

PRESS RELEASE

High-Level Event on the Universality of Human Rights and the Universal Responsibility to Care: Commemoration of the 75th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Presentation of Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation on the Climate Crisis "Laudate Deum"

Geneva, 8 December 2023

On 8 December 2023, the Permanent Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva organized a High-Level Event on "The Universality of Human Rights and the Universal Responsibility to Care". It was organized to commemorate the 75th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and present Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation on the Climate Crisis "Laudate Deum." The event was co-sponsored by the Permanent Mission of the Order of Malta, the *Caritas in Veritate* Foundation, the International Catholic Migration Commission, and the Forum of Catholic-Inspired NGOs in Geneva.

The event, moderated by H.E. Archbishop Ettore BALESTRERO, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations and other International Organizations in Geneva, discussed the correlation between universal human dignity and rights, and our universal responsibility to care for one another and our common home.

H.E. Archbishop Ettore BALESTRERO opened the event by acknowledging the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) as the "cornerstone of the life and work at the United Nations," which recognizes the "inherent dignity of the human person and formally protects and promotes the human rights which flow from it." He stressed that the roots of these human rights "are to be found in the dignity of the human person created by God." Archbishop Balestrero highlighted the interconnectedness of relationships on this planet, saying, "We are called to live in right relationship with God, with one another, with ourselves and with all of creation, our common home...."

Archbishop Balestrero recalled that, "without life there is no dignity and without dignity there can be no rights." He affirmed that "The right to life, which is enshrined in Article 3 of the Universal Declaration, must be defended at all stages, from conception to natural death, especially when life is most vulnerable: in sickness or infirmity, in conflict and war, in places of work, and along the many paths of our world, as people flee conflict, disaster and the effects of climate change." Furthermore, Archbishop Balestrero called *Laudate Deum* a "clarion call" to respond to "the attacks to our common home [that] have consequences for human lives." He reiterated Pope Francis' warning that the international community's response to the climate crisis has "not been adequate, while the world in which we live is collapsing and may be near the breaking point."

Ms. Tatiana VALOVAYA, Director-General of the United Nations Office in Geneva, praised the UDHR as "a testament to our shared commitment, enshrining common values that transcend borders, cultures, and faiths." Given the increase in global mistrust, inequality, geopolitical tensions, and the climate crisis, Ms. Valovaya stressed the "dire need for renewed multilateralism... not merely as a diplomatic imperative, but an urgent necessity in the face of transnational threats and opportunities." She shared her vision for a modern United Nations, embodied in the UN Charter and the UDHR, "serving as the most suitable international forum to find convergences between different interests." Ms. Valovaya acknowledged Pope Francis' advocacy for UN reform and praised him as a "strong believer in the role of the UN and the value of multilateralism [and] a strong advocate of the UN reform".

Sister Alessandra SMERILLI, Secretary of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, in presenting the Apostolic Exhortation “Laudate Deum” affirmed that human rights and safeguarding creation are “two sides of the same coin”. She added that there is a “deep and direct link between caring for our brothers and sisters and caring for the earth: both are rooted in recognizing life as a gift from God.” Subsequently, she outlined how the “myth of limitless growth” and “false meritocratic logic” have “provided the basis on which unscrupulous economic pragmatism and the reckless exploitation of natural resources could be justified.” Sr. Smerilli also highlighted that “ecological responsibility is intertwined with social justice and, therefore, with respect for, and compliance with, human rights.” Echoing Pope Francis, she noted that the “ecological crisis is first and foremost a crisis of culture... a consequence of the losing our admiring and grateful gaze on the creation as a whole, as a gift and an inheritance that God has given us.” Therefore, a cultural change is required through personal conversion: such a change is key for “a prudent and realistic rethinking of multilateralism” which enables multilateral bodies to reach binding decisions which can be monitored and to ensure that such bodies are an “expression of civil society and other civil actors”. Sr. Smerilli concluded, by calling on the international community to accept “our ethical responsibility toward the new generations, and the world that we will hand over to them as a legacy and inheritance.”

Mr. Gilbert HOUNGBO, Director General of the International Labour Organization (ILO), emphasized the importance of ‘care is work and work is care.’ He recalled the words of Pope Francis addressed to the 109th International Labour Conference on work in the care of creation and the relational nature of work. On the latter, he stressed that if work is relational then it “must include the dimension of care because no relationship can survive without care”. When work is conceived without care, then “it destroys creations, it endangers the survival of future generations, it does not respect the dignity of work and it cannot be considered decent”. In contrast to this, Mr. Houngho shared that work that is imbued with care has the potential to contribute “to the restoration of full human dignity” and to ensuring “a sustainable future for future generations”. He concluded by stressing that “labour is not a commodity” and that the pursuit of social justice makes economies and countries “function better.”

