



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER  
POPE JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE WORLD CONGRESS  
ON THE PASTORAL PROMOTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS**

*Saturday, 4 July 1998*

*Your Eminences,*

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,*

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

1. With great joy I welcome here this morning those taking part in the *World Congress on the Pastoral Promotion of Human Rights* which the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace has organized, within the framework of the Holy See's initiatives, to mark the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I warmly thank the new President of the Pontifical Council, Archbishop François Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuận, for his presentation of your work. I am also pleased with the opportunity I have been given to express to our dear and tireless Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, the outgoing President, my deep gratitude for the devotion and competence with which he has directed this dicastery for 14 years.

I greet all the participants and with them, the Pontifical Council's members, consultants and staff. The presence among you of representatives of the other Christian Churches and of various international bodies is a sign of our common concern and the commitment of us all to the promotion of the human person's dignity in today's world.

2. *God's plan for the human person*, through the "*human dimension of the mystery of the Redemption*", was one of the principal themes of my first Encyclical *Redemptor hominis* (cf. n. 10). In considering man as "the primary and fundamental way for the Church" (*ibid.*, n. 14), I showed the significance of the "objective and inviolable rights of man" (*ibid.*, n. 17) which in the midst of the trials and tribulations of our century have gradually been formulated at the international level, especially in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Subsequently, throughout my ministry as Pastor of the universal Church, I have paid special attention to in all the phases of his life and in every political, social, economic or cultural circumstance.

In the Encyclical *Redemptor hominis*, in analysing the tension between the signs of hope concerning the protection of human rights and the most painful signs of a *state of menace* for man, I questioned the relationship between the “letter” and the “spirit” of these rights (cf. n. 17). Still today one can note the gap that exists between the “letter”, as acknowledged in many international documents, and the “spirit”, currently very far from being respected. For our century is still marked by *serious violations of fundamental rights*. There are still countless people in the world, women, men and children, whose rights are cruelly denied. How many persons are unjustly deprived of their freedom, of the possibility of expressing themselves freely or of freely professing their faith in God? How many are victims of torture, violence and exploitation? How many persons, because of war, unjust discrimination, unemployment or other disastrous economic situations cannot attain *full enjoyment of the dignity God has given them and of the gifts they have received from him*?

3. The first objective of the pastoral promotion of human rights is therefore to see that the *acceptance of the “letter” of universal rights also entails their practical application in “spirit”, everywhere* and in the most effective way, starting with the *truth about man and the equal dignity of every person*, man or woman, created in God’s image and who has become a child of God in Christ.

On this earth, every person has the right to know the “truth about man” and to be able to live by it, each according to his personal and irreplaceable identity with his spiritual gifts, his intellectual creativity and his work, in his family — also a specific subject of rights — and in society. Each human being has the right to make the gifts he has received from God fruitful. As a result, every act which belittles man’s dignity and frustrates his potential for fulfilling himself is *an act contrary to God’s plan* for man and for all creation.

The pastoral promotion of human rights is therefore closely connected to *the mission of the Church herself in the modern world*. The Church, in fact, can never abandon man, whose destiny is closely and indissolubly linked to Christ.

4. The second objective of the pastoral promotion of human rights consists in asking “the essential questions concerning man’s situation today and in the future” (*Redemptor hominis*, n. 15), with objectivity, loyalty and a sense of responsibility.

In this regard, one can see that in our times the economic and social conditions in which people live assume particular importance. The persistence of *extreme poverty*, which contrasts with the opulence of a minority in a world marked by great humanistic and scientific breakthroughs, is a real scandal, one of those situations that seriously hinder the full exercise of human rights today. In your work you will certainly have noticed, almost every day, the effects of poverty, hunger or the lack of access to the most basic services, on people’s lives and on their struggle for their own survival and that of their loved ones.

Too often the poorest, because of their precarious situation, are the worst hit by the economic crises that affect developing countries. Economic prosperity, we must remember, is primarily the result of human work, of honest and often laborious toil. *The restructuring of the economy on a world scale* must be based on the dignity and rights of the person, especially on the right to work and the worker’s protection.

Today therefore this requires that fresh attention be paid, within the general framework of human rights, to *social and economic rights* which are *inseparable*. It is important to reject every attempt to deny these rights a true juridical status

and it should be repeated that to achieve their total and effective implementation, the common responsibility of all the parties — public authorities, businesses, civil society — must be involved.

5. Today the *educational dimension* is assuming particular importance in the pastoral promotion of human rights. Education in respect for human rights will naturally lead to the creation of a *true culture of human rights*, necessary if the *state of rights* is to function and if international society is truly to be based on respect for rights. The Diplomatic Conference of the United Nations is currently taking place in Rome to set up an international criminal court. I hope, as everyone hopes, that this conference will conclude with the creation of a new institution to protect the culture of human rights on a world scale.

It will in fact be possible for total respect for human rights to be integrated in every culture. Human rights are by nature *universal*, for their source is the equal dignity of every person. While recognizing the cultural diversity that exists in the world and the different levels of economic development, it is appropriate to reiterate forcefully that *human rights concern every person*. As I said in my [Message for World Day of Peace](#) this year (*L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 17 Dec. 1979, p. 3) the argument of cultural specificity must not be used to mask human rights violations. Rather it is far more necessary to promote an *integral concept of every person's rights to development*, in the sense of what my Predecessor Paul VI hoped for, an "integral" development, that is, the development of every person and of the whole person (cf. [Populorum progressio](#), n. 14). To focus on the promotion of a single right or category of rights, to the detriment of the integrity of human rights, would be to betray the very spirit of the Universal Declaration.

6. The pastoral promotion of human rights must, by its nature, be particularly concerned with the *person's spiritual and transcendent dimension*, especially in the current context where there is a tendency to reduce the person to a single, economic dimension and to consider development first and foremost in economic terms.

From the consideration of the person's transcendent dimension follows the obligation to protect and promote *the right to religious freedom*. This pastoral congress gives me the opportunity to express my solidarity and support in prayer for all those in today's world who are still unable to exercise this right fully and freely, personally and as a community. I address to national leaders my pressing and renewed appeal to guarantee the concrete realization of this right for all their citizens. Indeed, public authorities will find among the faithful men and women of peace who are keen to collaborate with everyone, with a view to building a more just and peaceful society.

7. I thank you all, not only for taking part in this congress, but also for your daily witness and educational action in the Christian community. With you, I pay homage to the witness of those who in our time have lived their fidelity to Christ's message about the dignity of man by renouncing their own rights through love of their brothers and sisters. I entrust your various missions to Mary, Mother of the Church, who will help you penetrate, as she did, the deepest meaning of the great mystery of the Redemption of man.

I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you all, to your loved ones and to everyone who shares in your work.

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