



Statement by His Excellency Archbishop Ivan Jurkovič  
Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the UN and Other International Organizations in Geneva

Special Event  
“70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the UDHR – Dignity of Life”  
10 am – 1pm  
Room XXV – Palais des Nations

Excellencies,

Distinguished Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First, I would like to thank all the co-organizers of this Special Event for the commemoration of the “70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights”, namely the Permanent Observer Mission of the Order of Malta, the *Caritas in Veritate* Foundation, the International Catholic Child Bureau, the Vatican Pontifical Academy for Life and the European Centre for Law and Justice. A special thanks also goes to the co-sponsoring states present here today.

For your information, we distributed a booklet on “Human Dignity” on all the seats.

Seventy years ago, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) stated, for the first time in the history of modern States, the primacy of freedom and the unity of the human family over and above any political or ideological divisions based on race, sex, religion or any other human characteristic.

The Declaration was not only a simple proclamation but a new stance taken by the International Community as a whole, and it aimed to place human dignity among the highest values which organise the internal and external behaviour of nations, societies, and governments.

Today the language of human rights dominates public culture and human rights serve as a common ground for dialogue and collaboration. There is a conviction that the

implementation of human rights is the way to achieve the common good. Saint Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica* outlined that law has four characteristics: law is [1] an ordinance of reason [2] for the common good, [3] made by him who has care of the community, and [4] promulgated.

The common good is central to the nature of law. The legislator determines what the common good of society requires and molds legislation to enable society to effectively pursue that good.

In the present era, the entire structure of the human rights doctrine and law is struggling to confront new theoretical and practical threats. On one hand, the consensus that approved the Declaration and reaffirmed it through the adoption of the Vienna Declaration seems to be weakened; meanwhile, different conceptions, and even denunciations of human rights as a mere product of Western culture, are gaining ground in different international and regional fora. On the other hand, recent decades have witnessed the birth of the category of so-called “new rights”, emerging from a theoretical approach that fragments the human being and promotes a selective and often conflicting concept of individual freedom. These different stances lead to misperceptions and confusion that undermine the global recognition of human rights as universal in their nature, thus risking trivializing “one of the highest expressions of the human conscience of our time”.<sup>1</sup>

The attempts to rewrite the profound meaning of human rights *a posteriori* have often brought less clarity and conflict, weakening the same structure that was intended to reinvigorate and expand. It is important to clarify that the rights recognized by the UDHR were not intended to be reinterpreted or reshaped according to the political or social tendencies of the moment. Indeed, they are derived from the human dignity that is common, shared, and inherent to every human being, regardless of any other difference.

This stance is still valid today; more importantly, it cannot be substituted because it is the only approach that elevates the individual as the primary actor and recipient of all political decision while simultaneously evaluating the social implications of the rights shared among all human beings.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II, Address to the United Nations General Assembly, 5 October 1995

Facing the challenges and conflicts of our time, we should recognize that due respect of human rights is the true source of peace. Today, the multilateral system is blocked and encounters enormous difficulties; in the meantime, many international organizations are struggling against a growing lack of legitimacy. In this regard, the 70th Anniversary of the UDHR can be a turning point and represents a unique opportunity to reaffirm the UDHR's pivotal importance as a reference point for global and cross-cultural discussion on human rights, freedom, and dignity. It represents further opportunity to restate those very concepts of human rights, democracy, rule of law, and individual freedom that have their roots in the recognition and promotion of human dignity.

Since we have such an important number of eminent speakers present today and due to time constraints, I would like to directly give the floor to Her Excellency, Marie-Thérèse Pictet-Althann, Ambassador of the Sovereign Order of Malta to the United Nations who kindly accepted to moderate this first panel.

Excellency, the floor is yours.