Ms. Amy POPE, Director General of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), opened by highlighting how the fundamental rights set out in the Universal Declaration do not “distinguish between those who have legal status, a particular nationality, those travelling by visa or travelling by boat at the hands of a smuggler”. She emphasized the continued relevance of the UDHR in the context of the global migration landscape and lamented how the international community is not “living up to these expectations particularly when it comes to migrant populations...people who are displaced or who are on the move.” She commented on how the national policies of many countries framed migrants as “somehow lesser” or as not having “the same worth as other human beings” or as unequal to others, given they have “no vote, no voice, no rights”. Ms. Pope’s speech focused on two distinct aspects of the migration issue: displacement due to climate change and the number of migrants moving for work. She concluded by reiterating the need to “reinforce our commitment to migrant rights when we speak of human rights” and to “work for a future where every individual, including the migrant, has their dignity, well-being and safety upheld, regardless of where they come from and regardless of their status”.

Mr. Fabrice HADJADJ, philosopher and playwright, spoke on the three meanings of “care” and the paradoxes of our time when “...in the name of caring for human life...we destroy human life”. Post-modernity, he said, is an era ‘marked by heresies of love and compassion.’ From this perspective, “euthanasia is compassion. Abortion is compassion. Being child-free is compassion, compassion for the planet.” He spoke of the humanity’s desire to be carefree, looking for a life of “comfort, success, performance” while refusing “failure, deficiency and sacrifice”. Mr. Hadjadj proposed to those gathered that “to care for human life is not to spare but to dare human life, to hope against all hope, to believe in providence not in a programme, to risk an adventure rather than to rest in a bed of thornless artificial roses”. Commenting on Europe’s falling fertility rates and rising suicide among the young, he suggested at its root was the fact that “the only thing we propose to young people is to protect their lives when what they are really looking for is something or someone to give their life to.”

At the end of the event, H.E. Archbishop Ettore BALESTRERO offered concluding remarks. He reiterated Pope Francis’ invitation to “follow the way of togetherness” and expressed his hope that the event would contribute to the cultural change necessary for a “new [and] effective multilateralism”, as the Holy Father stressed at COP28.

The entire opening and concluding remarks of H.E. Archbishop Ettore BALESTRERO as well as the intervention of Sister Alessandra SMERILLI statement are attached to this press release.



**High-Level Event on the occasion of the
75th Anniversary of the Adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights
and Presentation of the Apostolic Exhortation *Laudate Deum* on the Climate Crisis**

Palais des Nations, 8 December 2023

**Opening Remarks by H.E. Archbishop Ettore Balestrero, Permanent
Representative of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International
Organizations in Geneva**

Excellencies,

Distinguished colleagues,

Dear friends,

I would like to extend a warm welcome to all of you, both those physically present in this room and those online. In particular, I wish to thank and welcome our most distinguished speakers to this High-Level event marking the 75th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the presentation of the Apostolic Exhortation *Laudate Deum* on the climate crisis.

The Universal Declaration is the cornerstone of the life and work of the United Nations and is ‘*a true milestone on the path of humanity’s moral progress.*’ (Pope St. John Paul II, *Address to the 34th General Assembly of the United Nations*, 2 October 1979).

Unfortunately, it must be acknowledged that 75 years after the adoption of such a landmark document, the world is increasingly divided, fragmented, and inward looking. The global situation is undeniably dire, and it appears to be deteriorating further. Nevertheless, all of this highlights the growing necessity

to commemorate the Universal Declaration, to reflect on it, and to rekindle its inspiration.

The UDHR acknowledges the inherent dignity of every human person and formally protects and promotes human rights.

The Holy See upholds that the foundation of human rights lies in the dignity of the human being created by God. The human person possesses an unparalleled and inviolable dignity, while being relational in nature. We do not exist as isolated individual rights-bearers, but in a web of connections and relationships on this planet. In his Encyclical Letters *Laudato si'* and *Fratelli tutti*, as well as in the more recent Apostolic Exhortation *Laudate Deum*, Pope Francis reminds us that everything and everyone is interconnected (cf. *Laudato si'* n. 139, *Fratelli tutti* n. 34). Our duty is to live in proper relationship with God, with one another, with ourselves and with the whole of creation, our common home.

