The Pope's Address to the United Nations

Human Rights Theme of United Nations Speech

UNITED NATIONS (NC) — Here is the prepared text of the address by Pope John Paul II to the 34th General Assembly of the United Nations on Oct. 2. At the United Nations, the pope delivered a shorter version of the prepared text.

Mr. President,

1. I desire to express my gratitude to the General Assembly of the United Nations for the privilege of participating in and to address. My thanks go in the first place to the Secretary General of the United Nations Organization, Dr. Kurt Waldheim. Last autumn, soon after my election to the chair of St. Peter, he invited me to make this visit, and he reviewed my invitation in the course of our meeting in Rome last May. From the first moment I felt greatly honored and deeply obliged. And today, before this distinguished assembly, I also thank you, Mr. President, who have so kindly welcomed me and invited me to speak.

2. The formal reason for my intervention today is, without any question, the special bond of cooperation that links the Apostolic See with the United Nations Organization, as is shown by the presence of the Holy See's permanent observer to this organization. The existence of this bond, which is held in high esteem by the Holy See, rests on the sovereignty with which the Apostolic See has been endowed for many centuries. The territorial extent of that sovereignty is limited to the small State of Vatican City. To every sovereignty itself is warranted by the need of the papacy to exercise its mission in full freedom, and to be able to deal with any interlocutor, whether a government or an international organization, without dependence on any other sovereignties. Of course the nature and aims of the spiritual mission of the Apostolic See and the tasks it makes participation in the tasks and activities of the United Nations organization very different from those of States, which are communities in the political and temporal sense.

3. Besides attaching great importance to its collaboration with the United Nations organization, the Apostolic See has always, since the foundation of your organization, expressed its esteem and its agreement with the historic significance of this supreme forum for the international life of humanity today. It also never ceases to support your organization's functions and initiatives, which are aimed at a fruitful co-existence and collaboration between nations. There are many proofs of this. In the more than 20 years of the existence of the United Nations organization, it has received much attention from the Pope. John XXIII and encyclicals, in documents of the Catholic episcopate, and likewise in the Second Vatican Council, John Paul VI looked with confidence on your important institution as an eloquent and promising sign of the times. As I am addressing you, since the first months of his pontificate, several times expressed the same confidence and conviction as his predecessors.

4. This confidence and conviction on the part of the Apostolic See is the result, as I have said, not of merely political reasons but of the religious and moral character of the mission of the Roman Catholic Church. As a universal community embracing faithful belonging to almost all countries and continents, nations, peoples, races, languages and cultures, the Church is deeply interested in the existence and activity of the organization whose very name tells us that it unites and associates nations and states. It unites and associates; it does not divide and oppose. It seeks out the ways for understanding and peaceful collaboration, and endeavors with the means at its disposal and the methods in its power to exclude war, division and mutual destruction within the great family of humanity today.

5. This is the real reason, the essential reason, for my presence among you, and I wish to thank this distinguished assembly for giving consideration to this reason, which can make my presence among you in some way useful. It is certainly a highly significant fact among you in the representatives of the states, whose raison d'etre is the sovereignty of powers linked with territory and people, there is also today the representative of the Apostolic See and the Catholic Church. This church is the church of Jesus Christ, who declared before the tribunal of the Roman judge, Pilate, that he was a King, but with a kingdom not of this world (cf. John 18: 36-37). When he was then asked about the reason for the existence of his kingdom among men, he explained: "For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth" (John 18: 37). Here, before the representatives of the states, I wish not only to thank you but also to offer my special congratulations, since the invitation extended to the pope to speak in your assembly shows that the United Nations organization accepts and respects the religious and moral dimension of those human problems that it is her duty to bring to the world. The questions that concern your functions and receive your attention as is indicated by the vast organic complex of institutions and activities that are part of or collaborate with the United Nations, especially in the fields of culture, health, food, labor, and the peaceful uses of nuclear energy — certainly make it essential for us to meet in the name of man in his wholeness, in all the fullness and manifold riches of his spiritual and material existence, as we have stated in my encyclical "Redemptor Hominum," the first of my pontificate.

