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BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIEGE
PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLIS

BOLLETTINO

SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

N. 230926f

Tuesday 26.09.2023

Statement by Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher at the General Debate of the High-Level Week at the Opening of the 78th Session of the United Nations General Assembly

The following is the statement made today in New York by Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher, Secretary for Relations with States and International Organizations of the Secretariat of State, at the 78th Session of the United Nations General Assembly:

Statement by Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher

**Statement by His Excellency Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher
Secretary for the Relations with States and International Organizations
Head of the Delegation of the Holy See
at the General Debate of the High-Level Week at the Opening of the 78th Session of the United Nations
General Assembly**

New York, 26 September 2023

Mr. President,

I am pleased to extend to you and to the Representatives of Nations gathered here the warm greetings of Pope Francis, while also congratulating Your Excellency on your election as President of this august Assembly.

The Holy See wishes to commend you on the topic for this General Debate and cannot agree more that there is an overwhelming need to start rebuilding trust in order to reignite global stability, peace and prosperity. Indeed, *“we are living at a crucial moment for humanity, in which peace seems to give way to war. Conflicts are growing, and stability is increasingly put at risk.”*^[1]

In recent decades, this Organization has witnessed an increase in activities on various fronts, including laudable

initiatives aimed at reducing poverty, helping migrants, combating climate change, promoting nuclear disarmament, and offering humanitarian aid along with multiple others.

On the other hand, in these last years we have seen crumbling trust among nations, clear evidence of which is the increase in number and gravity of conflicts and wars. Furthermore, “the current conflict in Ukraine has made all the more evident the crisis that has long affected the multilateral system, which needs a profound rethinking if it is to respond adequately to the challenges of our time.”[2]

All of this has resulted in an inevitable and equally significant increase in the number of meetings held at different levels, though not always in direct proportion to the effectiveness required in pursuing the proposed goals.

In such fora, while, on the one hand, rivers of words are spent by delegations in order to explain their respective positions on a given issue, one does not always find, on the part of individual States, the same willingness to listen. Rather we witness a marked tendency to impose their own ideas and agenda. Pope Francis calls this ideological colonization. That is, the phenomenon whereby richer, more powerful Countries attempt to impose their own worldview on poorer countries, promoting alien, cultural values that they do not share. Worse still, aid is provided, reduced or even blocked on the condition or “threat” of accepting those positions, through the imposition of policies and programs these Countries export abroad. The rule of law seems sometimes to be replaced by the law of the strongest.

It is necessary, therefore, to return to listening and dialogue in order to solve and avoid further conflicts, and lessen the suffering of humanity. Today, we are observing an inverse trend; not only are people not listening, but they want to silence or exclude those who disagree with their views, making seemingly plausible arguments. Nevertheless, the effect, no matter the reason given, is to exclude certain parties from the conversation. This undermines the very nature of global multilateral forums, which should continue to correspond to their primary vocation as places of authentic encounter and dialogue between equally sovereign States. Therefore, the international community must maintain the universality of global multilateral forums and not turn them into clubs reserved for a few elites, who think alike and where some are simply tolerated as long as they do not bother anyone.

In this sense, I would highlight the following key words for effective multilateralism: dialogue, shared responsibility and cooperation, each in the pursuit of the common good. All this under the banner of solidarity that “*comes from knowing that we are responsible for the fragility of others by seeking a common destiny.*”[3]

All States must rediscover a spirit of service with the intention of building a global solidarity that expresses itself concretely in helping those who suffer. For to serve means to care for those who are fragile in our society, in our peoples. As part of this shared commitment, rulers must put aside their own needs, expectations, and desires for sovereignty or omnipotence before the concrete gaze of the most fragile. A commitment to service that looks at the face of the suffering, whether from hunger, the effects of war or the lack of respect for basic human rights. “*For this reason, service is never ideological, since it serves not ideas but people.*”[4]

As Pope Francis says, “*this demands a reform of the bodies that allow it to function effectively, so that they can be truly representative of the needs and sensitivities of all peoples, and avoid procedures that give greater weight to some, to the detriment of others. It is not a matter of creating coalitions, but of providing opportunities for everyone to be partners in dialogue.*”[5] Indeed, any reform of the United Nations must not be based in first instance on the multiplication of meetings, speeches, structures or institutions, but in rendering what is already existing more efficient and in line with the current era we are living in.

