



Concept Note

Special Event on the occasion of the

70th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

On

“Dignity of Life”

3rd December 2018, 10 am – 1 pm

Room XXV, Palais des Nations (Geneva)

The Permanent Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations in Geneva, the Permanent Mission of the Order of Malta to the United Nations in Geneva, the *Caritas in Veritate* Foundation, the European Centre for Law and Justice, and the International Catholic Child Bureau are organizing a Special Event on the following theme: **“Seventieth Anniversary of the UDHR: Dignity of Life”**.

Date and Venue

The event will take place on Monday 3rd December 2018, at the *Palais des Nations* in Geneva, Room XXV from 10 am - 1 pm.

Context

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted by the United Nations in 1948, set the protection, promotion and respect of the human person as the central concern of the international community. The UDHR affirms 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.”¹

Pope John Paul II hailed the Declaration as “a true milestone on the path of humanity’s moral progress”², adding that “all the subsequent international documents on human rights declare this truth anew.”³

The Seventieth Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) on 10th December 2018 represents a unique opportunity to reaffirm its pivotal importance as a reference point for global discussions on human rights, fundamental freedoms and human dignity. The Declaration was not

¹ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, *Preamble* (<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>)

² Message of Pope John Paul II for the World Day of Peace, 1 January 1999, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_14121998_xxxii-world-day-for-peace.html

³ *Ibid.*

formulated as an abstract philosophical or legal construction. Rather, it was “the outcome of a convergence of different religious and cultural traditions, all of them motivated by the common desire to place the human person at the heart of institutions, laws and the workings of society”⁴.

It recognizes and affirms that human rights stem from the inherent dignity and worth of the human person and that these rights apply to every stage of life and to every political, social, economic and cultural situation. Thus, the universality of human rights finds its justification in the fact of the universality of man’s common nature. It is important to emphasize the principle of universality in a singular way: it is the universality of the person that provides human rights the characteristic of universality. In fact, “not only rights are universal, but so too is the human person, the subject of those rights”⁵.

However, one may observe a recent trend wherein increasing efforts have been made to change the content and meaning of the human rights language in various UN Conventions and Declarations. There is a tendency to reinterpret them according to a “post-modern” conception of the human person. From this perspective, the individual is considered an end in him/herself. Such a myopic understanding of the person and of human rights that focuses solely on the fulfillment of individual desires, suffocates the aspiration toward the other, thus encouraging selfishness.

The fragmentation of the human person is the basis for proclaiming so called “new rights”, in order to build large spaces of freedom. Often, however, all these spaces remain deprived of the necessary effectiveness: “the interpretation of some rights has progressively changed, with the inclusion of a number of “new rights” that not infrequently conflict with one another”⁶.

The right to life, for instance, is “the supreme right from which no derogation is permitted [...] and has crucial importance both for individuals and for society as a whole. [...] (The Right to Life), whose effective protection is the prerequisite for the enjoyment of all other human rights.”⁷ Therefore, the Right to Life requires a commitment to uphold life from conception to natural death.

The right to life includes “the right of the child to develop in the mother's womb from the moment of conception; the right to live in a united family and in a moral environment conducive to the growth of the child's personality”.⁸ This principle is also recalled in the preamble of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, “The child by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth”.⁹ Looking at the General Comment No. 36 on Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Committee of Human Rights claims that international human rights treaties, including the ICCPR, contain a right to abortion. However, there is no justification for this position within the

⁴ Archbishop Ivan Jurkovič, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations in Geneva, statement at the 37th Session of the HRC, 28 February 2018

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York, 18 April 2008

⁶ Pope Francis, Address to the Diplomatic Corps, 2018

⁷ I.2. General comment No. 36 on article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, on the right to life

⁸ J.P. II, *Centesimus Annus*, par. 47 (https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html)

⁹ <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>. On this regard, see “*Maternal Mortality and the human rights of women*” (2008) and “*Preserving life for both mother and child*” (2010).

ordinary meaning of the text, and the idea that a woman's right to life would be protected by abortion on demand is questionable.

The Right to life also entails "the right to a natural death". Nevertheless, the recent emerging vocabulary of a human right to a dignified death is contrary to the notion of inherent and universal dignity. Dignity does not change or alter with illness or age and there is nothing dignified in assisted suicide. The fear of a loss of autonomy, of consciousness, or rationality or just the experience of physical or psychological pain is now seen as denting or denying our fundamental dignity and have fed the idea of a "right to die". So much so, that a "legal exit" from pain, illness and old age is presented as the truly dignified form of dying. This is not moral progress, as the UDHR is, but a regression, a loss of humanity and a crawling back in terms of human rights. There is no mention of it within UN treaties, the interpretation of these treaties over the course of several decades has not resulted in a single instance of support for euthanasia or assisted suicide. On the contrary, the UN treaty-monitoring bodies have consistently expressed concern regarding the practice of euthanasia and assisted suicide in the small minority of countries where it is legal.

From conception to natural death, human rights stem from the dignity of the human person and from the unity of human nature, preceding the positive laws that acknowledge them. Removing human rights from this context would mean restricting their range and casting them off to a relativistic sphere, where the meaning, application and interpretation of any right would diverge into inevitable contradictions.

As recalled by Pope Francis "All life has inestimable value even the weakest and most vulnerable, the sick, the old, the unborn and the poor, are masterpieces of God's creation, made in his own image, destined to live forever, and deserving of the utmost reverence and respect"¹⁰.

Methodology

For the occasion of the Seventieth Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on 10th December 2018, a Special Event on 3rd December on "Dignity of Life" together with the launching of a short booklet, is going to be organized.

