



Address by His Eminence Cardinal Pietro Parolin  
Secretary of State of the Holy See  
at the General Debate of the  
79<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations General Assembly  
New York, 28 September 2024

*Leaving no one behind: acting together for the advancement of peace, sustainable development and human dignity for present and future generations.*

Mr. President,

I am honoured to extend to you and to the distinguished representatives of the Nations assembled here the warm greetings of His Holiness Pope Francis, while also congratulating Your Excellency on your election as President of this esteemed Assembly.

This year marks the sixtieth anniversary of the Holy See's presence as an Observer at the United Nations. Over the course of its uninterrupted tenure, the Holy See has advanced a set of core principles, including the respect for the inherent God-given human dignity of all individuals, the equal sovereignty of states, the pursuit of peace and disarmament, and the care of our common home.

Mr. President,

The Holy See is deeply concerned that at this particular point in time, we are witnessing a worrying increase in the number of conflicts worldwide and the severity of their violence. These conflicts are responsible for a significant loss of innocent life and a vast amount of destruction, which presents a challenge in accurately assessing the extent of the damage caused to civilian infrastructure, including places of worship, educational institutions and medical facilities, as well as the impact on the environment.

It seems that seventy-five years after the ratification of the Geneva Conventions, humanitarian law is still being undermined. These four conventions, which set out clear rules to protect people who are not taking part in hostilities, are increasingly being violated. It is evident that the targeting of places of worship, educational institutions,

medical facilities, and other civil infrastructure is a prevalent phenomenon. This has resulted in not only the loss of life among those who are not directly involved in the conflict but also an unacceptable disruption to the daily lives of many. On this point Pope Francis is very clear that “we must not forget that grave violations of international humanitarian law are war crimes, and that it is not sufficient to point them out, but also necessary to prevent them. Consequently, there is a need for greater effort on the part of the international community to defend and implement humanitarian law, which seems to be the only way to ensure the defence of human dignity in situations of warfare.”<sup>1</sup> The Holy See calls for the strict observance of international humanitarian law in all armed conflicts, with particular attention to the protection of places of worship.

However, the situation becomes more complex when one considers the prominent and destabilising role often played by violent non-state actors in many of the crises around the globe. It is estimated that there are over four hundred fifty armed groups that present a security concern on a global scale. Violent non-state actors control areas in which one hundred and ninety-five million people reside, with 64 million of these individuals living in areas that are completely under the control of the groups in question.<sup>2</sup> It is imperative that violent non-state actors seek constructive engagement with States, renounce violence and acts of terrorism and enter into legality. Conversely States, must always bear in mind that such groups are so called not only because they cannot be configured under international humanitarian law, but also precisely because they operate under a cloak of illegality. It is therefore the responsibility of states to address the underlying causes of the formation of such groups, primarily through the promotion of human rights and the advancement of the rule of law.

As Pope Francis affirms, “The need for peace challenges us all, and demands that concrete steps be taken.”<sup>3</sup> Peace is only possible if it is wanted. The establishment of peace is contingent upon the existence of a collective desire for its realisation. The pursuit of peace is a collective responsibility. It is imperative to move beyond rhetoric and the tendency to ascribe blame. Indeed, it is always possible to attribute responsibility to a State, an international organisation or a lack of reform; however, the reality is that there is no genuine commitment to achieving peace.

In times of conflict, there is often a tendency to prioritise military victory over the pursuit of peace. This inevitably result in dynamic unwarranted escalations and casualties, particularly of innocent individuals. It is thus incumbent upon diplomacy to

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, Address to the members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, 8 January 2024.

<sup>2</sup> ICRC statistics, <https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2023/10/10/icrc-engagement-with-armed-groups-in-2023/> .

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, 8.

demonstrate unwavering dedication to pursuing, with fortitude and ingenuity, every avenue for negotiation with the objective of establishing enduring peace.

“To pursue peace, however, it is not enough simply to eliminate the instruments of war; its root causes must be eradicated. Foremost among these is hunger, a scourge that continues to afflict entire areas of our world while others are marked by massive waste of food.”<sup>4</sup> The global population is predominantly poor, with billions of individuals living below the poverty line. While poverty is increasingly discussed in international political and economic fora, it often appears to be addressed as an afterthought, as an add-on or tangential issue, or even as a mere collateral damage. Consequently, the plight of the poor remains largely unaddressed, and they frequently remain at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. As I said during the Summit of the Future “eradication of poverty must remain the overarching goal of all future action, bearing in mind that development is the name for peace.”<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the prevailing tendency over recent years has been to maintain the growth in military expenditure, while simultaneously striving to fulfil the commitments made in relation to sustainable development in a timely manner. This is indicative of a deficit of trust between States.

