



The speech to the United Nations General Assembly.
Benedict XVI spoke loud and clear to the UN

The recognition of the unity of the human family and the attention to the innate dignity of every man and woman today acquires a new emphasis with the principle of the responsibility to protect

By: SS Benedict XVI | Source: Vatican Press

New York, Friday, 18 April 2008

**Mr. President
Ladies and gentlemen**

As I begin my speech in this Assembly, I would first like to express to you, Mr. President, my sincere gratitude for your kind words. I would also like to thank the Secretary-General, Mr. Ban Ki-moon, for his invitation to visit the headquarters of the organization and for his cordial welcome. I greet the ambassadors and diplomats of the Member States, as well as all those present: through you, I greet the nations you represent here. They expect this institution to carry forward the inspiration that led to its founding, that of being a "center that harmonizes the efforts of nations to achieve common goals", of peace and development (cf. Letter of the United Nations, art. 1.2-1.4). **As Pope John Paul II said in 1995, the Organization should be "moral center, in which all the nations of the world feel at home, developing the common consciousness of being, so to speak, a " family of nations"** (Speech to the General Assembly of the United Nations, New York, October the 5th, 1995, 14).

Through the United Nations, States have established universal objectives which, while not coinciding with the total common good of the human family, certainly represent a fundamental part of this good. The founding principles of the Organization-the desire for peace, the pursuit of justice, respect for the dignity of the person, cooperation and humanitarian assistance-express the just aspirations of the human spirit and constitute the ideals that should be underlying international relations. As my predecessors Paul VI and John Paul II have noted

from this same tribune, these are questions that the Catholic Church and the Holy See follow with attention and interest, as they view in your activity an example of how the problems and conflicts related to the common World may be subject to common regulation. The United Nations embodies the aspiration to "a higher degree of international ordering" John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei social*, 43), inspired and governed by the principle of subsidiarity and, therefore, able to respond to the demands of the human family through binding international rules and structures capable of harmonizing the everyday development of peoples' lives. This is even more necessary at a time when we experience the manifest paradox of a multilateral consensus that continues to suffer a crisis because of its subordination to the decisions of a few, while **the world's problems require mutual interventions by the international community.**

Certainly, security issues, the objectives of development, the reduction of local and global inequalities, the protection of the environment, resources and climate require all international managers to act together and demonstrate a willingness to act in good faith, respecting the law and promoting solidarity with the weakest regions of the planet. I think particularly of those countries in Africa and other parts of the world that remain outside of genuine integral development, and thus run the risk of experiencing only the negative effects of globalization. In the context of international relations, it is necessary to recognize the superior role played by the rules and structures intrinsically ordered to promote the common good and, therefore, to defend human freedom. These rules do not limit freedom. On the contrary, they promote it when they prohibit behaviors and acts that go against the common good, hinder their effective realization and therefore compromise the dignity of every human person. In the name of freedom, there must be a correlation between rights and duties, whereby each person is called to take responsibility for their choices, taken as they enter into relation with others. Here, our thinking is directed to how the results of the discoveries of scientific and technological research have been applied at times. However the enormous benefits that humanity can collect from them, some aspects of this application represent a clear violation of the order of creation, to the point where not only the sacred character of life is contradicted, but the person's Human self and the family are stripped of their natural identity. Similarly, international action aimed at preserving the environment and protecting the various forms of life on Earth should not only guarantee a rational use of technology and science but must also rediscover the true image of creation. This never requires a choice between science and ethics: it is rather about adopting a scientific method that respects ethical imperatives.

The recognition of the unity of the human family and the attention to the innate dignity of every man and woman today acquires a new emphasis with the principle of the responsibility to protect. This principle has been defined only recently, but it was already implicitly present at the origins of the United Nations and has now become more and more a feature of the organization's activity. Every state has the primary duty to protect the population itself from

serious and continuous violations of human rights, as well as the consequences of humanitarian crises, whether caused by nature or by man. If States are unable to guarantee this protection, the international community must intervene with the legal means provided for by the Charter of the United Nations and other international instruments. The action of the international community and its institutions, taking for granted respect for the principles that are at the base of the international order, should never be interpreted as an unjustified imposition and a limitation of sovereignty. On the contrary, it is indifference or lack of intervention that causes real harm. What is needed is a deeper search for the means to prevent and control conflicts, exploring any possible diplomatic pathways and paying attention and encouragement also to the faintest signs of dialogue or desire for reconciliation.