A report is going to be presented during the Anniversary of the UDHR on 10th December with some recommendations and a declaration of the Forum of Catholic Inspired NGO's in Geneva.

Overall Goal

The purpose of this three-folded approach (event, booklet and report), is the empowerment of key players to enable them to know how laws enacted with good intentions and directed to protect the dignity of life from conception to natural death, can evolve into policies that revert the interpretation of this right.

Special Event

The objective of this special event is to facilitate a reflection and discussion on the universality of the UDHR and the transcendent values and principles underlying the Universal Declaration on Human

¹⁰ Pope Francis, [Message to Catholics taking part in annual Day for Life in Britain and Ireland July 28, 2013](#)

Rights and on the international mandates and instruments firmly grounded in the Declaration (first panel).

A second panel is going to be organized on the dignity of life from its conception until its end. The aim is to give diplomats, the public, and the media a more balanced picture and pointing out the risk that laws may be introduced that could violate the human rights of the majority of people in the name of an alternative interpretation of the “right to Life”.

Programme and Speakers

Introductory Remarks

H.E. Archbishop Ivan Jurkovič, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva

Panel on the Universality of the UDHR and its Challenges (1h15)

Moderator

H.E. Ms. Marie-Thérèse Pictet-Althann, Ambassador, Permanent Observer of the Sovereign Order of Malta to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva

Keynote Speech: The Universality of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its Challenges (15-20min)

H.E. Dr. Martin Ihoeghian Uhomobhi, President of the Pan African Institute for Global Affairs and Strategy (PAIGAS), Former President of the Human Rights Council

Ethical Reflections on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (10-15min)

Mr. Grégor Puppinck, PhD, Director, European Centre for Law and Justice

Ongoing Engagement of the Forum of Catholic Inspired Non-Governmental Organizations in promoting Human Rights at the United Nations (10-15min)

Ms. Alessandra Aula, Secretary-General, International Catholic Child Bureau

Panel on the Dignity of Life (1h15)

Moderator

H.E. Mr. Zbigniew Czech, Ambassador of the Republic of Poland to the United Nations Office and Other International Organizations in Geneva

Key Note Speech: Ethical Reflections on Dignity of Life (15-20min)

H.E. Monsignor Vincenzo Paglia, President, Vatican Pontifical Academy for Life

Is there a Right to Abortion? (10-15min)

Mrs. Helen Alvaré, Professor of Law, Antonin Scalia School of Law, George Mason University

Is there a Right to Die? (10-15min)

Dr. William F. Sullivan, Physician, St. Michael's Hospital and Surrey Place Centre, Associate Professor, Department of Family and Community Medicine, University of Toronto, Director, Order of Malta International Association of Catholic Bioethics; Ordinary member, Pontifical Academy for Life; Hospitaller, Canadian Association of the Order of Malta

Target Audience

Wide participation is invited to the event, including Permanent Missions to the UN in Geneva, officials and staff of the UN agencies and other multilateral and intergovernmental organizations,

representatives of non-governmental organizations, representatives of the different religious groups, media representatives, as well as the general public.

Organizers

- Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations Office and other International Organizations in Geneva
- Permanent Observer Mission of the Sovereign Order of Malta to the United Nations and other International Organizations in Geneva
- *Caritas in Veritate* Foundation
- International Catholic Child Bureau
- Pontifical Academy for Life
- European Centre for Law and Justice

Co-Sponsors

- Permanent Mission of Poland to the United Nations
- Permanent Mission of Egypt to the United Nations
- Permanent Mission of Nigeria to the United Nations
- Permanent Mission of the African Union to the United Nations (tbc)
- Permanent Mission of Bolivia to the United Nations (tbc)
- Permanent Mission of Ecuador to the United Nations (tbc)
- Permanent Mission of El Salvador to the United Nations (tbc)
- Permanent Mission of Panama to the United Nations (tbc)
- Permanent Mission of Uganda to the United Nations (tbc)
- Forum of Catholic Inspired NGOs in Geneva
- ADF International

Interpretation

Simultaneous interpretation will be available in English and French.

Coffee Break

Light refreshments will be served.

Booklet “Right to Life and Human Dignity – 70th Anniversary of the UDHR”

For the Special Event, a booklet of approximately 30 pages is going to be distributed:

- Editorial: **Archbishop Ivan Jurkovič, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva**
- “Theological Anthropology and Human Rights”: **Jorge M. Dias Ferreira, Forum of Catholic inspired Non-Governmental Organizations, Geneva**
- “Reflections on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights”: **Prof. Vincenzo Buonomo, Rector of the Pontifical Lateran University**
- “The Dignity of Human Life in International Law”: **Grégor Puppinck, PhD, Director, European Centre for Law and Justice**
- “Is There a Right to Abortion?”: **Mrs. Helen Alvaré, Professor of Law, George Mason University School of Law**
- “Is There a Right to Die?”: **Prof. William F. Sullivan, Physician, St. Michael's Hospital and Surrey Place Centre, Associate Professor, Department of Family and Community Medicine, University of Toronto, Director, Order of Malta International Association of Catholic Bioethics; Ordinary member, Pontifical Academy for Life; Hospitaller, Canadian Association of the Order of Malta**

The main aim of this booklet is to examine the treatment of terms such as “life”, “euthanasia” and more recent formulations such as “abortion as right to life” in United Nations documents. In addition, it will be useful to study, in the context of Human Rights legislation and policy, the evolving concepts related to “right to life” and the role of the State in response to this phenomenon.

Points of Contact

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