



# The Holy See

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**MESSAGE OF POPE JOHN PAUL II  
TO H.E. Mr. DIDIER OPERTTI BADÁN  
PRESIDENT OF THE 53rd SESSION OF  
THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY,  
TO MARK THE 50th ANNIVERSARY  
OF THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS\***

*To His Excellency Mr Didier Opertti Badán  
President of the 53rd Session of the UN General Assembly*

With this Message I am particularly pleased to join in the celebrations for the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights being held by the United Nations Organization, the guardian of one of the most precious and important documents in the history of law.

I do so all the more willingly since, in a solemn Constitution of the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church did not hesitate to affirm that she herself, “sharing the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time” (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 1), also asks that “forms of social or cultural discrimination in basic personal rights ... be eradicated as incompatible with God’s design” (*ibid.*, n. 29).

In proclaiming a certain number of fundamental rights which are common to all the members of the human family, the Declaration has made a decisive contribution to the development of international law, it has challenged national legislation and has allowed millions of men and women to live with greater dignity.

However, anyone who looks at today’s world cannot note: these fundamental rights, proclaimed, codified and celebrated are still the object of serious and constant violations. This anniversary is thus an appeal for an examination of conscience on the part of every State that willingly subscribes to the text of 1948.

In fact, the tendency of some to choose one or another right at their convenience, while ignoring those which are contrary

to their current interests occurs too frequently. Others do not hesitate to isolate particular rights from their context in order to act as they please, often confusing freedom with licence, or to provide themselves with advantages which take little account of human solidarity. Without doubt, such attitudes threaten the organic structure of the Declaration, which associates every right with other rights, duties and limits required by an equitable social order. In addition, they sometimes lead to an exacerbated individualism which can lead the stronger to dominate the weak and thus attenuate the relationship between freedom and social justice which is firmly established by the text. As the years pass, let us make sure that this foundational text is not just a monument to be admired or a document to be archived!

This is why I wish to repeat what I said at my first visit to your organization's headquarters on 2 October 1979: "If the truths and principles contained in this document were to be forgotten or ignored and were thus to lose the genuine self-evidence that distinguished them at the time they were brought painfully to birth, then the noble purpose of the United Nations Organization, for the good of your countries and of all humanity, could be faced with the threat of a new destruction" (n. 9; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 15 October 1979, p. 8). Thus you will not be surprised if the Holy See gladly supports the statement of the Secretary-General who recently said that this anniversary provides the opportunity to "ask not only how the Universal Declaration of Human Rights can protect our rights, but how we can suitably protect the Declaration" (*Kofi Annan to the Human Rights Commission*, Geneva, 23 March 1998).

The struggle for human rights is still a challenge we must face and calls for the perseverance and creativity of all. If, for example, the 1948 text succeeded in relativizing a rigid conception of the State's sovereignty which would dispense it from accountability for its actions to its citizenry, we cannot deny at the moment that other forms of sovereignty have appeared. Today there are many individuals and organizations involved at an international level who actually enjoy a sovereignty comparable to that of a State and decisively influence the destiny of millions of men and women. It would thus be advisable to find the appropriate means to ensure that they also apply the Declaration's principles.

Moreover, 50 years ago the political context in the post-war period did not permit the authors of the Declaration to provide it with an anthropological basis or explicit moral references, but they knew well that the principles proclaimed would be rapidly devalued if the international community did not eventually seek to root them in the various national, cultural and religious traditions. Perhaps this is the task incumbent on us now, if we are faithfully to serve the unity of their vision and promote a legitimate plurality in the exercise of the freedoms proclaimed by this text, while at the same time assuring the universality and indivisibility of the rights with which it associates them.

To promote this "common understanding" to which the Declaration's Preamble refers and to enable it to become more and more the ultimate reference-point where human freedom and solidarity between individuals and cultures meet and are mutually enriching: this is the challenge to be met. That is why casting doubt on the universality, or even existence, of certain basic principles would be equivalent to undermining the whole edifice of human rights.

At the end of 1998, we see around us too many of our human brothers and sisters overwhelmed by natural disasters, decimated by illness, prostrate with ignorance and poverty, or victims of cruel and interminable wars. Next to them are others, more affluent, who seem protected from precariousness and sometimes ostentatiously enjoy the essentials and the superfluous. What has happened to everyone's right "to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized" (Art. 28)? Dignity, freedom and happiness will never be

complete without solidarity. This is certainly what we are taught by the turbulent history of the past 50 years.

Let us therefore reap this precious legacy and above all make it bear fruit for the happiness of all and the honour of each of us!

As I pray fervently that brotherhood and peace will grow among the people you represent, upon everyone I invoke an abundance of God's blessings.

From the Vatican, 30 November 1998.

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