



Statement of H.E. Archbishop Ettore Balestrero, Apostolic Nuncio  
Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations  
and Other International Organizations in Geneva  
**at the General Debate on Item 2 of the  
54<sup>th</sup> Session of the Human Rights Council**  
*Geneva, 13 September 2023*

Mister President,

Later this year, the international community and this Council will celebrate the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). This cornerstone of today's multilateral system is founded on the conviction that "*All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.*"<sup>1</sup>

It is a sad fact of history that this conviction was enshrined in the UDHR only after the devastation and loss of millions of lives in the Second World War. It is even more tragic, however, that 75 years later, many of our brothers and sisters still suffer from war, conflict, famine, prejudice and discrimination. Rather than the "spirit of fraternity" to which the international community unequivocally committed itself, all too often today, anyone who is perceived as weak, poor or lacking "value" based on certain cultural norms is ignored, marginalized or even considered a threat to be eliminated.

Mister President,

In light of the all too frequent violations of human rights that occur in the world today, the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the adoption of the UDHR offers an important opportunity to reflect on those fundamental principles that undergird the protection of human rights.

The UDHR is, first of all, *universal*. All persons, without distinction of any kind, inherently and inalienably possess human dignity. Not only does this mean that every person is to be respected, but it also implies that each person is to be valued for the unique contribution that they bring to society.

Unfortunately, it is often people in the most vulnerable situations that are discriminated against and marginalized. Migrants and refugees, the elderly, the sick, the unborn and the poor, to name just a few, are often relegated to the sidelines of society or even discarded. In order to combat these tendencies, it is essential to adopt a *preferential option* for the poor and the marginalized, to uphold their universal rights and to enable them to flourish and contribute to the common good. As Pope Francis has said, "*often the most fragile persons are discarded, considered useless*" and it is necessary to "*combat the throwaway culture and remind everyone that diversity is a richness which must never become a reason for exclusion or discrimination.*"<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, the UDHR is a *declaration*. The human rights enshrined [in the UDHR] therein are not bestowed on anyone, but rather pre-exist any document. The Declaration

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<sup>1</sup> Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 1.

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, Audience with Members of the Movement *Foi et lumière internationale*, 2 October 2021.

represents the collective recognition by the international community of those values which are inseparable from what it means to be human. As such, regardless of whether or not there are specific legal obligations in a given place and time, the values of the UDHR must be respected for all people at all times.

Being rooted in the dignity of the human person, human rights are not simply a privilege bestowed by the consensus of the international community on individuals. They represent, rather, those objective, timeless values that are essential for the flourishing of the human person. This implies that even if a society or the international community would refuse to recognize one or more of the rights included in the UDHR, that would not diminish the validity of that right, nor would it excuse anyone from respecting it. It also means that so-called “new rights” do not acquire legitimacy simply because a majority of individuals or States assert them. The most egregious example today of this mistaken understanding of rights is represented by the estimated 73 million innocent human lives that are terminated each year in the womb, under the guise of a purported “right to abortion”.<sup>3</sup>

A positivistic approach might see human rights as a set of liberties accorded to each individual and, as such, a corresponding set of limits imposed on others in order to respect those rights. Such an approach, however, would reduce human interactions to a form of individualism, where the rights of one person stand in opposition to the rights of others. *“The merit of the Universal Declaration is that it has enabled different cultures, juridical expressions and institutional models to converge around a fundamental nucleus of values, and hence of rights. Today, though, efforts need to be redoubled in the face of pressure to reinterpret the foundations of the Declaration and to compromise its inner unity so as to facilitate a move away from the protection of human dignity towards the satisfaction of simple interests, often particular interests.”*<sup>4</sup>

When rooted in our common human dignity, on the other hand, human rights are an expression of human fraternity, the recognition that we are all members of the one human family, to be valued, treasured and promoted. In this light, even more fundamental than our “individual” human rights is our *common responsibility* to one another. By firmly rooting human rights in the common and inalienable dignity of the human person, therefore, the promotion of human rights becomes a source of unity, rather than falling prey to selfish individualism and division.

Mister President,

Allow me to conclude by echoing the appeal of Pope Francis in his Encyclical Letter on fraternity and social friendship: *“At a time when various forms of fundamentalist intolerance are damaging relationships between individuals, groups and peoples, let us be committed to living and teaching the value of respect for others, a love capable of welcoming differences, and the priority of the dignity of every human being over his or her ideas, opinions, practices and even sins”*.

Thank you, Mister President.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/abortion>.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the UN General Assembly, 18 April 2008.