



The Universal Declaration of Human Rights at 70: Its Foundations, Achievements, and Violations

December 4, 2018 • 1500-1700
UN Headquarters Conference Room 4

Concept Note

Summary

The Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See, together with ADF International, are sponsoring an Event entitled “*The Universal Declaration of Human Rights at 70: Its Foundations, Achievements and Violations.*” The event will take place on Tuesday, December 4, 2018, from 3:00 to 5:00 pm, in Conference Room 4 at the United Nations Headquarters. It is being held in anticipation of the Seventieth Anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which took place December 10, 1948. The aim of this event is to bring experts on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and on human rights in general to mark the seventieth anniversary by focusing on the UDHR’s foundations and achievements and the challenges still being faced in implementation of full respect and enjoyment of those rights.

Rationale

The occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is an opportunity to reaffirm the understanding that fundamental human rights are based on the “the inherent dignity and ... inalienable rights of all members of the human family” (Preamble). It’s a time to celebrate the enormous contributions of the Declaration, which ushered in an unprecedented approach to human rights as belonging to ‘all members of the human family’—a timeless, and yet groundbreaking, understanding of the universality of human rights. The anniversary is a time for the international community to recommit to the urgent work of ensuring human rights for all. This necessitates a renewed attention to the fundamental rights enumerated in the Declaration, many of which are disregarded in various parts of the world.

It is also an occasion to ensure that UDHR must not be used to advance newly claimed rights that do not enjoy international agreement. Pope Francis said earlier this year to Ambassadors accredited to the Holy See, “Over the years, particularly in the wake of the social upheaval of the 1960s, the interpretation of some rights has progressively changed, with the inclusion of a number of ‘new rights’ that not infrequently conflict with one another. This has not always helped the promotion of friendly relations between nations. ... Somewhat paradoxically, there is a risk that, in the very name of human rights, we will see the rise of modern forms of *ideological colonization* by the stronger and the wealthier, to the detriment of the poorer and the most

vulnerable. At the same time, it should be recalled that the traditions of individual peoples cannot be invoked as a pretext for disregarding the due respect for the fundamental rights proclaimed by the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.” The Declaration was drafted to be relevant to all peoples and cultures—a tremendous feat that must be protected for the longevity of the human rights project.

The drafters of the UDHR struck a delicate balance, successfully identifying what is universal in a pluralistic world. The enduring value of the UDHR rests in its ability to transcend divisions and appeal to our shared humanity, resulting in a practical agreement that delineates the basic rights to which everyone is entitled. While not without the inevitable imperfections of any international project, it is this practical function that has solidified the Declaration’s status as the most important reference point on human rights today.

The universal applicability of the rights enumerated in the UDHR is made possible by its grounding in the dignity of the human person based on our common human experience. Human dignity refers to the intrinsic worth of the person, no matter one’s circumstances, no matter how young or old, rich or poor, strong or vulnerable, healthy or sick, wanted or undesired, economically productive or incapacitated, politically influential or insignificant. Because dignity is innate, all human beings are equal in value, and human rights cannot be given or taken away by the State or any other actor.

As we mark the seventieth anniversary of the UDHR’s adoption and celebrate its achievements, it is important to note that many of the provisions so clearly articulated in the UDHR go unrecognized. The 2018 *Report of the Secretary-General on the Work of the Organization* highlights that, although there has been much “progress made in the advancement of human rights at a global level... challenges to the protection of human rights are a global phenomenon.” One in ten children is still subjected to child labour, one in three people currently in detention is held without trial, 29 percent of children under five do not have birth registration, and there are 250 million women married under the age of 15. The *Declaration* affirms that “everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person,” and yet in many places those rights are not only not respected but their violations are even celebrated. Article 4 states that “no one shall be held in slavery or servitude,” and yet tens of millions are ensnared by various forms of so-called modern slavery. Article 18 upholds the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, to change one’s religion or belief, and the freedom alone or in community with others, in public or private, to manifest that religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance; yet these rights are infringed upon, restricted or denied and in so many places changing one’s religion or even practising one’s faith is still a death sentence or a reason to be discriminated against.

These realities make it urgent for the UN and its Member States to reaffirm the core human rights that currently are threatened internationally, beginning with the right to life. Respect for human life, from conception to a natural death, is the indisputable corollary of respect for human dignity. There is also a need for renewed respect for the family as ‘the natural and fundamental group unit of society,’ which the UDHR insists ‘is entitled to protection by society and the State.’ Respect for the dignity of every child requires a commitment to ensuring, whenever possible, that children are raised by both mother and father in a loving, safe, and stable home. Protection of the family should be centered on this ideal, including through the safeguarding of

parental rights, in particular the right to choose the education of their children, and the provision of support to equip healthy families who will in turn contribute to the flourishing of society. Respect for freedom of religion and belief, opinion, expression, assembly and association must be reaffirmed as millions are enduring severe limitations on freedom, violence, and death in the name of religion or conscience, and others are unable freely to exercise their religious beliefs or rights of conscience, thus seriously jeopardizing the human rights project.

The seventieth anniversary of the UDHR is an occasion to foster renewed appreciation for the crucial role of the UDHR at a time when fundamental human rights consistently are being ignored and abused and countless individuals are suffering from that privation all over the world. As noted in the UDHR, the UN by its Charter is bound to reaffirm ‘fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person.’ Now is the time for the international community to recommit itself to the vision of the UDHR and work to revitalize the integrity of the human rights project.

Objective

To create the space for government representatives, experts on human rights and the UDHR, NGOs, faith-based organizations and leads, and other stakeholders to engage in an interactive dialogue on the significance of the UDHR for the past, present and future and to discuss ways to strengthen the human rights project.

Invited Speakers

- **H.E. Archbishop Bernardito Auza**, Apostolic Nuncio and Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations.
- **H.E. Prof. Mary Ann Glendon**, Learned Hand Professor at Harvard Law School; former Ambassador of the USA to the Holy See; past member, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom; author of *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.
- **Prof. Robert P. George**, McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence and Director of the James Madison Program at Princeton University; past chairman, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.
- **Prof. Paolo Carozza**, Professor of Law, Concurrent Professor Political Science and Director, Kellogg Institute for International Studies at Notre Dame University; former president, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights; member, Director, Notre Dame Center for Civil and Human Rights; author of *Regional Protection of Human Rights*.
- **Mr. Michael P. Farris**, President, CEO and General Counsel of Alliance Defending International, Attorney before the US Supreme Court, Author of 15 books.

RSVP

If you would like to reserve a spot (both UN Delegates as well as those outside the UN) please RSVP at holyseemission.org/rsvp4December2018 by **November 30**. Inscription may be closed before November 30 if the event reaches its capacity so interested parties are encouraged to register early.