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INTERVENTO DELLA SANTA SEDE ALL'ASSEMBLEA PLENARIA DELLE NAZIONI UNITE

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Pubblichiamo di seguito l'intervento che l'Osservatore Permanente della Santa Sede presso l'O.N.U., S.E. Mons. Renato Raffaele Martino, ha pronunciato ieri all'Assemblea Plenaria delle Nazioni Unite *"on Item 25: United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations"*:

● INTERVENTO DI S.E. MONS. RENATO R. MARTINO

Mr. President,

In his Message for the World Day of Peace celebrated on 1 January 2001, Pope John Paul II wrote of the urgency *"to reflect on the theme of dialogue between cultures and traditions"*, with this dialogue being *"the obligatory path to the building of a reconciled world, a world able to look with serenity to its own future. This is a theme which is crucial to the pursuit of peace ... the United Nations Organization has called attention to this urgent need by declaring 2001 the 'International Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations'"* (n.3).

The impact of the brutal and unprecedented attacks of 11 September are forcing all of us to consider the urgency of the dialogue among civilizations and to intensify our hopes as this International Year draws to a close. To do anything less would only allow for the perversion of the very idea of civilization. As the recently-published Report of the Secretary-General on this agenda item indicates, *"A dialogue among civilizations is not only a necessary answer to terrorism - it is in many ways its nemesis"* and the very presence of this organization is a testament to the deep human desire for justice and peace. The terrorist attacks must make the UN not only re-consider but re-commit and resolve itself to this dialogue.

In last year's resolution on the Dialogue among Civilizations, the General Assembly noted that *"civilizations are not confined to individual nation-States, but rather encompass different cultures within the same civilization, and ... that civilizational achievements constitute the collective heritage of humankind, providing a source of inspiration and progress for humanity at large"* (Resolution 55/23). In recognizing the plurality and relatedness of the world's cultures and civilizations, this body thus admitted the vital role culture, as a subset of each civilization, must play in the drama that is every human life.

"The main concern of culture in general and of all culture is education."¹ Addressing man in his moral, intellectual and spiritual capacities, authentic culture is rooted in the search for ultimate truth. In the recesses of his heart, man seeks to discover both his origins and his ultimate destiny. In many respects, culture is the means by which whole communities of people come to meet God and to ask life's fundamental questions. It is this common search for truth that forms the basis of culture: "At the heart of every culture lies the attitude man takes to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God."²

As personal as this search is to the human heart, it naturally expresses itself in and through the customs and traditions of whole communities of people who, through their relative proximity to one another, have sought the ultimate meaning of life together as a people. The first experience of living together is found in the family, a universal experience whose importance can hardly be overstated. The family provides the basis of an essential relationship between the individual and one's origins. In the family, individuals also come to maturity through receptive openness to others and through generous self-giving to them.

Moreover, there is a close connection between the particular culture of a people and its identity as a nation. "History shows that in extreme circumstances ... it is precisely its culture that enables a nation to survive the loss of political and economic independence."³ Not even the powerful ideological systems of colonialism and totalitarianism were able, and neither will terrorism be able, to suppress the universal need for a particular and unique cultural life.

It may seem that any particular culture, if it is taken seriously, raises strong and definitive claims to truth - in a sense, each culture may say that *its way* is *the way*, to the exclusion of all others. This determination may even seem to give cultures a certain force. Yet such overly-simplistic claims have led, and sadly continue to lead, to strife and conflict between peoples, not to mention the number of inhuman and barbarous acts against human dignity, dubiously justified in the name of "culture." All cultures must bear some relationship to freedom and truth. Fanaticism and fundamentalism cannot be equated with the search for truth itself.

A true dialogue between cultures requires a respect for differences. Much too often, both in history and present times, ethnic and religious differences have been used as a justification for brutal conflict, genocide, and persecution. There have also been problems where one religious group has sought to expel members of another religion from a country, often with threats and actual violence. Authentic culture cannot be built upon the practice of religious persecution. Such a so-called culture stands diametrically opposed to the human person and will eventually lead to the disintegration of society.

Meaningful dialogue among civilizations cannot take place in the absence of religious freedom. The cultures of the world, with all of their rich diversity of gifts, have much to contribute to the building up of a civilization of love. What is required is a mutual respect for differences among cultures - a respect inspired by the desire to uphold the right of all individuals to seek the truth in accord with the dictates of their conscience and in continuity with their cultural heritage.

Human beings are not enslaved by the past. They cannot disregard the past or recreate themselves in any way they wish, but they do have the capacity to *discern* and *choose* how they should live, both as individuals and together. They are free enough to accept the limitations imposed by various historical, cultural, economic or other conditions. These conditions may constrain but cannot abolish their freedom. As a part of human nature, freedom, especially the freedom to choose dialogue and peace, is always possible.

After the recognition of a variety of cultures and civilizations, one is bound to ask, What unifies mankind? The answer proposed and affirmed by the United Nations has been "those *universal rights* which human beings enjoy by the very fact of their humanity. It was precisely outrages against human dignity which led the United Nations Organization to formulate, barely three years after its establishment, that *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* which remains one of the highest expression of the human conscience of our time."⁴

As Pope John Paul II stated in his address to the General Assembly in 1995, "These are not abstract points; rather, these rights tell us something important about the actual life of every individual and of every social group.

They also remind us that *we do not live in an irrational or meaningless world*. On the contrary, there is a *moral logic which is built into human life* and which makes possible dialogue between individuals and peoples. If we want a *century of violent coercion* to be succeeded by a *century of persuasion*, we must find a way to discuss the human future intelligibly. The universal moral law written on the human heart is precisely that kind of 'grammar' which is needed if the world is to engage this discussion of its future."⁵

Mr. President,

My Delegation would like to conclude with a final reflection on the relationship between civilization and recognition of the value and dignity of human life. No authentic dialogue can take place if it fails to respect life. There can be no peace or dialogue among civilizations when this fundamental right is not protected. There have been many examples of generosity, dedication, even heroism in the service of life in our time. Yet the world is still plagued by a number of attacks on life. When the human dignity of the weakest and most vulnerable members of society is not duly recognized, respected and protected, all civilizations suffer.

Yet again, despite these terrible practices and the recent crises, mankind must not be discouraged. The very idea of dialogue presupposes our ability to reason and understand, and especially to change and make anew. The Holy See has full confidence that a true dialogue among civilizations will serve to benefit all.

Thank you.

1 Address of Pope John Paul II to UNESCO, 2 June 1980, n. 11

2 *Centesimus Annus*, n. 24

3 Address to the United Nations, 5 October 1995, n. 8

4 *Ibid.*, n. 2

5 *Ibid.*, n. 3[01825-02.01] [Original text: English]