It is thus that Pope Francis appeals to rich Countries to “acknowledge the gravity of so many of their past decisions and determine to forgive the debts of Countries that will never be able to repay them. More than a question of generosity, this is a matter of justice. It is made all the more serious today by a new form of injustice which we increasingly recognize, namely, that a true ‘ecological debt’ exists, particularly between the global North and South, connected to commercial imbalances with effects on the environment and the disproportionate use of natural resources by certain countries over long periods of time.”<sup>6</sup>

It is regrettable that this lack of trust has a negative impact on those in the most vulnerable situations, particularly the poor and the needy, despite the numerous initiatives, meetings and conferences that have been held to address the issue of the eradication of poverty. “Let us not forget: the poor are almost always the victims, not the ones to blame.”<sup>7</sup>

It is easy to become complacent and resigned in the face of the constant stream of new forms of poverty. However, these dramatic situations can be encountered all around us, not only in certain parts of the world. This is the case for example of the

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<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, 8 January 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Statement at the Summit of the Future, 24 September 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, 16.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

modern phenomenon of homelessness. These people often do not have enough to eat for the day, or a safe shelter for the night.

There is indeed a need to look towards the future we want to leave for the new generations. This means to start acting now especially by taking care of those who could be easily left behind, these need to be given new hope. Poverty has a particularly detrimental impact on women, often trapping them in a vicious cycle of unfortunate circumstances, resulting in isolation and abandonment before they are forced to make desperate and unwelcome decisions.

It is thus that the life of the human being needs to be protected from the moment of conception to that of natural death. The lack of this is one of the greatest poverties of our era. As Pope Francis says “the path to peace calls for respect for life, for every human life, starting with the life of the unborn child in the mother’s womb, which cannot be suppressed or turned into an object of trafficking.”<sup>8</sup> In this regard, the practice of so-called surrogate motherhood is deplorable, representing a grave violation of the dignity of both the woman and the child, based on the exploitation of situations of the mother’s material needs. A child is always a gift and never the basis of a commercial contract. Consequently, the Holy See hopes for an effort by the international community to prohibit this practice universally. Moreover, in order to promote women’s equal dignity with men and to protect them from any oppressive practices, it is of the utmost importance to preserve all those traditional values which highlight the beauty of their being women, which flourishes in motherhood, in mutual reciprocity in family life, as well as in their free and equal participation in social, economic and political life.

The hope for a better future lies in “working for a future filled with the laughter of babies and children, in order to fill the empty cradles in so many parts of our world,”<sup>9</sup> and to recover the joy of living. A better quality of life should also be given to the sick, and as I said during the High-Level Meeting on Antimicrobial Resistance there is a need to “promote policies and resources needed to each person’s fundamental right to basic and decent healthcare.”<sup>10</sup> In this regard special attention should be given to the elderly and those affected by illnesses or disabilities that restrict their personal independence and freedom. Human life must be protected and defended at every moment of its existence. It is, however, a cause for concern that, particularly in the

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<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis, Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, 8 January 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Statement at the Summit of the Future, 24 September 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Statement at the High-Level Meeting on Antimicrobial Resistance, 26 September 2024.

West, there is a continued spread of a culture of death, which, in the name of false compassion, discards children, the elderly and the sick.

The dignity of migrants who leave their homeland behind in search of a better life for themselves and their families must be upheld. People seeking refuge must not be rejected or treated unfairly but welcomed with respect and a sense of responsibility to ensure their right to live with dignity. Those forced to leave their homes due to war, violence or discrimination must be given access to security, work and education to help them settle in their new Country.

Furthermore, another affront to human dignity is trafficking in human beings. The exploitation and subjugation of individuals restrict their freedom and transform them into objects to be used and discarded. The trafficking system exploits the injustices and inequalities that force millions of people to live in vulnerable conditions. Trafficking is growing at an alarming rate, affecting mainly refugees and migrants, women and children, young people, and individuals who are full of dreams and the desire to live with dignity. This illegal and, above all, dehumanising practice must be stopped and the traffickers brought to justice, while hope and dignity must be given back to their victims.