In this respect, the multilateral system has shifted its focus from the peaceful coexistence of States to issues that are not that relevant for that purpose, preferring issues pertinent to the lives and patterns of individuals. Thus, a real reform of the UN necessarily answers the question as to the functionality of the multilateral system, favouring a “reversal” of the current priorities, making the UN truly “fit for purpose” and reviving coordination among States to achieve truly common ends. In other words, going back to basics.

Here, I would propose that an important turning point could be restoring the healthy distinction between the actions of States and those of civil society, or those who pretend to represent it, while focusing on rebuilding healthy relations and trust between Nations, in order to foster peace and security.

Mr. President

“It has become increasingly evident that in the multipolar world of the twenty-first century, the pursuit of peace is closely related to the need for security and reflection on the most efficient means for guaranteeing it. Such reflection must necessarily consider the fact that global security needs to be integral, capable of embracing issues including access to food and water, respect for the environment, health care, energy sources and the equitable distribution of the world’s goods.”[6]

The conflict in Ukraine has been instrumental to bringing back the elevated threat of nuclear escalation into the discussion. Once again, it is the firm conviction of the Holy See that *“the use of atomic energy for purposes of war is, today more than ever, a crime not only against the dignity of human beings, but against any possible future for our common home,”*[7] while the mere possession itself of nuclear weapons is also immoral.[8]

In this context, there is need to instill an ambitious program of work for the Second Meeting of States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), including advancement of discussions on the creation of an International Trust Fund to support a restorative approach to the human and environmental harms caused by nuclear use and testing. The Holy See calls on States to sign and ratify the TPNW, as well the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which together, in complementarity, form the basis for the disarmament and non-proliferation regime.

Mr. President

Another important challenge which we have at hand could be defined, more generally, as the expanding digital galaxy we inhabit, and specifically artificial intelligence. Digital innovation touches every aspect of our lives and community, from governmental to social and personal. *“It is increasingly present in human activity and even in human decisions, and is thus altering the way we think and act. [...] A personal act is now the point of convergence between an input that is truly human and an automatic calculus, with the result that it becomes increasingly complicated to understand its object, foresee its effects and define the contribution of each factor.”*[9]

That is why there is an urgent need to engage in serious ethical reflection on the use and integration of supercomputer systems and processes in our daily lives. Moreover, Pope Francis insists that we must be *“be vigilant and work to ensure that the discriminatory use of these instruments does not take root at the expense of the most fragile and excluded [...] it is not acceptable that the decision about someone’s life and future be entrusted to an algorithm.”*[10] This is valid in all situation also in the development of use of Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS).

Recently, a growing number of legal and ethical concerns have been raised, about the use of LAWS in armed conflicts. It is clear that their use should be in line with the international humanitarian law. There is need to begin negotiations on a legally binding instrument governing LAWS and to implement a moratorium on them pending the conclusion of negotiations. It is imperative to ensure adequate, meaningful and consistent human oversight of weapon systems: only human beings are truly capable of seeing and judging the ethical impact of their actions, as well as assessing their consequent responsibilities.

In this regard, the Holy See supports the establishment of an International Organization for Artificial Intelligence, aimed at facilitating the fullest possible exchange of scientific and technological information for peaceful uses and for the promotion of the common good and integral human development.

Indeed, there is need to foster the humane development of new technologies. This requires, first of all, dialogue

among all actors, in a whole of society approach, especially in the discussion around the Global Digital Compact. In this regard, *“in the encounter between different visions of the world, human rights represent an important point of convergence in the search for common ground. At present, there would seem to be a need for renewed reflection on rights and duties in this area. The scope and acceleration of the transformations of the digital era have in fact raised unforeseen problems and situations that challenge our individual and collective ethos.”*[11]

However, with the development of new technologies should go hand in hand with the care for our common home. New technologies should be used to mitigate the planetary crisis of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss, and the urgency of acting now to safeguard the world we live in. *“Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods. It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day. Its worst impact will probably be felt by developing countries in coming decades.”*[12] It is a great injustice that those who contribute the least to pollution are those paying the highest price and are the most exposed to the adverse effects of climate change.

In this sense, the International Community needs to focus on a positive outcome at the forthcoming COP28 in the UAE, without reducing the discussions on climate change to financing issues. Though these are an integral component of climate talks, financing issues should never overshadow the ultimate goal of protecting our common home. Rather, they should work towards bringing the human family together to seek sustainable and integral development.