6. Now, availing myself of the solemn occasion of my meeting with the representatives of the nations of the earth, I wish above all to send my greetings to all the men and women living on this planet. To every man and woman, without any exception whatever. Every human being living on earth is a member of a civil society, of a nation, many of them represented here. Each one of you, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, represents a particular state, system, and political structure, but what you represent above all are individual human beings; you are all representatives of men and women, of practically all the people of the world. Individual men and women, communities and peoples who are living the present phase of their own history and who are also part of the history of humanity as a whole, each of them a subject endowed with dignity as a human person, with his or her own culture, experiences and aspirations, tensions and sufferings, and legitimate expectations. This relationship is what provides the reason for all political activity, whether national or international, for in the final analysis this activity comes from man, is exercised by man and is for man. And if political activity is cut off from this fundamental relationship and finally, if it becomes in a way its own end, it loses much of its reason to exist. Even more, it can also give rise to a specific alienation; it can become extraordinaire to man; it can come to contradict humanity itself. In reality, what justifies the existence of any political activity is service to man, concerned and responsible attention to the essential problems and duties of his early existence in its social dimension and significance, on which also the good of each person depends.

7. I ask you ladies and gentlemen, to excuse me for speaking of questions that are certainly self-evident for you. But it does not seem pointless to speak of them, since the most frequent pitfall for human activities is the possibility of losing sight, while performing them, of the clearest truths, the most elementary principle.

I would like to express the wish that, in view of its universal character, the United Nations organization will never cease to be the forum, the high tribune from which all man's problems are appraised in truth and justice. It was the name of this inspiration, it was through this historic stimulus, that on June 26, 1945, towards the end of the terrible Second

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World War, the Charter of the United Nations was signed and on the follow-
ing Oct. 24 your organization began its life. Soon after, on Dec. 10, 1948, came its fundamental document, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The rights of the human being as a concrete individual and of the human being in his universal value. This doc-
ument is a milestone on the long and difficult path of the human race. The
progress of humanity must be mea-
sured not only by the progress of scien-
tific and technology, which shows
man's uniqueness with regard to na-
ture, but also and chiefly by the pri-
mary given to spiritual values and by the
progress of moral life. In this field
is manifested the full dominion of rea-
son, through truth, in the behavior of
the individual and of society, and also
the control of reason over nature; and
thus human conscience quietly tri-
umphs, as was expressed in the an-
cient saying, "Genus humanum atre
etatione vivit."

It was when technology was being
directed. In its one-sided progress to-
towards goals of war, hegemony and
conquest, so that man might kill man
and nature destroy nature, without depriv-
ing it of its liberty and the right to exis-
t — and I still have before my mind the
image of the Second World War in Europe, which began 40 years ago on
Sept. 1, 1939 with the invasion of Pol-
and and ended on May 8, 1945 — it
was precisely then that the United Na-
tions organization arose. And three
years later the document appeared
which, as I have said, left a new birth-
ner milestone on the path of the
moral progress of humanity — the
Universal Declaration of Human
Rights. The governments and states of
the world have understood that, if
they are not to attack and destroy each
other, they must unite. The real
way, the fundamental way to this is
through each human being, through
the definition and recognition of and
respect for the individuality of human in-
dividuals and of the communities of
peoples.

8. Today, 40 years after the out-
break of the Second World War, I wish
to recall the whole of the experience
by individuals and nations that were
sustained by a generation that is
largely still alive. I had occasion not
long ago to reflect again on some of
those experiences, in one of the places
that are most distressing and over-
flowing with contempt for man and
his fundamental rights — the exter-
nation camp of Oswiecim (Ausch-
switz), which I visited during my
pilgrimage to Poland last June. This
infamous place is unfortunately only
one of the many scattered over the
continent of Europe. But the memory
of even one should be a warning sign
on the path of humanity today, in or-
der that every kind of concentration
camp anywhere on earth may once
and for all be done away with. And
everything that recalls those horrible
experiences should also disappear
forever from the heart of states, every-
ingthing that is a continua-
tion of those experiences under differ-
ent forms, namely the various kinds
suffering and oppression, either phys-
ical or moral, carried out under any
system, in any land; this phenomenon
is all the more disturbing under the
pretext of internal security or the need
in order to preserve an apparent
peace.

