



Understanding Priority Challenges in Protecting Human Dignity at Intergovernmental Levels

Contribution to the 5th International Assembly of the Forum of Catholic-Inspired NGOs on
“Mission and responsibilities in a more just and fraternal world.”

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By

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Dear friends,

I wish to thank you for inviting me to share a few thoughts on the major challenges facing the protection of human dignity at intergovernmental levels, particularly at the United Nations and other international organisations present in Geneva.

A common mission

I would like to begin by recalling the teaching of the Council Fathers in paragraph 89 of *Gaudium et spes* (hereafter *GS*), the Pastoral Constitution of the Second Vatican Council on the Church in the modern world:

“Since, in virtue of her mission received from God, the Church preaches the Gospel to all men and dispenses the treasures of grace, she contributes to the ensuring of peace everywhere on earth and to the placing of the fraternal exchange between men on solid ground by imparting knowledge of the divine and natural law. Therefore, to encourage and stimulate cooperation among men, the Church must be clearly present in the midst of the community of nations both through her official channels and through the full and sincere collaboration of all Christians—a collaboration motivated solely by the desire to be of service to all.

This will come about more effectively if the faithful themselves, conscious of their responsibility as men and as Christians will exert their influence in their own milieu to arouse a ready willingness to cooperate with the international community. Special care must be given, in both religious and civil education, to the formation of youth in this regard.”

This declaration of the Council Fathers reminds us that the participation of the Holy See through its direct representatives and that of Catholic-inspired non-governmental organisations in multilateral diplomacy is part of the mission of the Church, particularly the mission of preaching the Gospel and dispensing the treasures of grace to all men and women.

In this regard, the Pope sends to the intergovernmental multilateral fora his envoys as permanent representatives and observers in order to make present and share the Christian message, so that this may in turn become a source of inspiration for discussions at their assemblies and meetings. Whether it is in New York, Geneva, Brussels, Rome, Vienna, Strasbourg, Addis Abeba, Nairobi or Washington, the representatives of the Pope strive to ensure that beyond the national and political interests, the different States may also recognize as fundamental the need to respect human life, human dignity and common good.

Similarly, alongside the representatives of the Pope, the non-governmental organizations, inspired by the teachings, traditions and mores of the Catholic Church and according to their various founding visions and charisms, also seek to make their contribution in these fora with the ultimate purpose of promoting human dignity and common good.

Since they represent different expressions of the same mission of the Church, it is important that Catholic-inspired NGOs and the Permanent Missions of the Holy See cooperate in order to carry out this shared vision. This cooperation or synergy is what Pope Francis calls the “style” of God.

The style of God: towards an ecclesiology of the relationships

In his homily at the opening Mass of the Synod journey on 10 October 2021 Pope Francis declared: “Today, as we begin this synodal process, let us begin by asking ourselves – all of us, Pope, bishops, priests, religious and laity – whether we, the Christian community, embody this ‘style’ of God, who travels the paths of history and shares in the life of humanity”. Earlier, on the eve of that Eucharistic celebration, in his address at the formal opening of the synodal process, the Pope had presented what that style of God implies. “The Synod”, he said, “has three key words: communion, participation and mission. Communion and mission are theological terms describing the mystery of the Church, which we do well to keep in mind... With those two words, the Church contemplates and imitates the life of the Blessed Trinity, a mystery of communion *ad intra* (or) and source of mission *ad extra*.” That communion *ad intra* is what the Fathers of the Church, especially Maximus Confessor (662 A.D.) and Gregory of Nazianzus (389/90 A.D.) called “*perichoresis*” (in Greek) or circumincession (from the Latin roots *circum* or “round” and *incedere* or “to walk”). It is not difficult to see that, like the Church in its synodal life, the Holy See’s diplomacy also bears this Trinitarian imprint. I already referred to this insight of the Holy See’s diplomacy as “Trinitarian” as far back as 2006, on the occasion of a conference organized here in Rome by Pax Romana.

The Trinitarian metaphor, with its limitations, is an important means of illustrating the relationship between the Catholic-inspired NGOs, the Permanent Missions of the Holy See and the Holy Father, assisted by the Secretariat of State and the Roman Curia, in their shared mission of promoting human dignity and common good, using the Gospel as benchmark. Simply put, as God the Father sent the Son into the world to accomplish his will, so the Pope, aided by the Superiors of the Holy See, sends his representatives to the different nations and to

the international community to express and share the vision of the Holy See. As a Permanent Observer of the Holy See in Geneva, for example, I do not act in my own name; it is not my personal will that I carry out; I do not pursue my own interests. I only do the will of the Holy Father. I am his representative, giving him voice and expressing his will at the intergovernmental fora. By the same analogy, the Catholic-inspired NGOs are involved in the international community as advocates, doing the work of advocacy, in the manner of the Holy Spirit, the “other Advocate” (cf. Jn 14:16,26; 15:26; 16:7).