This hope should be given to those who experience hardships of any kind. Dignity must be given to prisoners, starting from the providing with dignified prisons, and “forms of amnesty or pardon meant to help individuals regain confidence in themselves and in society; and programmes of reintegration in the community, including a concrete commitment to respect for law.”<sup>11</sup>

Closely related to the dignity of human life is the care for our common home. The effects of climate change are borne by those in the most vulnerable situations. As I underscored during the High-Level Meeting to Address Existential Threats Posed by Sea Level Rise, it is a shared “duty to care for the world and the quality of life of the poorest, with a sense of solidarity which is at the same time aware that we live in a common home which God has entrusted to us.”<sup>12</sup> It is indeed the poorest countries, who contribute the least to climate change, but are those who carry the greatest burden of its effects, including the rising of sea-levels.

There is a pressing need for “a healthy ecology [which] is also the result of interaction between human beings and the environment, as occurs in the indigenous cultures and has occurred for centuries in different regions of the earth.”<sup>13</sup> The care for

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<sup>11</sup> Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Statement at the High-Level Meeting to Address Existential Threats Posed by Sea Level Rise, 25 September 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudate Deum*, 27.

our common home necessitates that the commitments taken over the years to combat climate change are translated into action.

Opportunities and risks are also given by the rise of new technologies, particularly artificial intelligence. “It is precisely this powerful technological progress that makes artificial intelligence at the same time an exciting and fearsome tool, and demands a reflection that is up to the challenge it presents.”<sup>14</sup>

This technological advancement coincides with a growing societal divide over pivotal social issues. Even within communities with a shared cultural heritage, there is often a divergence of opinion, making it challenging to identify solutions that are both equitable and satisfactory. In addition to the emergence of disparate perspectives within society, there appears to be a decline in the understanding of what it truly means to be human, accompanied by a reduction in the significance attributed to human dignity. It seems that the value of the human person is being eroded. Not to mention the times when the human person is being substituted by a machine working on an algorithm. There is a need to ensure and safeguard a space for proper human control over choices made by artificial intelligence.

It is precisely in this regard, that Pope Francis insists that “in light of the tragedy that is armed conflict, it is urgent to reconsider the development and use of devices like the so-called ‘lethal autonomous weapons’ and ultimately ban their use. This starts from an effective and concrete commitment to introduce ever greater and proper human control. No machine should ever choose to take the life of a human being.”<sup>15</sup>

There is an urgent need for a comprehensive ethical reflection involving all States on the utilization of emerging technologies, particularly within the military domain. There is a necessity for the establishment of a binding ethical and regulatory framework to be negotiated, both within the non-military and military domains. Nevertheless, the Holy See maintains that the ethical and humanitarian implications of lethal autonomous weapons are of paramount concern and reiterates the urgent need for a moratorium on their use.

Peace is an indivisible concept, and in order for it to be both just and lasting, it must be universal in scope. It is fallacious and self-defeating to assume that the security and peace of a particular group is unrelated to the collective security and peace of others. The Holy See is convinced that a world free from nuclear weapons is both necessary and possible. In a system of collective security, the presence of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction is untenable. As I said during the

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<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis, Address to the G7 Session on Artificial Intelligence, 14 June 2024

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

High-Level Meeting to Commemorate the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons “the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons can only be achieved through discussions based on mutual trust. [The Holy See] will continue to build bridges of dialogue with every State, with the aim of safeguarding the common good rather than individual interests.”<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, it is evident that existing disarmament treaties are not merely legal obligations; they encompass a broader range of considerations. Indeed, they constitute moral commitments based on trust among States and among their representatives. This trust is itself rooted in the trust that citizens place in their governments. The adherence to and respect for international disarmament agreements and international law should not be perceived as a form of weakness. Conversely, it serves as a source of strength and responsibility, as it fosters trust and stability. It is thus that the Holy See renews its call for a total and complete disarmament and “to devote to the benefit of developing nations at least a part of the money that could be saved through a reduction of armaments.”<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, as Pope Francis says, we are witnessing a third world war fought piecemeal. In the midst of the ongoing tragedy of the Russian war in Ukraine, we are faced with a situation that calls for urgent action to prevent further escalation and to create a path towards a just and peaceful resolution. While diplomatic efforts are crucial, it is evident that military engagement continues to prevail. It is, therefore, essential to find ways to encourage gestures of goodwill and spaces for direct dialogue between the parties involved.