The principle of the "responsibility to protect" was considered by the former *ius gentium* as the foundation of any action by the governors towards the governed: at a time when the concept of sovereign national States was being developed, the Friar Dominico Francisco de Vitoria, qualified rightly as a precursor of the idea of the United Nations, described this responsibility as an aspect of the natural reason shared by all nations, and as the result of an international order whose task was regulating relations between peoples. **Today as then, this principle must refer to the idea of the person as the image of the Creator, to the desire for absolute and essential freedom.** As we know, the United Nations Foundation coincided with the profound upheaval experienced by humanity when the reference to the sense of transcendence and the natural reason was abandoned and, consequently, freedom and dignity of man were seriously violated. When that happens, the objective foundations of the values that inspire and govern the international order are threatened and are undermined based on the interrogable and inviolable principles formulated and consolidated by the United Nations. When faced with new and insistent challenges, it is a mistake to go back to a pragmatic approach, limited to determining "common ground", minimalist in content and weak in its effectiveness.

The reference to human dignity, which is the foundation and objective of the responsibility to protect, brings us to the topic on which we have been invited to focus this year, in which the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is fulfilled. The document was the result of a convergence of religious and cultural traditions, all of them motivated by the common desire to put the human person at the heart of the institutions, laws, and actions of society, and to consider the human person essential for the world of culture, religion and science. Human rights are increasingly presented as the common language and the ethical substrate of international relations. At the same time, the universality, indivisibility, and interdependence of human rights serve as a guarantee for the safeguarding of human dignity. However, it is clear that the rights recognized and enunciated in the Declaration apply to each one under the common origin of the person, which remains the highest point of God's creative design for the world and history. These rights are based on the natural law enshrined in the heart of man

and present in different cultures and civilizations. Starting the human rights of this context would mean restricting its scope and yielding to a relativistic conception, according to which the meaning and interpretation of rights could vary, denying its universality in the name of different cultural contexts, political, social and even religious. Thus, this vast variety of views should not be allowed to darken not only the fact that rights are universal, but so is the human person, subject to these rights.

The life of the community, both internally and internationally, clearly shows how respect for the rights and guarantees deriving from them are the measures of the common good that serve to assess the relationship between justice and injustice, development and poverty, security and conflict. **The promotion of human rights remains the most effective strategy to eradicate inequalities between countries and social groups, as well as to increase security.** It is true that the victims of oppression and despair, whose human dignity is violated with impunity, can easily yield to the impulse of violence and turn themselves into transgressors of peace. However, the common good that human rights allow achieving cannot be achieved simply by the application of correct procedures or by a simple balance between rights. The Universal declaration has the merit of having allowed it to converge in a fundamental core of values and, therefore, of rights, to different cultures, legal expressions, and institutional models. Today, however, efforts must be redoubled in the face of pressures to reinterpret the fundamentals of the Declaration and thereby compromise its intimate unity, thus facilitating its removal from the protection of human dignity to satisfy mere interests, with a particular frequency. The declaration was adopted as a "common ideal" (preamble) and cannot be applied by separate parties, according to selective tendencies or options which simply run the risk of contradicting the unity of the human person and thus the indivisibility of the human rights.

Experience teaches us that legality often prevails over justice when the insistence on human rights makes them appear as the exclusive result of legislative measures or policy decisions taken by the various agencies of which they are in power. When they are presented simply in terms of legality, the rights run the risk of becoming fragile propositions, separated from the ethical and rational dimension, which is their foundation and end. On the contrary, the Universal Declaration has reinforced the conviction that respect for human rights is rooted primarily in unchanging justice, on which the binding force of international proclamations is also based. This aspect is often neglected when attempting to deprive the rights of its true function in the name of a miserable utilitarian perspective. Since the rights and subsequent duties naturally come from human interaction, it is easy to forget that they are the fruit of a common sense of justice, based primarily on solidarity between members of society and, therefore, valid for all times and all peoples. This intuition was expressed soon, in the 5th century, by Augustine of Hippo, one of the masters of our intellectual heritage. He said the maxim does not do to others what you do not want them to do to you "in any way can vary, however much the diversity of nations" (Christian Doctrine, III, 14). Human rights must, therefore, be respected as an expression of justice, and not

simply because they can be made to respect them by the will of the legislators.

Ladies and gentlemen, with the passing of history new situations arise and we try to connect them to new rights. **Discernment, i.e. the ability to distinguish well from evil, becomes more essential in the context of demands concerning life itself and the behavior of people, communities, and nations.** When faced with the issue of rights, since important situations and deep realities are involved in it, discernment is at the same time an indispensable and fruitful virtue.

