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Intervention by the Secretary for Relations with States at the 73 rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly on the death penalty

The following is the intervention pronounced by H.E. Msgr. Paul Richard Gallagher, secretary for Relations with States, head of the Holy See Delegation, yesterday in New York, at the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly on the theme *Death Penalty: Poverty and the Right to Legal Representation*:

Intervention by H.E. Paul Richard Gallagher

Madam President,

I am pleased to take part in this high-level side event on the “Death Penalty: Poverty and the Right to Legal Representation” and add the voice of the Holy See to that of an increasing number of States supporting the UN’s long-standing sponsorship for the abolition of the death penalty. I would like also to commend the organizers of this meeting - OHCHR, Italy, Brazil, Burkina Faso, France and Timor Leste - for the selected topic: “ensure equal access to justice for all” (SDG 16), especially for those affected by poverty, social and economic inequalities, as well as those who are facing possible execution.

As is well known, in the last century the Holy See has consistently sought the abolition of the death penalty and in the last decades this position has become more clearly articulated. In fact, twenty years ago, the issue was framed within the proper ethical context of defending the inviolable dignity of the human person and the role of the legitimate authority to defend in a just manner the common good of society.[1] Considering the practical circumstances found in most States, as a result of steady improvements in the organization of the penal system, it appears evident nowadays that means other than the death penalty “... are sufficient to defend human lives against an aggressor and to protect public order and the safety of persons.”[2] For that reason, “public authority must limit itself to such means, because they better correspond to the concrete conditions of the common good and are more in conformity to the dignity of the human person.”[3]

Pope Francis has further emphasized that the legislative and judicial practice of the State authority must always be guided by the “primacy of human life and the dignity of the human person.” He has cautioned that there is “the possibility of judicial error and the use made by totalitarian and dictatorial regimes... as a means of

suppressing political dissidence or of persecuting religious and cultural minorities.”[4]

Thus, respect for the dignity of every human person and the common good are the two pillars on which the Holy See has developed its position. This is exactly what the new version of the Catechism of the Catholic Church on the death penalty highlights when it states that “the Catholic Church teaches, in the light of the Gospel, that ‘the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person’, and she works with determination for its abolition worldwide”. [5]

Madam President,

The universal abolition of the death penalty would be a courageous reaffirmation of the belief that humankind can be successful in dealing with crime and of our refusal to succumb to despair before evil acts, offering the criminal a chance to reform.

Thank you, Madam President.

[1] Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 25 March 1995, n. 56.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Pope Francis, Address to the Delegates of the International Association of Penal Law, 23 October 2015, nos. I and IIb.

[5] New revision of number 2267 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church on the death penalty – Rescriptum “ex Audentia SS.mi, 02.08.2018.