9. You will forgive me, ladies and
gentlemen, for evoking this memory.
But I would be untrue to the history
of this century if I would be dishonest
with regard to the great cause of
man, which we all wish to serve. If I
should keep silent, I, who come from
the country on whose living body Os-
owiecim was at one time constructed. But
my purpose in invoking this memory is
above all to show what painful experi-
ences and sufferings by millions of
people gave rise to the Universal Dec-
laration of Human Rights, which has
been placed as the basic inspiration
and cornerstone of the United Nations
Organization. This declaration was
paid for by millions of our brothers
and sisters at the cost of their suffer-
ing and sacrifice, brought about by
the brutalization that darkened and
made insensitive the human con-
esciences of their oppressors and of
those who carried out a real genocide.
This price cannot have been paid in
vain! The Universal Declaration of
Human Rights — with its train of
many declarations and conventions of
highly important aspects of human
rights, in favor of children, of women,
of equality between races, and espe-
cially the two international covenants
on economic, social and cultural
rights and on civil and political rights
— must remain the basic value in the
United Nations organization with
which the consciences of its members
must be confronted by a constant and
deliberate and the continual inspira-
tion. If the truth and principles contained
in this document were to be forgotten
or disregarded, the whole system of
guarantees on which the United Na-
tions organization could be faced with
the threat of a new destruction.
This would not happen if the simple yet
powerful eloquence of the Universal
Declaration of Human Rights were
decidedly subjugated to what is
called political interest, but
often means no more than one-
side gain and advantage to the detri-
tment of others, or a thirst for power
regardless of the needs of others — ev-
erything which by its nature is op-
posed to the spirit of the declaration.
Political leaders should understand in
this sense, if you will pardon me, ladies
and gentlemen, disabiors the noble
and laudable work of peace for the
good of your countries and of
all humanity.

10. Fourteen years ago my great predecessor, Pope Paul VI, spoke from
this podium. He spoke memorable
words, which I desire to repeat today:
"Never one against the other; never
one above the other," or even
"one above the other," but always,
on every occasion, "with each other."
Paul VI was a tireless servant of
the cause of peace. I wish to follow
him with all my strength and continue his
work. I know that the Holy See Church in
every place on earth proclaims a message
of peace, prays for peace, educates
and forms consciences, communicates
by the representatives and followers
of other churches and communities
and of other religions of the world,
and they have pledged themselves to
it. In union with efforts by all people
of good will, this work is doable. No
difficulties we are currently troubled by
the armed conflicts that break out from time
to time. However, I am also aware
when a direct intervention succeeds in
avoiding such a conflict, as in the
case of the tension that has year
threatened Argentina and Chile.

It is my fervent hope that a solution
also to the Middle East crises may be
reached. We must learn to recognize
the value of any concrete step or attempt made to settle the conf-
lict, I want to recall. It should be
noted however that if it did not truly rep-
resent the first stone of a general
overall peace in the area, a peace
towards which the international
community is acting is meaningful,
ought to be recognized as a first step
toward the achievement of the Palestin-
ian question. Connected with this
question is that of the tranquillity, in-
dependence and territorial integrity
of Lebanon within its frontiers that has
made it an example of peaceful
and mutually fruitful coexistence
between distinct communities, a formu-
la that I hope will, in the common
interest, be maintained, with the
ad-
justments required by the develop-
ment of the situation. I also hope
for a special statute that, under inter-
national guarantee, as my prede-
cessor Paul VI indicated would
respect the particular nature of Jeru-
usalem, a heritage sacred to the
veneration of millions of believers of the
three great monotheistic religions,
Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