Life is the fundamental condition for the exercise of all rights, within this network of relationships. Devoid of life, there can be no dignity, and in the absence of dignity there can be no rights. The right to life, as enshrined in Article 3 of the Universal Declaration, must be defended at all stages, from conception to natural death, especially when life is most vulnerable: in sickness or infirmity, in conflict and war, and along the many paths of our world, as people flee conflict, disaster and the effects of climate change.

Despite efforts to protect and promote the rights of migrants and refugees, and to provide solutions for a more humane governance of migration, an increasing number of people are currently on the move. There are several reasons for this, some of which are overlapping. Often, people are fleeing from violence and conflict, the effects of climate change, lack of respect of fundamental human rights and freedoms, as well as poverty. When addressing these factors, we must always adhere to the objective truth of the inviolable dignity of migrants as our moral compass. Our duty to care, demands of us a spirit of empathy and unity, cohesion and concreteness, rather than simple slogans, quick fixes or sheer indifference.

This responsibility to care also encompasses human work. Promoting the right to decent work and caring for the rights of workers is an essential component of the recognition of human dignity. Work is a fundamental good that

corresponds to human dignity, facilitates its expression and promotes its flourishing (cf. Pope St John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*).

Finally, it is worth noting that Pope Francis, at the beginning of his Apostolic Exhortation *Laudate Deum*, once again shows how the care we have for one another and our care for the earth are connected. Thus, any harm inflicted to our common home has consequences for human lives (*Laudate Deum*, n. 3). The disregard of our responsibility to care for our common way has become a drama and a crisis that threatens the “*inherent dignity [...] and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family.*” (Preamble, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). *Laudate Deum* is a clear call to address the crisis and acknowledge that until now “*our responses [to the climate crisis] have not been adequate, while the world in which we live is collapsing and may be nearing the breaking point*” (*Laudate Deum*, n. 2). Without recognising our responsibility to care for our common home and acting on it, commitments to human rights and human flourishing will lack a vital foundation and a secure future.

Today's contributions will explore the continuing relevance of the Universal Declaration and the significance of *Laudate Deum*.

Geneva is a key strategic hub for human rights, humanitarian law, disarmament, labour and many other fields. I am therefore honoured by the presence of Ms. Tatiana Valovaya, Director General of the UN Office in Geneva, Mr. Gilbert Houngbo, Director General of the International Labour Organization, and Ms. Amy Pope, Director General of the International Organization for Migration. A special note of thanks also goes to Sister Alessandra Smerilli, Secretary of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. Finally, a special gratitude goes to a French writer, philosopher and playwright of the calibre of Fabrice Hadjadj, well known in Europe and beyond.

All of the proficient speakers at our event will significantly enrich it, and their reflections will help us to renew our hope and commitment to human fraternity, solidarity, human rights and peace.

Concluding Remarks by H.E. Archbishop Ettore Balestrero, Permanent Representative of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva

Today's productive and enlightening discussion has demonstrated that these two documents, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Apostolic Exhortation on the Climate Crisis *Laudate Deum*, have in common their call to promote human dignity and the responsibility to care.

“Our care for one another and our care for the earth are intimately bound together. Climate change is one of the principal challenges facing society and the global community. The effects of climate change are borne by the most vulnerable people [...] around the world.” (cf. *Laudate Deum* n. 3)

Christmas is approaching, and as Christians, we celebrate the birth of the Son of God as a human child in our world, an ultimate confirmation of the God-given inviolable dignity of every human being. Therefore, it is our duty to protect every human life and its living space.

As stated by Pope Francis in his Message to COP 28 in Dubai *“Let us choose life! Let us choose the future!”* (Pope Francis, *Address to the Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change*, 2 December 2023) for the well-being of new generations, workers and migrants.

To this end, he invites us to follow the path of fraternity and solidarity which is nothing else than multilateralism. Today, we convene within a framework, including a logistical one that inherently embraces the notion of multilateralism. Many of you present here are qualified actors in the multilateral world.

A new and effective multilateralism requires a cultural change, as the Pope stressed in his recent Message to COP28. I trust that this event will be a positive contribution and a step towards this cultural change, and that multilateralism itself will benefit from it.

I am very grateful to our expert speakers for their interesting and insightful reflections. Moreover, I deeply appreciate the time that they have dedicated to us, especially at this particularly busy time of year.

