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BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIEGE
PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLIS

BOLLETTINO

SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

N. 180926f

Wednesday 26.09.2018

Intervention by the Secretary for Relations with States at the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly on the “Nelson Mandela Peace Summit”

The following is the intervention pronounced by H.E. Msgr. Paul Richard Gallagher, secretary for Relations with States, head of the Holy See Delegation, on Monday 24 September in New York, at the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly on the High Level Plenary *Nelson Mandela Peace Summit*.

Intervention by H.E. Paul Richard Gallagher

Madam President,

This high-level plenary meeting provides an auspicious opportunity to honour the centenary of the birth of Nelson Mandela and to reflect on his legacy.

Mandela’s legacy has become synonymous with the promotion of peace and non-violence, reconciliation and healing, non-discrimination and the promotion of human rights. In a telegram to express his condolences for the death of Nelson Mandela, Pope Francis paid tribute to his “steadfast commitment [...] in promoting the human dignity of all the nations’ citizens and in forging a new South Africa built on the firm foundations of non-violence, reconciliation and truth.”[1]

The centenary of Mandela’s birth reminds us of another centenary: that of the end of the First World War, a conflict that violently disfigured the face of Europe. Reflecting on the Great War and the life of Nelson Mandela, two great lessons emerge that could serve as golden rules to foster peace.

The first lesson is that victory never means humiliating a defeated foe. Peace is not built by vaunting the power of the victor over the vanquished. The haughty glory of the victor sows the seed of rancour that would translate itself into vengeance on the first opportunity, while humility in victory is a promise of reconciliation. After twenty-seven years of imprisonment, Mandela’s sacrifices were vindicated with the end of apartheid and his becoming the President of South Africa. He was gracious and generous in victory and, before the cheers of the world, remained humble. His wisdom led him to reject recrimination in favour of reconciliation and to extend a hand of friendship to those who had made him suffer, convinced that the future demanded moving beyond the past.

The second lesson is that peace is consolidated when nations can discuss matters on equal terms. There is a reason why the League of Nations was born after the Great War and the United Nations in the dying embers of the Second World War: Effective multilateralism is a concrete expression of the “family of nations.” As Pope John Paul II affirmed in his Address to the General Assembly on 5 October 1995, “The United Nations Organization needs to rise more and more above the cold status of an administrative institution and to become a moral centre where all the nations of the world feel at home and develop a shared awareness of being, as it were, a ‘family of nations.’ The idea of ‘family’ immediately evokes something more than simple functional relations or a mere convergence of interests. The family is by nature a community based on mutual trust, mutual support and sincere respect. In an authentic family the strong do not dominate; instead, the weaker members, because of their very weakness, are all the more welcomed and served.”

In Nelson Mandela’s legacy, we find this idea in the very rich concept of Ubuntu, according to which “people are made people through other people”, that we are one humanity so bound to one another that we flourish only if we help people around us flourish.

Madam President,

The Political Declaration, adopted at the beginning of this Peace Summit, acknowledges that we must “seek the conversion of heart and mind that can make a difference.” A conversion of hearts is indeed needed; we have to recognize in the other a brother or sister to care for and to work with in building a fulfilling life for all. This is the spirit that inspires many initiatives of civil society, including religious organizations, in promoting peace.

Each New Year’s Day, the Catholic Church celebrates the “World Day of Peace” in order to draw attention to the immense, universal good of peace. Today’s Summit is also a kind of “World Day of Peace,” in which we proclaim that peace is a gift from God entrusted to us all. It is our task to care for it. The Holy See joins Member States in every effort to work strenuously for true peace and expresses hope that “the daily commitment of all will continue to bear fruit and that there will be an effective application in international law of the right to peace, as a fundamental human right and a necessary prerequisite for every other right.”[2]

This would be the type of conversion of mind and heart, to flourish through helping others flourish in peace and freedom, that we celebrate in the magnanimous life of Nelson Mandela. As Mandela counsels in his autobiography *“Long Walk to Freedom”*: “If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner”. May Mandela’s inspiring perseverance in seeking justice, freedom and peace, be for this “family of nations” a motivation to redouble our efforts and dedication in the quest for a more just and thus peaceful world.

Thank you, Madam President.

[1] Pope Francis, Message to the President of the Republic of South Africa, 6 December 2013.

[2] Pope Francis, Message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace, 1 January 2014.