We are troubled also by reports
of the development of weapons exceed-
ing in quality and size the means
of war and destruction ever known be-
fore. In this field also we have to
challenge the decisions and agreements aimed at
reducing the arms race. Neverthe-
less, the life of human beings is seri-
ously endangered by the threat of
destruction and by the risk arising
even from accepting certain tranquil-
izing reports. And the resistance to
actual concrete proposals of real disarm-
ament, such as those called for by
this assembly in a special session last
year, shows that together with the will
for peace that all profess and that
most desire there is also in existence
perhaps in latent or conditional form
but nonetheless real — the con-
trary and the negation of this will. The

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continual preparations for war demonstrated by the production of ever more numerous, powerful, and sophisticated weapons in various countries show that there is a desire to be ready for war, and that being ready means being able to start it; hence, the risk that sometime, somewhere, somehow, someone can set in motion the terrible mechanism of general destruction.

11. It is therefore necessary to make a continuing and even more energetic effort to live in peace with the very rights of all his powers? However, this task must also be served by constant reflection and activity aimed at discovering the very roots of hatred, destructive contempt — the roots of everything that produces the temptation to war, not only in the hearts of the nations as in the inner determination of the systems that dictate the history of whole societies. In this titanic labor of building of the peaceful future of our planet the United Nations organization has undoubtedly a prominent role, for which it must refer to the just ideals contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This declaration has struck a real blow against the many deep roots of war, since the spirit of war, in its basic creativity, springs up and grows to maturity where the inalienable rights of man are violated.

This declaration is a relevant vision of the cause of peace, one that goes deeper and is more radical. It is a vision that sees the genesis, and in a sense the substance, of war in the more complex forms emanating from injustice viewed in all its various aspects, this injustice first attacks human rights and thereby destroys the organic unity of the social order and it then affects the whole system of international relations. Within the church’s doctrine, the encyclical “Pacem in Terris” by John XXIII provides a symbolic vision of this matter that is very close to the ideological foundation of the United Nations Organization. This must therefore form the basis to which one must loyally and perseveringly adhere in order to establish true peace on earth.

12. By applying this criterion we must diligently examine which principal tensions in connection with the inalienable rights of man can be identified with the construction of this peace which we all desire so ardently and which is the essential goal of the work of the United Nations organization. It is not easy, but it must be done. Anyone who undertakes it must take a total objective position and be guided by sincerity, readiness to acknowledge one’s prejudices and mistakes and readiness even to recognize one’s own particular interests, including any of these values and also for reasons concerning the good of man. The pre-eminence of the values of the spirit defines the proper sense of earthly material goods and sensuous pleasure. The pre-eminence is therefore at the basis of a just peace. It is also a contributing factor to ensuring that development, both economic and cultural, and the development of civilization are at the service of what constitutes man. This means enabling man to be full access to truth, to moral development, and to the complete possibility of enjoying the goods of spirit that he has inherited, and of increasing them by his own creativity. It is easy to see that material goods do not have an unlimited capacity for satisfying the needs of man: they are not in themselves easily distributed and, in the relationship between those who possess them and those who are without them, they give rise to tension, dissension and division that will often even turn into open conflict.

Spiritual goods, on the other hand, are open to unlimited enjoyment by many at the same time, without diminution of the goods themselves. Indeed, the more people share in such goods, the less both the goods and the efforts to produce and draw upon, the more then do those goods show their indestructible and imortal worth. This truth is confirmed, for example, by the works of creativity — I mean by the works of thought, poetry, music, and the figurative expression in all its variety.

15. A critical analysis of our modern civilization shows that in the last 100 years it has developed as never before to the development of material goods, but that it has also given rise, both in theory and still more in practice, to a sense of emptiness which sensitivity to the spiritual dimension of human existence is diminished to a great extent. In the processes which reduce the meaning of human life chiefly to the many different material and economic factors, from production, the market, consumption, the accumulation of riches or of the growing bureaucracy of public services which can attempt to regulate these very processes, is this not the result of having subordinated man to single conception and sense of values?