Thus, discernment shows how exclusively relying on each state, with its laws and institutions, the ultimate responsibility to conjugate the aspirations of whole people, communities, and nations can sometimes have consequences that exclude the possibility of a social order respectful of the dignity and the rights of the person. On the other hand, a vision of life firmly rooted in the religious dimension can help to achieve these ends, since the recognition of the transcendent value of every man and every woman favors the conversion of the heart, which leads to the commitment to resist violence, terrorism, and war, and promote justice and peace. Also, this provides the appropriate context for that interreligious dialogue that the United Nations is called upon to support, in the same way, they support dialogue in other fields of human activity. Dialogue should be recognized as the means through which the various sectors of society can articulate their viewpoint and build consensus on the truth about particular values or objectives. It belongs to the nature of religions, freely practiced, which can independently engage in a dialogue of thought and life. If also at this level the religious sphere is kept separate from political action, great benefits will be produced for people and communities. On the other hand, the United Nations can count on the results of the dialogue between religions and benefit from the willingness of believers to put their own experiences at the service of the common good. Its task is to propose a vision of faith, not in terms of intolerance, discrimination, and conflict, but of total respect for truth, coexistence, rights, and reconciliation.

Human rights should include the right to religious freedom, understood as an expression of a dimension that is both individual and communitarian, a vision that manifests the unity of the person, even clearly distinguishing between the dimension of a citizen and that of a believer. United Nations activity in recent years has ensured that public debate provides space for views inspired by a religious view in all its dimensions, including rite, cult, education, dissemination of information, as well as the freedom to profess or choose a religion. It is inconceivable, therefore, that believers have to suppress a part of themselves-their faith-to be active citizens. It should never be necessary to disown God to enjoy own rights. The rights associated with religion need protection especially if they are considered in conflict with the prevailing secular ideology or with positions of a religious majority of an exclusive nature. The full guarantee of religious freedom cannot be limited to the free exercise of worship, but the public dimension of religion must be taken into due consideration, and therefore the possibility for

believers to contribute to the construction of the social order. To tell the truth, they are already doing it, for example, through their influential and generous involvement in a broad network of initiatives, ranging from universities to scientific institutions, schools, health care centers, and charitable organizations to service of the poorest and most marginalized. The refusal to recognize the contribution to society that is rooted in the religious dimension and the search for the absolute-expression by its very nature of communion between people-would effectively privilege an individualistic approach and it would fragment the unity of the person.

My presence in this Assembly is a sign of esteem for the United Nations and is regarded as an expression of hope that the Organization will increasingly serve as a sign of unity among States and as an instrument in the service of the entire human family. It also expresses the will of the Catholic Church to offer its contribution to the construction of international relations in a way in which each person and each nation are allowed to perceive that they are an element capable of making a difference. Also, the Church works to obtain these objectives through the international activity of the Holy See, in a manner consistent with its contribution in the ethical and moral sphere and with the free activity of the faithful themselves. Indeed, the Holy See has always had a place in the assemblies of nations, thus expressing its specific character as a subject at the international level. As the United Nations has recently confirmed, the Holy See thus offers its contribution under the provisions of international law, helps to define it and is referred to it.

The United Nations remains a privileged place where the Church is committed to bringing its own experience "inhumanity", developed over the centuries between nations of all races and cultures, and to make it available to all members of the international community. This experience and activity, aimed at obtaining freedom for every believer, also try to increase the protection that is offered to the rights of the person. These rights are based and embodied in the transcendent nature of the person, which allows men and women to walk their faith path and their search for God in this world. Recognition of this dimension must be strengthened if we are to promote the hope of humanity for a better world and to create conditions conducting to peace, development, cooperation and the guarantee of the rights of future generations.

In my recent encyclical *Spe Salvi*, I underlined "that the search, always new and tiring, of righteous ordinations for human realities is a task of every generation" (N. 25). For Christians, this task is motivated by the hope that comes from the saving work of Jesus Christ. That is precisely why the Church is happy to be associated with the activity of this illustrious organization, which is entrusted with the responsibility of promoting peace and goodwill throughout the world. Dear friends, I thank you for the opportunity to talk with you today and I promise the help of my prayers for the development of your noble task.

Before I say goodbye to this Assembly, I wish to salute all the nations represented

here in the official languages.