My gratitude goes to all of you, present here today, and to those who have followed us online, as well as, and in a special way, to the co-sponsors of today's

event, the Permanent Observer Mission of the Sovereign Order of Malta, the International Catholic Migration Commission, the Caritas in Veritate Foundation, and the Forum of Catholic Inspired NGOs.

Last but not least, I am deeply grateful to those who carried much of the burden of this High-Level Event: the dedicated staff of the Permanent Mission of the Holy See and all those who provided technical assistance.

“Care for our common home: The urgency of a universal call to responsibility”

Sr. Alessandra Smerilli

Your Excellencies, Dear Friends,

It is a pleasure and an honour to be here with you to commemorate the 75th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and to present the Apostolic Exhortation *Laudate Deum*. I would like to begin by thanking the Permanent Mission of the Holy See, the Sovereign Order of Malta, the Caritas in Veritate Foundation, the ICMC, and the Forum of Catholic Inspired NGOs for organizing this important high-level event.

Caring: The Environment, Human Life, and God’s Law

The first thing that I noticed when I received the invitation was the title of today’s event: “The Universality of Human Rights and the Universal Responsibility to Care.” I was particularly struck by the emphasis on the word “universal.” In a world in which we witness a steady rise in conflicts, unstable situations, and climate change problems – to name just a few of the dramas that will be addressed in today’s dialogue – the thought that there is still something “universal” may seem quite naïve.

Yet this was already the case 75 years ago, at the end of the bloodiest and most devastating war in human history. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights that we are celebrating today was signed with full awareness of the drama that had just taken place and the knowledge 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” (UDHR Preamble).

Today we are called to do the very same, both in the area of Human Rights as well as in the safeguarding of creation. These two areas are, in fact, two sides of the same coin.

It is no coincidence that, in the story of creation in the Book of Genesis, God commands the first human beings to “cultivate and keep” the garden of Eden (Gen. 2:15). This commandment to care for creation is not separate from our relationship with God or with our brothers and sisters. On the contrary, it is aimed at involving us as human beings in full participation in God’s creative action and glory. The term “to care” (*šamar* in Hebrew) expresses the intentionality of caring with responsibility, and of protecting with love. Again, it is no coincidence that in the Bible it is applied to different realities toward which human beings are called to express special solicitude and dedication: creation, which is to be protected; human life, which is to be defended; and God’s law, which is to be kept in the heart (cf. Gen. 4:9; Deut. 4:9; Prov. 13:3; 16:17). The circularity between these three relational dimensions is amply expressed in the Sacred Scripture: it is respect for life that allows for the recognition of the dignity and rights of both the human person and the

environment. There is a deep and direct link between caring for our brothers and sisters and caring for the earth: both are rooted in recognizing life as a gift from God. This obvious relationship is at the heart of Pope Francis' 2015 Encyclical *Laudato Si'*:

The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation. [...] Both everyday experience and scientific research show that the gravest effects of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest (LS, 48).

Everything is connected – these are the words that summarize the core message of *Laudato Si'*. Thus, the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are one and the same cry.

Latest Developments: *Laudate Deum*

This brings us to the second document that is the subject of our dialogue today: the Apostolic Exhortation *Laudate Deum*.

Laudate Deum constitutes a natural and organic development of *Laudato Si'*, eight years after its publication. However, it is also possible to consider *Laudate Deum* as an “updated” reinterpretation of the climate crisis, and the call for necessary ecological conversion, in light of the teaching on social friendship and fraternity that was later expressed in the Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*. Indeed, *Laudate Deum* links back to *Laudato Si'* in its chapters concerning the denunciation of the current progression of the climate crisis, while at the same time referring to *Fratelli Tutti* in identifying the causes of the crisis and a possible way forward.

If we wanted to sum up the essence of this new Apostolic Exhortation in just a few lines, we could say that Pope Francis has emphasized how – from 2015 to today – few steps forward have been taken. This unfortunate situation calls into question the unruliness of the “technocratic paradigm” and partisan interests. We can only get out of this crisis if we do so together, through a conversion that empowers everyone – both at the personal and community levels. This will be effective to the extent that we commit ourselves to generating a culture that is capable of re-establishing the alliance between humanity and the environment on a solid foundation.

Pope Francis appeals to the long-term planning of politics and civil societies, making a concrete proposal as a possible way forward, namely that of a prudent and realistic rethinking of multilateralism.

