



# The Holy See

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## **MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE UNITED NATIONS**

*To His Excellency Dr. Kurt Waldheim  
Secretary-General of the United Nations Organization*

THE SIGNAL OCCASION of the thirtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights gives the Holy See the opportunity of proclaiming once again to people and to nations its constant interest and solicitude for fundamental human rights whose expression we find clearly taught in the Gospel message itself.

With this in mind I want to greet you, Mr. Secretary-General, and through you the President and members of the General Assembly of the United Nations who have gathered to commemorate this anniversary. I want to express to all of you my firm agreement to "the continuing commitment of United Nations Organization to promote in an ever clearer, more authoritative and more effective manner, respect for the fundamental rights of man".

In these past thirty years significant steps have been taken and some outstanding efforts made to create and support the juridical instruments which would protect the ideals set out in this Declaration.

Two years ago the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights came into effect. By them, the United Nations marked a significant step forward in making effective one of the basic principles which it has adopted as its own from the very foundation of the organization: namely, to establish juridically binding means for promoting the human rights of individuals and for protecting their fundamental liberties

Certainly, it would be a desirable goal to have more and more States adopt these Covenants in order that the content of the Universal Declaration can become ever more operative in the world.

In this way the Declaration would find greater echo as the expression of the firm will of people everywhere to promote by legal safeguards the rights of all men and women without discrimination of race, sex, language or religion.

It should be noted that the Holy See – consistent with its own identity and at various levels – has always sought to be a faithful collaborator with the United Nations in all those initiatives which would further this noble but difficult task. The Holy See has always appreciated, lauded, and supported the efforts of the United Nations endeavouring to guarantee in an ever more efficient way the full and just protection of the basic rights and freedoms of the human person.

If a review of the past thirty years gives us all reason for real satisfaction at the many advances that have been made in this field, still we cannot ignore that the world we live in today offers too many examples of situations of injustice and oppression. One is bound to observe a seemingly growing divergence between the meaningful declarations of the United Nations and the sometimes massive increase of human rights violations in all parts of society and of the world. This can only sadden us and leave us dissatisfied at the current state of affairs.

Who can deny that today individual persons and civil powers violate basic rights of the human person with impunity: rights such as the right to be born, the right to life, the right to responsible procreation, to work, to peace, to freedom and social justice, the right to participate in the decisions that affect people and nations?

And what can be said when we face the various forms of collective violence like racial discrimination against individuals and groups, the use of physical and psychological torture perpetrated against prisoners or political dissenters? The list grows when we turn to the instances of the abduction of persons for political reasons and look at the acts of kidnapping for material gain which attack so dramatically family life and the social fabric.

In the world as we find it today what criteria can we use to see that the rights of all persons are protected? What basis can we offer as the soil in which individual and social rights might grow? Unquestionably that basis is the dignity of the human person. Pope John XXIII explained this in *Pacem in Terris*. "Any well-regulated and profitable association of men in society demands the acceptance of one fundamental principle: that each individual is truly a person.

As such he has rights and duties which together flow as a direct consequence from his nature. These rights and duties are universal and inviolable and therefore altogether inalienable".

Quite similar is the preamble of the Universal Declaration itself when it says: " 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".

It is in this dignity of the person that human rights find their immediate source. And it is respect for this dignity that gives birth to their effective protection. The human person, even when he or she errs, always maintains inherent dignity and never forfeits his or her personal dignity.

For believers, it is by allowing God to speak to man that one can contribute more truly to the strengthening of the consciousness that every human being has of his or her destiny, and to the awareness that all rights derive from the dignity of the person who is firmly rooted in God.

I now wish to speak of these rights themselves as sanctioned by the Declaration, and especially of one of them which undoubtedly occupies a central position: the right to freedom of thought, of conscience and of religion.

Allow me to call the attention of the Assembly to the importance and the gravity of a problem still today very keenly felt and suffered. I mean the problem of religious freedom, which is at the basis of all other freedoms and is inseparably tied to them all by reason of that very dignity which in the human person.

True freedom is the salient characteristic of humanity: it is the fount from which human dignity flows; it is "the exceptional sign of the divine image within man". It is offered to us and conferred on us as our own mission.

Today men and women have an increased consciousness of the social dimension of life and as a result have become ever more sensitive to the principle of freedom of thought, of conscience and of religion. However, with sadness and deeply felt regret we also have to admit that unfortunately, in the words of the Second Vatican Council, in its Declaration on Religious Freedom, "forms of government still exist under which, even though freedom of religious worship receives constitutional recognition, the powers of government are engaged in the effort to deter citizens from the profession of religion and to make life difficult and dangerous for religious communities".

The Church strives to be the interpreter of the thirst modern men and women have for dignity. So I would solemnly ask that, in every place and by everyone, religious freedom be respected for every person and for all peoples. I am moved to make this solemn appeal because of the profound conviction that, even aside from the desire to serve God, the common good of society itself "may profit by the moral qualities of justice and peace which have their origin in man's faithfulness to God and to his holy will". The free exercise of religion benefits both individuals and governments. Therefore the obligation to respect religious freedom falls on everyone, both private citizens and legitimate civil authority.

Why then is repressive and discriminatory action practised against vast numbers of citizens, who have had to suffer all sort of oppression, even death, simply in order to preserve their spiritual values, yet who despite all this have never ceased to cooperate in everything that serves the true

civil and social progress of their country? Should they not be the objects of admiration and praise rather than considered as suspect and criminals?

My Predecessor Paul VI raised this question: " Can a State fruitfully call for entire trust and collaboration while, by a kind of 'negative confessionism', it proclaims itself atheist and while declaring that it respects within a certain framework individual beliefs takes up positions against the faith of part of its citizens?".

Justice, wisdom and realism all demand that the baneful positions of secularism be overcome, particularly the erroneous reduction of the religious fact to the purely private sphere. Every person must be given the opportunity within the context of our life together to profess his or her faith and belief, alone or with others, in private and in public.

There is one last point which deserves attention. While insisting – and rightly so – on the vindication of human rights, every individual has the obligation to exercise his basic rights in a responsible and ethically justified manner. Every man and woman has the duty to respect in others the rights claimed for oneself. Furthermore, we must all contribute our share to the building up of a society that makes possible and feasible the enjoyment of rights and the discharge of the duties inherent in those rights.

To conclude this message, I wish to extend to you, Mr. Secretary-General, and to all those who, in whatever capacity, serve in your Organization, my heartfelt good wishes, with the hope that the United Nations will continue tirelessly to promote everywhere the defence of the human person and of his dignity in the spirit of the Universal Declaration.

*From the Vatican, 2 December 1978.*

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