



SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE
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HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIÈGE PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS
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BIURO PRASOWE STOLICY APOSTOLSKIEJ دار الصحافة التابعة للكرسي الرسولي

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Audience with the participants in the Third Conference on Humanitarian International Law (Rome, 27-28 October 2017)

At midday today, in the Clementine Hall of the Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the International Conference on Humanitarian International Law, taking place in Rome at the *Scuola Ufficiali Carabinieri*, with the patronage of the General Command of the Carabinieri Corps and the Ministry of Defence. This third edition of the conference takes as its theme “*The Protection of Civilian Populations in Conflict – the Role of Humanitarian Organizations and Civil Society*”, and focuses on the role that civil society in general, and humanitarian organizations in particular, occupy in international law and in international humanitarian law.

The following is the Pope’s address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

I am delighted to welcome you, and I thank the Honourable Ministers of the Italian Government for the words with which they introduced this meeting. I cordially greet the authorities present and all participants in the Third International Humanitarian Law Conference on “The Protection of Civilian Populations in Conflict – the Role of Humanitarian Organizations and Civil Society”.

This theme is particularly significant on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the adoption of the two Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions, regarding the protection of victims of armed conflicts. Convinced of the essentially negative nature of the war and that the most desirable aspiration of man is its abolition, the Holy See has ratified these two agreements in order to encourage a “humanization of the effects of armed conflicts”[1]. It has not failed to appreciate, in particular, provisions relating to the protection of the civilian population and the indispensable goods for its survival, respect for healthcare and religious personnel, and the protection of cultural and religious assets, as well as of the natural environment, our common home. The Holy

See, however, aware of the omissions and hesitations that characterize above all the Second Additional Protocol, namely the protection of victims of non-international armed conflict, continues to consider these instruments as an open door for further developments in international humanitarian law,[2] that can may adequately take into account the characteristics of contemporary armed conflicts and the physical, moral and spiritual sufferings that accompany them.

Indeed, in spite of the praiseworthy attempt to reduce, through codification of humanitarian law, the negative consequences of hostilities on the civilian population, from various theatres of war there too frequently emerges evidence of atrocious crimes, real offences against people and their dignity, committed in contempt of every elementary consideration of humanity. Images of lifeless people, of mutilated or decapitated bodies, of our brothers and sisters tortured, crucified, even mutilated after death, challenge the conscience of humanity. On the other hand, we hear of ancient cities, with their millennial cultural treasures, reduced to piles of rubble, hospitals and schools made the objectives of deliberate attacks and destroyed, thereby depriving entire generations of their right to life, health and education. How many churches and other places of worship are subject to targeted aggression, often precisely during liturgical celebrations, with numerous victims among the faithful and ministers gathered in prayer, in violation of the fundamental right to freedom of religion! Sometimes, unfortunately, the dissemination of this information may lead to a certain saturation that anesthetizes and to some extent relativizes the severity of the problems, so that it is more difficult to be moved to compassion and to open our conscience in solidarity.[3] For this to happen, a conversion of hearts is necessary, an opening up to God and to our neighbour, driving people to overcome indifference and to live in solidarity, as a moral virtue and social attitude, which can lead to efforts in favour of our suffering humanity.[4]

At the same time, however, it is encouraging to see the many demonstrations of solidarity and charity that are not lacking in times of war. There are so many people, many charitable groups and non-governmental organizations within and outside the Church whose members face fatigue and dangers to cure the injured and the sick, to bury the dead,[5] to feed the hungry and to give water to the thirsty, to visit prisoners. Relief to the peoples of the conflicts brings together various works of mercy, upon which we will be judged at the end of our lives. May humanitarian organizations always act in accordance with the fundamental principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. I therefore hope that these principles, which are at the heart of humanitarian law, can be *received in the consciences* of fighters and humanitarian workers *so as to be translated into practice*. [6] Where in humanitarian law there is hesitation and omission, may the individual conscience be able to recognize the moral duty of respecting and protecting the dignity of the human person in all circumstances, especially in situations where it is most strongly threatened. For this to be possible, I would like to recall *the importance of prayer* and to ensure, alongside technical and legal training, the spiritual accompaniment of fighters and humanitarian workers.

Dear brothers and sisters, to all of those – and there are more than a few among you – who have placed their own lives in danger to save another or to alleviate the sufferings of the populations afflicted by armed conflicts, are addressed the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (*Mt 25: 40*). I entrust you to the intercession of Mary Most Holy, Queen of Peace, and while I ask you, please, to pray for me too, I impart my apostolic blessing to you and your families.

[1] *Déclaration du Saint-Siège formulée lors de la ratification du « Protocole additionnel aux Conventions de Genève du 12 août 1949 relatif à la protection des victimes des conflits armés non internationaux », 8 juin 1977.*

[2] Cf. *ibid.*

[3] Cf. *Message for World Day of Peace 2016*, “Overcome indifference and win peace”, 3.

[4] Cf. *ibid.*

[5] Cf. *Message for World Day of Peace 2016*, “Overcome indifference and win peace”, 7.

[6] Cf. *Déclaration du Saint-Siège formulée lors de la ratification du « Protocole additionnel aux Conventions de Genève du 12 août 1949 relatif à la protection des victimes des conflits armés non internationaux », 8 juin 1977.*