According to this metaphor the Catholic-inspired NGOs would find in the Holy Father the source of their mission, just as the Father sent the Holy Spirit (Jn 15:26). Further, these NGOs accompany and also support the entire Catholic faithful, just as the Holy Spirit would remain with the followers of Christ so that they would not be orphaned (Jn 14:16). And finally, in their advocacy, the Catholic-inspired NGOs ought to maintain a fluid working relationship with the Permanent Missions which reflect the mission of Jesus Christ, the first Advocate (1Jn 2:1) and Ambassador of the Father, whose presence and mission are prolonged and fostered by the Holy Spirit. In fact, in the words of Jesus, “The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (Jn 14:16).

Consequently, as the Holy Spirit unveils the will of the Father, you, the Catholic-inspired NGOs, have the task of helping to establish between peoples the solid foundation of a fraternal community, namely, the knowledge of divine and natural law (*GS* 89). You are responsible for inserting Christian and human values into the speeches of States. You serve as a bond of communion, fraternity and love between the Holy Father and your interlocutors in the sense desired by the Second Vatican Council: “Christians will collaborate willingly and wholeheartedly in the construction of the international order which must be done with sincere respect for legitimate freedoms and in the friendly brotherhood of all”(*GS* 88) giving “birth to the consciousness of a truly global solidarity and responsibility” (*GS* 90).

Outstanding challenges at the intergovernmental fora

I would now like to dwell briefly on a few specific challenges that the diplomatic activity of the Holy See faces in today’s international fora. The first is what Pope Francis has described as “cultural” or “ideological” colonialism. Whereas traditional colonial powers were intent on acquiring *territory* in order to amass material or strategic resources, the new form of ideological colonialism – as the name suggests – seeks to impose a specific set of so-called “ideals” on a population, with total disregard to the customs, values and cultures of the people. This happens most frequently by limiting or even denying financial resources to developing countries unless they actively promote those “ideals”. In this way, affluent Western countries continue to impose a one-sided perspective on such countries, which do not dare to risk the essential aid they receive for development and humanitarian efforts. Worse still, while traditional colonial powers were, at least in theory, influenced by some Christian culture and values, today’s super-powers are dominated by post-Christian and often anti-Christian ideologies.

This ideological colonialism manifests itself in a number of ways, but its two most prevalent goals in today's world are the following: abortion, often euphemized with the terms "sexual and reproductive health/rights"; and LGBTQI+ rights, also more indirectly referred to as *gender mainstreaming* and *diversity*.

Another significant challenge to the multilateral system is the increasing politicization – and polarization – of the discussions. This, too, is in part due to the new forms of colonialism, which tend to focus on highly politicized issues. It is further exacerbated in today's global security climate. While we must not forget the many protracted conflicts all around the world, it is undeniable that the war in Ukraine has caused extreme polarization of opinions. It may be surprising to hear that while there is an unequivocal condemnation of Russia voiced by European and Western countries, nonetheless many countries of the Global South either remain silent (for fear of losing western funding) or even voice support for Russia, viewing the conflict as a sort of war against arrogant Western superiority, with its colonial past and present. In any case, I would estimate that these days, reciprocal accusations, points of order, rights of reply and other factors arising from the politicization of the war in Ukraine occupy at least 1/3 of the time that is spent in the various international organizations; time that is expected to be dedicated to addressing concrete issues relevant to the objectives of the organization itself.

One final challenge that is all too often encountered, and which is related to the other points already mentioned, is the aggressive and arrogant tone in which "negotiations" take place. In *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis rightly points to the importance of dialogue in overcoming the differences between peoples and nations. However, such dialogue cannot bear fruit unless it is sincere. What we see in the negotiating halls today is not a common effort to avoid conflict and resolve differences by coming to an acceptable solution for all. Rather, certain delegations have a tendency to presume the right to adopt a "take it or leave it" approach, putting at risk the effectiveness of the organization by using the "consensus" approach as an effective veto.

What is needed, in this context, is a return to true and authentic dialogue, which begins by listening to the other party or parties, understanding their legitimate concerns and differences and seeking in a spirit of fraternity and good will an acceptable solution of compromise which, if not ideal, is at least acceptable to all.

They ran together

I will like to conclude by returning to the "style" of God, which the Pope evoked in presenting the synodal process. It is a style that is expressed by the word "together" (in Greek *syn* or *homou*). The early Christians certainly utilised this "style" in their search for the presence of the risen Lord. We only need to think of the two disciples who journeyed together to Emmaus in the evening of the day of Christ's resurrection (Lk 24:13-35). More striking however is the Easter-morning race of the disciples, earlier on that same day (Jn 20:2-11). We are told that the disciples ran "together". Yet, they ran according to their different strengths, gifts, and situations. The other disciple ran faster than Peter, who did not try to stop him. Mary Magdalene who brought them the message of the absence of the Lord's body from the tomb, ran with them quietly and unmentioned. Yet, they all ran together.

This is the togetherness that should also distinguish the work of the Catholic-inspired NGOs. I have seen it among those present in Geneva. I am glad that the Geneva Forum will share their experience with others present at this meeting. It is my prayer that this example will be emulated by the NGOs present at other intergovernmental fora and all may grow in this fundamental mark of the Christian community: the style of God.

Thank you.