



PRESS RELEASE

70TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS: DIGNITY OF LIFE

United Nations, Geneva, 3 December 2018

On 3 December 2018, the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations and other International Organizations in Geneva, the Permanent Observer Mission of the Order of Malta to the United Nations in Geneva, the *Caritas in Veritate* Foundation, the International Catholic Child Bureau, the Vatican Pontifical Academy for Life and the European Centre for Law and Justice organized a Special Event at the United Nations in commemoration of the 70th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), on the theme: “**70th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – Dignity of Life**”. A **booklet entitled “Right to Life and Human Dignity”** was distributed to all participants. The Special Event was divided into two panels: in the first panel entitled “The Universality of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its Challenges”, His Excellency, Dr. Martin Ihoeghian Uhomobhi, President of the Pan African Institute for Global Affairs and Strategy, Former President of the Human Rights Council, delivered a keynote address. The panel was moderated by Her Excellency Mrs. Marie-Thérèse Pictet-Althann, Ambassador of the Sovereign Order of Malta to the United Nations. The second panel on “Dignity of Life” was moderated by His Excellency Mr. Zbigniew Czech, Ambassador of the Republic of Poland to the United Nations and the keynote speech was delivered by Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, President of the Vatican Pontifical Academy for Life. A large number of Delegations – from Kuwait, Morocco, Palestine, Ecuador, Cuba, Venezuela, Italy, Colombia, Mexico, European Union, Brazil, Croatia, Slovakia, Lebanon, Georgia, Monaco, Organization for Islamic Cooperation, among others –, UN Agencies and NGOs attended the meeting. This Special Event was co-sponsored by Egypt, Nigeria, Poland, ADF International and the Forum of Catholic Inspired NGOs.

His Excellency Archbishop Ivan Jurkovič, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations and other International Organizations in Geneva, delivered the opening remarks, highlighting that today the language of human rights dominates public culture and that human rights serve as a common ground for dialogue and collaboration. He explained that there is a conviction that the implementation of human rights is the way to achieve the common good. Nowadays, however, the entire structure of the human rights doctrine and law is struggling to confront new theoretical and practical threats. In fact, the attempts to rewrite the profound meaning of human rights *a posteriori*, so called “new rights”, have often brought less clarity, weakening the same structure that was intended to reinvigorate and expand.

Her Excellency Mrs. Marie-Thérèse Pictet-Althann, Ambassador of the Sovereign Order of Malta to the United Nations, introduced the first panel as moderator remembering the universal character of the Sovereign Order of Malta and its particular commitment to ensure the dignity and sanctity of human life. She denounced the risk that the new international instruments, drafted after the UDHR (such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam, the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights), may present a challenge to the notion of universality of 1948, given their intention to provide an approach adapted to specific cultural, social, religious, ethnic or even economic needs.

His Excellency Ambassador Dr. Martin Ihoeghian Uhomobhi, President of the Pan African Institute for Global Affairs and Strategy, Former President of the Human Rights Council, delivered the keynote address reiterating his commitment to the agenda and cause of universal human rights for all, irrespective of *status* and circumstance, race, character, creed or faith. He remembered that, in spite of what we could call a set of valid achievements in the past 70 years, there are still challenges to our projections of a world in which the rights of individual citizens would be protected, recognized and even guaranteed. He explained that these challenges are not neglected but that we have to do more as custodians and advocates for the unconditional entrenchment of human rights.

Mr. Grégor Puppinck, Director of the European Centre for Law and Justice, remembered that the Universal Declaration affirmed that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”, meaning that the human dignity is totally unrelated with the physical and intellectual traits of persons. According to him, this is the basis on which the universality of human rights is build and that the current disagreement on the nature and dignity of the human being is going to endanger the consensus on the entire Human Rights Framework.

Ms. Alessandra Aula, Secretary-General of the International Catholic Child Bureau, speaking for the Forum of the Catholic-inspired NGOs (CINGO) pointed out that the UDHR states in its first article that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, they are endowed with reason and conscience", and, with this affirmation the Declaration adopts a clear anthropology: the human being is rational and moral. The latter are the foundation of the special dignity of the human being. Therefore, Ms. Aula explained, that the CINGO is morally obliged to take inspiration from the UDHR, and to continue to contribute in a constructive and participative spirit.

In the second panel, entitled “Dignity of Life”, **His Excellency Mr. Zbigniew Czech**, Ambassador of the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Poland to the United Nations Office at Geneva and moderator, acknowledged the UDHR as by far one of the most important documents of the XX century which represents a source of inspiration and a guide for national and international efforts to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms.

His Excellency Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, President of the Vatican Pontifical Academy for Life, pronounced the keynote intervention: Seventy years after the adoption of the UDHR, the question of human dignity is still very much debated. Archbishop Paglia stated that, while at the level of principle the importance of dignity is clear, problems arise when we are called on to interpret the actual meaning and content of the term. In fact, there are many questions about the meaning of dignity – whether it is recognizably objective, whether it is unconditional, and how it relates to other fundamental rights. He outlined that changes in historical-cultural contexts have influenced the understanding and related evaluation of human rights that the Church has developed.

To conclude he recalled that every Christian is called to offer to the contemporary culture a deep sense of dignity of the human person, beyond possessions or whatever else the individual can make of himself or bring to society, highlighting that the dignity of men and women derives from being children of God, which in Jesus has been confirmed once for all and forever.

Mrs. Helen Alvaré, Professor of Law, Antonin Scalia School of Law, George Mason University, analysed the main consequences of legalized abortion resulting from decades of personal experience: a worldwide predictable growth in the practice of abortion, an increasing number of women that suffer of severe psychological and spiritual repercussions, a growing pressure on medical conscientious objection which leads to a severe limitation of the rights of conscience, religion and belief. Politically and culturally, legal abortion is generally perceived a proxy for progress for women; yet abortion advocacy has instead obscured and absorbed resources from other pro-woman policies such as those facilitating a better balance between work

and family. According to Mrs. Alvaré, the movement to legalize abortion in the name of human rights relies upon a vision of human beings as strictly “self-made” and possessing the power over the life and death of others. Today societies around the globe need rather to affirm that every human being is made for interdependence, for solidarity within a community.

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 of the Order of Malta International Association of Catholic Bioethics, Ordinary member of the Pontifical Academy for Life, Hospitaller of the Canadian Association of the Order of Malta, explained that the ratification of the UDHR reflected a global consensus that today disregards human lives. He was particularly concerned about the negative ratification of laws permitting euthanasia and assisted suicide (EAS) for people with disabilities, and for the profession of medicine, especially palliative care. He stated that States should develop competencies to rigorously assess claims that death by EAS is a human right, including the philosophical and ethical assumptions supporting those claims.