The Alchemy of two Ideologies: The Myth of Growth and Meritocratic Logic

In *Laudate Deum*, Pope Francis clearly reminds everyone that we have almost reached a point of no return: humanity's relationship with the environment has become critical. The causes that have led to the current situation are many, but today I would like to highlight two of them, as their negative effects are also evident in many other areas of human living.

The first cause is the aforementioned “technocratic paradigm,” which can be described as a view of reality according to which, “goodness and truth automatically flow from technological and economic power as such” (LS, 105). Such a vision is based on “the notion of a human being with no limits, whose abilities and possibilities can be infinitely expanded thanks to technology” (LD, 21). This leads to an unrestrained drive to produce more and faster, without considering both the human and natural limits of the reality that surrounds us.

Secondly, the myth of “limitless growth” has been compounded by a deceptive and false “meritocratic logic,” aimed at disadvantaging the weakest and excluded (cf. LD, 9), and holding them primarily responsible for their disadvantaged condition, as if power and wealth were exclusively the result of personal ability and the unequivocal guarantee of earned success.

The alchemy of these two ideological principles has provided the basis on which unscrupulous economic pragmatism and the reckless exploitation of natural resources could be justified. The environment has been regarded as an “object” to be manipulated at will, to be used according to the greatest profit. However, nature cannot simply be reduced to a mere “setting” (LD, 25), on which the human existence unfolds. We cannot look at nature “from the outside,” because we are fully immersed within it: we are an integral part of its delicate balance. The quality of human life and the quality of the environment are closely linked and deeply interdependent.

Unlike other living beings, our processes of adaptation are not determined solely by our biological evolution but are also by cultural developments: as human beings we have the ability to manage our presence in the world and to decide what kind of relationship we should have with the ecosystem around us.

As Pope Francis notes, the ecological crisis is first and foremost a crisis of culture (cf. LD, 70), a consequence of the losing our admiring and grateful gaze on the creation as a whole, as a gift and an inheritance that God has given us.

Personal Conversion, Civil Commitment, and Political Responsibility

The necessary but insufficient condition for strengthening our commitment to our common home and our brothers and sisters who live in it, is that of a personal conversion, which is capable of generating cultural changes. There is an urgent need for adequate education in “environmental responsibility,” to be meant as the transmission of knowledge, methods, and experiences through which the individuals and the community become aware of the natural and human environment in which they live.

However, this is not enough: without bold and internationally binding decisions, it will prove difficult to generate solid and lasting changes.

This is why Pope Francis, at the most recent Conference of the Parties (COP 28), emphasized that “it is essential that there be a breakthrough that is not a partial change of course, but rather a new way of making progress together” that represents “a turning point” and “a concrete sign of hope”

that makes it possible to “set out anew” (Message at COP28). Ultimately, according to Pope Francis, the key to change is to rethink multilateralism. On one hand, there is a call for multilateral bodies to be able to reach binding decisions which can be monitored. On the other hand, “Our world has become so multipolar and at the same time so complex that a different framework for effective cooperation is required. It is not enough to think only of balances of power but also of the need to provide a response to new problems and to react with global mechanisms to the environmental, public health, cultural and social challenges, especially in order to consolidate respect for the most elementary human rights, social rights and the protection of our common home.” (LD, 42)

In conclusion, the full recognition of the universality of rights and duties that characterizes every human person brings Pope Francis to appeal to the Catholics, and to our brothers and sisters of all religions, to cultivate in today’s culture and society the wisdom of their own faith experiences (cf. LD, 61) as a contribution to the entire human family. After all, the teachings and the warnings that emerge loud and clear from the pages of *Laudate Deum* are clear and direct: ecological responsibility is intertwined with social justice and, therefore, with respect for, and compliance with, human rights. Therefore, we must take into account the possible future scenarios that are currently emerging: the climate crisis could lead to increased migration (cf. LD, 6); many people could lose their jobs, as a result of nations attempting to apply strategies to mitigate its effects (cf. LD, 10); the social gap between rich and poor could widen, to the extent that the choice to put national interests before the global common good persists (cf. LS, 52). We should look with healthy realism at the present: choosing to act, and knowing that failing to do so, refraining from taking action, will surely entail consequences for the future.

It is up to us to decide the direction we want to take in the near future, accepting our ethical responsibility toward the new generations, and the world that we will hand over to them as a legacy and inheritance.

Thank you.