with the data but let me recap briefly here. According to the World Health Organization, tobacco kills more than 8 million people each year. More than 7 million of those deaths are the result of direct tobacco use while around 1.2 million are the result of non-smokers being exposed to second-hand smoke.

As Dr. Tedros Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization has affirmed: "if tobacco was a virus, it would long ago have been called a pandemic, and the world would marshal every resource to stop it". Indeed, if we are conscious of the consequences that smoking has on our health, it is legitimate to ask: why are people still attracted and "tempted" to smoke?

Personally, I feel a sense of despair when I see young teenagers smoking. Children! This is a common failure of the whole of humanity, which covers up a larger problem of addiction, that is not limited to smoking, but also to alcohol and other addictive substances. This, too, is a failure to be "our brother's keeper".

Of course, we cannot impose our will or "force" people, but the Catholic Church has a responsibility to raise awareness, promote education and take action on prevention. Perhaps, it is in the area of education that not enough is being done. Schools should be more proactive in teaching the youth about the perils and health consequences of smoking. In this regard, it is also significant that over 80% of the world's 1.3 billion tobacco users live in low- and middle-income countries.

At the institutional level, the Member States of the World Health Organization created World No Tobacco Day in 1987 to draw global attention to the tobacco epidemic and the preventable death and disease it causes. This "No

¹ Pope Francis, Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See, 10 January 2022.

Tobacco Day” is celebrated every year on 31 May. In 2003, Member States also adopted the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control which acknowledged the devastating worldwide health, social, economic, and environmental consequences of tobacco consumption and exposure to tobacco smoke.

So, while undoubtedly progress has been made (let us think of those frightening images of “victims” on cigarettes packaging alongside information on the risks; or of the legislation forbidding minors to purchase cigarettes, the taxes placed on sales etc.), we still have a long way to go. And we are all aware that tobacco companies will lobby to defend their profits, which are quite substantial.

Lastly, I wish to emphasize that smoking also poses questions related to environmental degradation as cigarette butts are thrown in the streets or in the beaches with little regard – or I would say utter disregard - for our common home, for biodiversity. Furthermore, the smoke blown in the air contributes to CO2 emissions and the mere production of cigarettes takes away the already scarce resources of our planet: trees are chopped down and gallons of water are wasted to make cigarettes.

Dear participants,

We are very aware that life is a gift from God; thus, we have an obligation to conduct ourselves in a manner that protects our health. Guided by our faith, and by the respect for the sacred value of life, we have a responsibility to protect and preserve both our physical and mental health.

This indeed was the rationale that brought Pope Francis, five years ago, to order a halt on the sale of cigarettes within the Vatican shops. The Holy See cannot contribute to an activity that clearly damages the health of people. While such decision might not have been popular among smokers working at the Vatican, it certainly was welcomed by many others. The cigarettes sold were also a source of revenue. But it was a courageous decision and the right one: no profit can be legitimate if it puts lives at risk.

In conclusion, the Church has a responsibility to show the way of preserving and defending life, from conception to natural death, including by raising its voice in international organizations, and especially through education to prevent and eliminate life-threatening risks. I hope that today’s seminar will contribute to advancing and enhancing the fulfilment of this responsibility through concrete actions and outcomes.

I thank you for your kind attention.