



**THE HOLY SEE**  
**2016 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting**  
*Working Session 2: The International Covenants on human rights*  
*and their importance for the OSCE human dimension*  
**Tuesday, 20 September 2016**

Mr. Moderator,

The Holy See warmly welcomes these discussions on the International Covenants on Human Rights and their importance for the work of the OSCE human dimension, since the two International Covenants (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) are central to the international human rights system rooted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and express values that are common to all of humanity.

The OSCE participating States have recognized the particular significance of the International Covenants on Human Rights in stimulating and developing universal respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. In this respect, it is worth bearing in mind that in the field of human rights and fundamental freedoms, participating States are required to implement their commitments in accordance with the purposes and principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenants on Human Rights.

Moreover, 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 aimed at authentically protecting human rights. The Holy See has always appreciated, lauded and supported the efforts of the United Nations in its endeavour to guarantee in an ever better way, the full and just protection of the human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Both Covenants dwell on the origins of human rights, proclaiming in their preambles that “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”. The Holy See would like to recall – as it has so often done – that “the inherent dignity of the human person” is not given by the State or other public powers, but it arises from our dignity as beings created in the image and likeness of God. Therefore, the Catholic Church affirms the inherent dignity of the person as the

foundation of human rights, and the right to life from conception to natural death as the first among all human rights and the condition for all other rights of the person.

In the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, human rights are described as universal, inalienable and inviolable. These three characteristics stem from the deepest “foundation stone,” namely the divinely-given nature of human dignity. Human rights are *universal* since they apply to all humans without exception of time, place or subject. They are *inviolable* insofar as they are inherent in the human person and in human dignity, and because the proclamation of these rights demands complete respect by all people everywhere and for all people everywhere. Finally, these rights are *inalienable* insofar as no one can legitimately deprive others of these rights - whoever they may be - since this would do violence to their nature.

Today’s discussions are warranted because the pillars of the international human rights system face significant challenges today. The Holy See is particularly worried about viewpoints that question the “universality” of human rights and that seek to politicize human rights or remove them from their mooring in the natural order.

It has furthermore often expressed concern about removing these rights from their proper context, restricting the range of application of rights and permitting the meaning and interpretation of rights to vary and their universality to be denied in the name of different cultural, political, social and even religious outlooks. Such an approach does lasting harm to the very idea of human rights and certainly impairs their enjoyment by every man and woman. Rights are universal;<sup>1</sup> they are common to all persons. They do not depend upon the fashions and trends of societies or on the will of governments; they cannot legitimately be denied or removed. As Pope Francis has stated: “The dignity of the human person and the common good rank higher than the comfort of those who refuse to renounce their privileges.”<sup>2</sup> So, “when these values are threatened, a prophetic voice must be raised.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the Church is a vigorous partner in the efforts to speak out and to be a voice of many whose voice is not heard.

This concern relates also to the search for and application of so-called “new” human rights, based on ideas and concepts that significantly stray from the vision of the human person, on which the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenants on Human Rights are grounded. Genuine human rights are inalienable and must be universally recognized, respected and advanced. Therefore, the term “human right” must be strictly and prudently applied, lest it becomes a rhetorical catch-all, endlessly expanded to suit the passing whims of the age. Such an elastic approach would discredit and undermine the very concept of human rights. Promoting

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict XVI, *Address to the 62nd session of the United Nations General Assembly*, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, § 218.

<sup>3</sup> *IBID.*

such “new rights” will also include – again in the words of Pope Francis – an “ideological colonialization” that strives to impose on others a vision of humanity and of rights, that does not shy away from bullying, discrimination and injustice in their advancement of “new” rights.

Finally, the Holy See strongly believes that for human rights to bear fruit, not only must they be proclaimed in words, but they must also be put into practice.<sup>4</sup> Renewed efforts are needed in this regard. In his first World Day of Peace Message, Pope Francis expressed this deep regret: “In many parts of the world, there seems to be no end to grave offences against fundamental human rights.”<sup>5</sup> It is clear that the OSCE is ideally placed to correct these offences, advance the cause of human rights and promote the much-needed accurate implementation of these rights.

Thank you, Mr. Moderator!

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<sup>4</sup> Cfr. Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See (January 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, *Message*, World Day of Peace, 2014, § 1.