The Holy See continues to be worried about the ongoing instability in the Middle East, particularly following the terrorist attack of 7 October 2023 in Israel by Hamas and other armed Palestinian groups. However, the military response by Israel, considering the high number of civilian casualties, raises many questions about its proportionality. The Holy See calls for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, the West Bank, as well as the release of Israeli hostages in Gaza. It is also urging for humanitarian assistance to be granted to the Palestinian population. The Holy See strongly condemns attacks on UN humanitarian agencies, specifically UNRWA, and urges all parties to refrain from using humanitarian aid for military or political purposes. The Holy See reaffirms that the only viable solution is a two-state solution with Jerusalem having a special status. It also emphasizes that both sides must abandon all forms of violence, coercion, and unilateral actions, such as Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories.

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<sup>16</sup> Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Statement at the High-Level Meeting to Commemorate the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, 26 September 2024.

<sup>17</sup> Pope Paul VI, Address to the United Nations Organization, 4 October 1965.

The Holy See expresses serious concern regarding the situation in Jerusalem, where several discriminations and harassments are taking place hindering the peaceful co-existence for Christians, Jews, and Muslims. It condemns all anti-Christian acts perpetrated months ago by a minority of Jewish individuals and calls on the authorities to continue confronting this ideological deviation firmly and clearly. The presence of Christians in Jerusalem must be protected and attempts to diminish their presence must be unequivocally condemned, and that no administrative tactics be used to threaten the Christian presence.

The current situation in Lebanon represents a significant cause for concern for the Holy See. The ongoing intensification of the conflict between Hezbollah and the Israeli military is having a considerable impact on the situation in southern Lebanon and northern Israel, putting at high risk the whole region. This has resulted in a significant number of displaced individuals and a considerable loss of life, including many civilians, among them children. The Holy See therefore demands that all parties adhere to the principles of international humanitarian law and halt the escalation and enter into a ceasefire without delay. The failure to elect a President of Lebanon has resulted in a state of inertia, leaving the country susceptible to partisan agendas. The necessity for a robust Christian voice to steer the nation through this unparalleled crisis is paramount. The Holy See is convinced that Lebanon plays a pivotal role in maintaining regional stability and urges all stakeholders to support the country and safeguard its message of peaceful coexistence.

Furthermore, the Holy See highlights the humanitarian crisis in Syria and urges the international community to do more in supporting the Syrian people, who feel hopeless about their future. The Holy See wishes to see new approaches to the Syrian question that take into account the impact of economic sanctions on the population, and provide relief to the affected population while also ensuring justice for past events.

The ongoing blood shedding armed conflict in Sudan has resulted in an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, with displaced persons, particularly women and children, succumbing to starvation and malnutrition. Famine has now been officially confirmed in the North Darfur region. Unfortunately, the assistance offered by international donors has so far been insufficient and below expectations. Therefore, the Holy See urges the international community not to forget the ongoing drama in Sudan, to promote peace negotiations and, above all, to immediately provide the population with vital humanitarian aid.

Cabo Delgado Province in Mozambique has been affected by armed conflict for seven years now, with almost nine hundred fifty thousand internally displaced persons (IDPs) who are facing significant challenges, including alarming levels of suffering,



insecurity and poverty. While these refugees experience a sense of uprooting from the lands of their ancestors, the situation of children without food or schooling is a cause for apprehension. The Holy See calls for more Humanitarian support, especially to reduce the impact on children and innocent civilians.

The situation in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo is deteriorating rapidly, leading to a disturbing increase in the humanitarian crisis. Ethnic tensions, rebel violence, armed clashes, human rights abuses, and conflicts over natural resources are prevalent in the provinces of Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu. The withdrawal of the United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) by the end of the year, along with the already initiated process, is likely to create a security vacuum. The peace processes in Nairobi and Luanda have lost their relevance and attention. The Holy See deems that it is crucial to continue supporting diplomatic efforts to find an appropriate and sustainable solution to the ongoing conflict.

The Holy See also follows with great preoccupation the socio-political situation in South Sudan, aggravated by the humanitarian crisis, the recent floods and the conflict in Sudan. It therefore calls on the international community to show renewed and urgent solidarity with the population, already exhausted by economic hardship, and urges all the country's leaders to place the well-being of the people at the centre of the political agenda. At the same time, it hopes that the ongoing dialogue initiatives will lead, with the goodwill of all, to peaceful coexistence and the consolidation of democracy.