Mr. President,

This year we are marking the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and of the 30th anniversary of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action. *“Through these two documents, the family of Nations sought to recognize the equal dignity of every human being, from which derive the fundamental rights and liberties that, as they are rooted in human nature — the inseparable unity of body and soul — are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interconnected. At the same time, the 1948 Declaration recognizes that ‘Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.’”*[13]

The significant anniversaries of these documents invite to an in-depth reflection on the foundation of human rights and respect for them in the contemporary world in order to renew commitments in favour of the defence of human dignity. *“In the world today numerous forms of injustice persist, fed by reductive anthropological visions and by a profit-based economic model, which does not hesitate to exploit, discard and even kill human beings. While one part of humanity lives in opulence, another part sees its own dignity denied, scorned or trampled upon, and its fundamental rights disregarded or violated.”*[14]

First and foremost among these are the unborn, who are denied the right to come into the world, in some case due to their sex or disability. It is also those who do not have access to the indispensable means for a dignified life. As well as those who are excluded from an appropriate education. Those who are unjustly deprived of work or compelled to work as slaves; those who are detained in inhumane conditions, who suffer torture or who are denied the opportunity for redemption; the victims of forced disappearances and of their families; those living in a climate dominated by suspicion and scorn, who are the object of acts of intolerance, discrimination and violence due to their sex, age, race, ethnicity, nationality or religion. Lastly, those who endure a multitude of violations of their fundamental rights in the tragic context of armed conflicts, while unscrupulous dealers of death enrich themselves at the cost of their brothers' and sisters' blood.[15]

Let us never forget that the true litmus test to see if human rights are being protected is the degree to which people have freedom of religion or belief in a Country. Disturbingly, we continue to live in a world where people are persecuted simply for professing their faith in public. There are many Countries where religious freedom is severely restricted. Indeed, about one-third of the world's population lives in this condition and the number only seems to be growing. Along with the lack of religious freedom, there is also outright religious persecution, including in people's private religious lives. I cannot fail to mention, as some statistics show, that one Christian in every seven is persecuted. Moreover, violence against Christians is on the increase and not only in Countries where they are a minority. Even the term “hate crime” or “hate speech” is now being used subjectively and

manipulated to keep people from expressing their religious beliefs, equating the practice of religion to violence. This purposefully dishonest, politically motivated agenda, especially egregious in the West, must end.

Religious freedom is one of the absolute minimum requirements necessary to live in dignity. Governments have a duty to protect the religious freedom of their citizens. Creating an environment suitable for religious freedom means guaranteeing every person, consistent with the common good, the opportunity to act according to his or her conscience. In fact, religious freedom is not only the freedom to worship, that is, the fact that one can have worship during the day or in the places provided, but also to be able to live according to one's own belief and for religions to be able to organize themselves in order to help their faithful in this. Religious freedom, like education and other fundamental rights, can be an important component in enabling the marginalized to be dignified agents of their own destiny.

Mr. President,

Despite the fact that so many tragedies have struck and are still shaking the family of nations this year, amid natural disasters, severe food security problems and political instability, causing anguish, hardship and uncertainty about the future, the Russian attack on Ukraine remains one of the most painful and bleeding wounds, which instead of healing is widening and deepening. Undoubtedly, in more than 18 months of war we have witnessed the admirable, ever-renewed commitment of so many Countries to help the battered Ukraine defend its people and its territory. Unfortunately, however, this has not been accompanied by an equal effort to find ways in which the confrontation can be overcome. We remain far from true encounter and dialogue, so as to put an end to the hatred, destruction and death, to open paths of peace and reconstruction. This is what the Holy See, apart from its humanitarian assistance, hopes for and seeks to promote with each of its countless appeals and initiatives, dependent on the cooperation of all international actors.

The humanitarian situation in Syria is indeed worrying. Syrians, plagued by twelve years of war, earthquake and great poverty, are once again sounding the alarm, expressing their great hardships and demanding that a solution to their sufferings can be found. The Holy See, in addition to encouraging the resumption of a political process of reconciliation, calls for humanitarian emergencies not to be weighed against the rigidities of political positions, but to have the courage to look at the suffering of the people with truth and honesty, so that the international sanctions imposed on the Syrian government by the European Union, the United States and the United Kingdom do not afflict the local population.

The situation in Sudan also continues to be of great concern. Over the past six months, armed clashes have resulted in a high number of victims and displaced persons, as well as a very serious humanitarian crisis, increasingly distancing the prospect of achieving peace and restoring stability to the country. The Holy See makes a heartfelt appeal for the laying down of arms so that dialogue can prevail and the suffering of the population can be alleviated.

