

Statement on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

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December 10 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations General Assembly. The Universal Declaration, which Pope John Paul II has praised as "one of the highest expressions of the human conscience in our time," is widely and rightly acknowledged as providing the basis and impetus for the growing promotion and observance of human rights during the past half century.

In his 1998 World Day of Peace message earlier this year, the Holy Father termed the adoption of the Declaration "a solemn act, arrived at after the sad experience of war and motivated by the desire formally to recognize that *the same rights belong to every individual and all peoples*." This was accomplished by translating the seven fundamental rights and freedoms enumerated in the United Nations Charter into "a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations."

The cornerstone of the Universal Declaration is the acknowledgement of human dignity: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." These rights are civil and political, as well as social, economic and cultural; all are indivisible, inalienable and universal. Taken together, these basic human rights are essential for protecting the life of each individual and helping that life to be more fully human, as well as for a just and peaceful world.

Religious groups around the world, including the Catholic Church, made notable contributions to the Universal Declaration, and continue to support efforts to codify these rights in international law and to press for their enforcement.

While much progress has been made, much remains to be done. Grave violations of fundamental human rights, often on a massive scale, still routinely occur in all too many places, especially during armed conflict. A very few examples include denial of self-determination in East Timor; employment of child labor under appalling conditions in Vietnam; political repression and religious persecution in China; use of torture and enforced starvation in Sudan; sexual exploitation of women and girls in East Asia; mistreatment of refugees in Africa; and widespread denial of the right to flee persecution and to seek the protection of asylum elsewhere.

In these and other cases the Church stands in solidarity with the victims of injustice, often suffering as a result of its witness in defense of human life and dignity. For the Church holds the defense and promotion of the basic premise of the Universal Declaration -- the equal dignity of every human person -- as one of the cornerstones of Christian faith and life. In the Catholic tradition, human dignity ultimately derives from the human person having been formed in the image and likeness of God and redeemed by the blood of Christ. In St. Paul's words:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28).

The shared acknowledgement of human dignity as the basis for human rights, which the framers of the Universal Declaration reached by reason, and which Catholic teaching reaches by reason and revelation combined, has fostered increasing collaboration among groups of otherwise differing views. This collaboration has in turn promoted a growing moral consensus that fundamental human rights are indivisible, inviolable and universal.

There is growing recognition that respect for human rights is essential for peace, as Pope John XXIII taught in *Pacem in Terris*, whose thirty-fifth anniversary is also being celebrated this year. In that document the Holy Father systematically applied Catholic teaching on peace and justice to the evolving international order, singling out the Universal Declaration as "an important step on the path toward the juridico-political organization of the world community." The goal of that journey lay in creation of a political order in service of the common good, defined in terms of the defense and promotion of human rights.

There is also growing recognition that human rights need to be better integrated and institutionalized within the overall framework of U.S. foreign policy. Welcome, though modest, steps have been taken in the form of recently enacted legislation mandating the promotion of religious liberty as an explicit policy goal. Similar steps need to be taken to promote respect for the full range of fundamental human rights, with greater attention paid to the category of social, economic and cultural rights than has been the case in the past. In addition, international efforts to improve enforcement of existing human rights instruments merit even stronger U.S. support.

Regrettably, the journey toward Pope John XXIII's vision of a more just and peaceful world remains unfinished. As we work and pray for its completion, however, this anniversary is also a fitting moment to acknowledge the sacrifices of so many of the generation that suffered and fought to secure the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration. To paraphrase the psalmist, we earnestly pray that the seeds which that generation sowed in tears, generations to come may reap in joy.