The spread of jihadist threats in the Gulf of Guinea is causing concern for the security of not just the Sahel, but all of West Africa. Christians are being targeted, while climate change and armed attacks are worsening the food crisis and causing children to drop out of school. Immediate and long-term action is needed to prevent a loss of education and stability in the region.

The Holy See is following the dramatic situation in Haiti with apprehension, and hopes that the steps that are being taken, with the support of the international community, to establish democratic order and stop the violence will lead to peace and reconciliation in the Country.

The dramatic situation and the dire need for humanitarian aid in Myanmar, which has been exacerbated by an increase in armed conflict in recent months and made worse by severe flooding, are also a source of deep concern for the Holy See. While armed groups and military forces continue to battle back and forth for territory, those who suffer the most are: the young who are deprived of education, the elderly who are

forced to flee their homes, the Rohingya who are targeted from all sides and have no place to turn. The Holy See calls on all parties to seek durable, inclusive and peaceful solutions to the situation, and to ensure access for humanitarian aid to all affected communities without prejudice.

The Holy See follows with great attention to what is happening in Nicaragua and is particularly concerned about the measures taken against personnel and institutions of the Church, which directly affect the sensitive issue of religious freedom. It is hoped that, in conjunction with the other fundamental rights of individuals and society, this freedom will be adequately guaranteed. For its part, the Holy See is open to respectful and constructive dialogue with the authorities of the country, with a view to resolving difficulties and promoting peace, fraternity and harmony for the benefit of all.

The recent presidential elections in Venezuela have demonstrated that, despite the numerous challenges faced, the Venezuelan people continue to place their trust in the democratic values enshrined in the Constitution. These democratic values are founded upon the sovereignty of the people, which is expressed through the act of voting. In the serious crisis that followed the announcement of the results, with several deaths, numerous detentions – also of minors – and the use of violence, the Holy See, deeply saddened and worried, appeals to the authorities of the country and to all those who have any responsibility for what has happened, to respect and protect the life, dignity, human rights and fundamental freedoms of its citizens. Furthermore, it calls upon them to seek ways to resolve the present situation, for the good of all, including with the assistance of members of the international community who have declared themselves willing to help, in a flexible and reasonable manner.

The Holy See encourages the talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan so that, with the support of the international community, they may continue the dialogue, assist the displaced persons, respect the places of worship of the different religious denominations and reach a final peace treaty between the parties as soon as possible.

The Holy See looks also favourably on the aspiration of the Balkan countries to join the European Union, and hopes that this objective will be achieved as soon as possible, to alleviate also the feeling of abandonment that troubles its citizens. It is important that ethnic, cultural and confessional differences are not a cause of division but become a source of richness for the whole of Europe and for the whole world.

While disarmament fosters peace among Nations, there is also a need to foster peace within societies. An instrument of this could be democracy. Democracy is not simply a matter of formal observation of a set of rules. Rather, it is the result of a considered and committed acceptance of the values that inspire democratic procedures.

These values include the dignity of every human person, the respect of human rights and a commitment to the common good as the purpose and guiding criterion for political life. Without a general consensus on these values, it may be challenging to embrace fully the deeper meaning of democracy and ensure its stability.

The establishment of democracy is contingent upon the existence of a state apparatus that is governed by the rule of law and a sound understanding of the human person. For such a system to flourish, it is essential that the requisite conditions be in place to facilitate the advancement of both the individual through the provision of quality education and the formation of genuine ideals, and the collective subjectivity of society through the creation of structures that facilitate participation and shared responsibility. In this sense Pope Francis warned that “participation cannot be improvised: it is learned from childhood, and young people must be ‘trained’ even to develop a critical sense regarding ideological and populist temptations.”<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, democracy may manifest in a multitude of forms, yet it is invariably founded upon the tenets of freedom of expression. In a democratic society, it is not only opinions that may diverge; rather, a plurality of views is essential. However, these should be accompanied by mutual respect and understanding. It thus follows that the right to freedom of speech must always be upheld, without neglecting the freedom of religion or belief.

A further fundamental principle of democracy is the respect for the will of the people. This implies that changes in the holders of power and in the leadership of a Country can occur in accordance with the fundamental laws and principles of that Country. However, there is cause for concern that there is an increasing tendency to alter constitutions or to modify electoral rules and procedures for the purpose of remaining in power or of preventing those who have been legitimately elected by the people from assuming power. Democracy entails respect for the established rules, a commitment to pursue the collective good of the Country and its people, and a recognition of their expressed will.