The Holy See closely follows political events in Sub-Saharan Africa and renews its commitment to the promotion of peace, justice and prosperity. Local churches contribute to national reconciliation processes and act with a view to the common good, especially in the educational, charitable and health sectors. Of particular concern in Sub-Saharan Africa have been the numerous episodes of violence as well as the frequent coups that disrupt democratic processes, cause death and destruction, and cause humanitarian and migration crises.

It is painful to discover that, sometimes, behind episodes of terrorism and violence, are also international economic interests that encourage the unjust dynamics of colonialism. In this regard, I appeal to the family of nations gathered here at this General Assembly to let the spirit of dialogue prevail, to cease all kinds of economic and financial exploitation, and to take care to foster generous and respectful international cooperation.

A special thought goes to Nicaragua with which the Holy See hopes to engage in respectful diplomatic dialogue for the good of the local Church and of the entire population.

The Holy See urges dialogue and negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia, with the support of the

International Community, which will favor a sustainable agreement, as soon as possible, thus ending the humanitarian crisis and resolving the dramatic situation in Nagorno-Karabakh. In addition, I express my condolences to the families of the victims of the explosion at a petrol station near of the city of Stepanakert.

The Holy See expresses serious concern about what is happening in Jerusalem and in particular the attacks against the Christian communities. These episodes are not simply undermining the coexistence between the different communities, but are threatening the very identity of the City of Jerusalem, which some cannot conceive as a meeting place between the three faiths, Christianity, Judaism and Islam. I renew my appeal not only to the Israelis and Palestinians to open up to sincere dialogue, but also to the entire International Community, so that Jerusalem is not forgotten, so that the project of a Holy City as a place of peace for all and of all, with a special internationally guaranteed status, is not abandoned.

Mr. President

Pope Francis, in his address to the Security Council this past June said that, *“today’s globalized world has brought all of us closer together, yet it has not made us any more fraternal. Indeed, we are suffering from a famine of fraternity, which arises from the many situations of injustice, poverty and inequality and also from the lack of a culture of solidarity. New ideologies, characterized by widespread individualism, egocentrism and materialistic consumerism, weaken social bonds, fueling that ‘throwaway’ mentality, which leads to contempt for and abandonment of, the weakest and those considered ‘useless’. In this way human coexistence increasingly tends to resemble a meredo ut des which is both pragmatic and selfish. Yet the worst effect of this famine of fraternity is armed conflict and war, that makes enemies of not only individuals but entire peoples, and whose negative consequences reverberate for generations.”*[16]

With the founding of the United Nations, it seemed that the world had learned, after two terrible world wars, to move towards a more stable peace, moving towards becoming a literal family of nations. However, it seems, that we are backlogging history, with the rise of myopic, extremist, resentful and aggressive nationalisms that have kindled conflicts which are not only anachronistic and outdated, but even more violent than we remember.

Indeed, *“in order to make peace a reality, we must move away from the logic of the legitimacy of war: if this were valid in earlier times, when wars were more limited in scope, in our own day, with nuclear weapons and those of mass destruction, the battlefield has become practically unlimited, and the effects potentially catastrophic.”*[17]

In fact, *“peace is possible, if it is truly willed; and if peace is possible, it is a duty.”*[18] This is the duty of each one present in this room, because it is only in the research of peace and in the peaceful living between States, that we can become truly united nations, in a single human family.

Thank you, Mr. President.

[1]Pope Francis, Address to the Security Council of the United Nations, 14 June 2023.

[2]Pope Francis, Address to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, 9 January 2023.

[3]Pope Francis, Fratelli tutti, 115.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Pope Francis, Address to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, 9 January 2023.

[6]Pope Francis, Letter to the Bishop of Hiroshima on the occasion of the G7 Summit, 19 May 2023.

[7]Pope Francis, Address at the Peace Memorial (Hiroshima), 24 November 2019.

[8]Pope Francis, Message to His Excellency Ambassador Alexander Kmentt, President of the First Meeting of States Parties to the treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, 21 June 2022.

[9]Pope Francis, Meeting with the participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life, 28 February 2023.

[10]Pope Francis, Address to the participants in the “Rome Call” Meeting promoted by the Renaissance Foundation, 10 January 2023.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 25.

[13]Pope Francis, Message to the participants at the International Conference “Human rights in the contemporary world: achievements, omissions, negations”, 10-11 December 2018.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Cfr. Ibid.

[16]Pope Francis, Address to the Security Council of the United Nations, 14 June 2023.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Paul VI, Message for the VI World Day of Peace, 1 January 1973.