As evidenced by historical precedent, a democracy that lacks a clearly defined set of values is susceptible to becoming an open or covert totalitarian regime. Democracy is, in essence, a system that serves a purpose, rather than being an end in itself. The moral value of democracy is not an inherent attribute; rather, it is contingent upon conformity to the moral law, to which it, like all other forms of human behaviour, must be subject. In other words, the morality of democracy is contingent upon the morality of the ends it pursues and the means it employs.

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<sup>18</sup> Pope Francis, Address on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> Social Week of Italian Catholics, 7 July 2024.

Pope Francis made it clear that “the path to peace calls for respect for human rights, in accordance with the simple yet clear formulation contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [...]. These principles are self-evident and commonly accepted. Regrettably, in recent decades attempts have been made to introduce new rights that are neither fully consistent with those originally defined nor always acceptable. They have led to instances of ideological colonization, in which gender theory plays a central role; the latter is extremely dangerous since it cancels differences in its claim to make everyone equal. These instances of ideological colonization prove injurious and create divisions between states, rather than fostering peace.”<sup>19</sup> They do not even help to ensure the necessary harmony between women and men, which requires the recognition of the reality and beauty of their complementarity and reciprocity, as well as the gift of welcoming life. In this regard, it is also inconceivable to associate the concept of “right” with the practice of abortion, which involves the taking of an innocent life. Instead, from a human rights perspective, it is necessary to acknowledge the right of the woman to find concrete and moral support when she is in a situation of distress, loneliness and abandonment during her pregnancy and in the post-natal period.

The Holy See is profoundly alarmed that some of the most common violations of human rights occur in the area of religious freedom. It seems that the international community faces significant challenges in defending religious freedom, which is the litmus test for all other rights and freedoms. The Holy See always emphasises the importance of recognising the public dimension of religious freedom, while also respecting the legitimate autonomy and secularity of the State built on a healthy dialogue between the State and religious communities, which are not rivals but partners. Dialogue is necessary to respect the principles of authentic pluralism and build true democracy, whether on the national or international level.

It is a matter of concern that, according to some estimates, almost 4.9 billion people live in countries where there are serious or very serious violations of religious freedom. It is estimated that at least seven out of every ten citizens worldwide are currently prevented or harmed in the exercise of their rights in matters of conscience. It is worthy of note that Christians are the most vulnerable in this regard. Approximately one in seven Christians (over 365 million individuals) are subjected to significant levels of persecution on the grounds of their religious beliefs. The number of attacks on churches and Christian properties has risen markedly in 2023, with a greater number of Christians than ever before suffering violent attacks. Similarly,

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<sup>19</sup> Pope Francis, Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, 8 January 2024.

numerous Christians are being deprived of their right to conscientious objection and to freedom of expression and peaceful protest.

Furthermore, it is important to emphasise the importance of the institutional aspect of religious freedom, which entails the right of each religious denomination to freely organise itself in accordance with its governing statutes.

Mr. President,

In order to relaunch a shared commitment to the service of peace, there is a need to recover the roots, the spirit and the values that gave rise to this organization, while at the same time taking into account the changed context and showing regard for those who do not feel adequately represented by its structures.

The first, and most necessary reform needed is the return to a sincere and open dialogue which is the “soul of the international community. The current situation is also the result of the weakening of structures of multilateral diplomacy that arose after the Second World War. Organizations established to foster security, peace and cooperation are no longer capable of uniting all their members around one table. There is the risk of a ‘monadology’ and of splitting into ‘clubs’ that only admit states deemed ideologically compatible. Even agencies devoted to the common good and to technical questions, which have thus far proved effective, risk paralysis due to ideological polarization and exploitation by individual states.”<sup>20</sup>

It is evident that without dialogue and an open exchange of perspectives, even when there is disagreement, consensus and agreement cannot be reached. Instead, there is a risk of a select few imposing their ideas and policies on others. In other words, there is a need to go back to basics, to the spirit which inspired the founding members of this Organisation, that is a forum of open dialogue and exchange of ideas in order to leave a better and more peaceful world.

The Holy See, as it has done in these last six decades, continues to support the work of the United Nations, making its voice heard in defence of the poor, of those in vulnerable situations, supporting every peace process and initiative.

Thank you, Mr. President.

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<sup>20</sup> Pope Francis, Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, 8 January 2024.