16. What is the link between these reflections and the cause of peace and war? Since, as I have already stated, material goods by their very nature provoke conditionings and divisions, the struggle to obtain these goods becomes inevitable in the history of humanity. If we cultivate this uncontrolled subordination of man to material goods alone, we shall be incapable of overcoming this state of need. We shall be able to attain it and avoid it in particular cases, but we shall not succeed in eliminating this state of need because we fail to approach the fundamental dimensions of life, the will of every society, to the second dimension of the goods of man: the dimension that does not divide people but unites them, each one and each other, associates them and unites them.

We consider that the famous opening words of the Charter of the United Nations, in which the peoples of the United Nations, determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war solemnly reaffirmed faith in fundamental human rights, in
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The dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women, regardless of race or color, small, are meant to stress this dimension.

Indeed, the fight against incipient war cannot be carried out on a mere-ly superficial level, by treating the symptoms. It must be done in a radical way, for the only reason I have called attention to the dimension constituted by spiritual realities is in order to underline that peace which is built up by men and women uniting around what is most fully and profoundly human, what raises them above the world about them and determines their indestructible grandeur is indestructible in spite of the death to which everyone on earth is subject. I would like to add that the Catholic Church and, I think I can say, the whole of Christianity sees in this very domain its own particular task. The Second Vatican Council helped to tabulate the Catholic Church’s path in common with the various non-Christian religions in this aspiration. The Church can and must give a witness of how respect and good will with regard to this mission of hers and not do impede it or make it difficult. In any case, in the analysis of the history of mankind, especially at its recent stage, shows how important is the duty of revealing more and more clearly the goods that are linked with the spiritual dimension of human existence. It shows how important is the duty of building peace and how serious is any threat to human rights. Any violation of them, even the smallest, is a form of war against humanity.

It seems that in the modern world there are two kinds of war: one against human rights, in the field of international relations and human rights within the individual states or societies.

17. The first of these systematic threats again human rights is linked in an essential way to the distribution of military goods. This distribution is frequently unjust within individuals, within societies, within nations, as a whole. Everyone knows that these goods are given to man not only as nature itself, but also as a form of enjoyment, by his chief as the fruit of his many activities, ranging from the simplest manual and physical labor to the most complicated and highly technical labor to the most complicated and highly technical production, and to the highly qualified and specialized research and study. Various forms of inequality in the possession of material goods, and in the enjoyment of them, can often be explained by different historical and cultural causes and circumstances. But, while these circumstances can diminish the moral responsibility of people in various ways, people on account of situations of inequality from being marked by injustice and social injury. People must always be concerned with economic relations within countries and in the relationship between states and even between entire continents. Conditions like that can be the determining elements that restrict or violate human rights. Such elements are the exploitation of others or the abuses that affect the dignity of the human person. It follows that the fundamental criterion for judging the economic and political systems is not, and cannot be, the criterion of hegemony and imperialism, it can be, and must be, the criterion of justice in which each system is really capable of reducing, restraining and eliminating the forms of exploitation of man and of ensuring for him through work, not only the economic but also the human and indispensable material goods, but also a participation, in keeping with his dignity, in the whole process of building the social life that grows up around that process. Let us not forget that, although man depends on the things of this world for the material that his life, he cannot be their slave, but he must be their master. The words of Jesus of Nazareth, “Give us bread today” and “Subduing” (Genesis 1:28), are in a sense a primary and essential directive in the field of economy and of labor policy.

18. Humanity as a whole, and the individual nations, have certainly made some remarkable progress in this field during the last 100 years. But it is a field in which there is never any lack of systematic threats and violations of human rights. Disturbing factors are frequently present in the form of the frightful disparities between rich and poor individuals and groups on the one hand, and on the other hand the majority made up of the poorest and most disadvantageous, who starve and suffer, have no food and opportunities for work and education and are in great numbers condemned to hunger. A genuine concern is also caused at times by the radical separation of work from property, by man’s indifference to the distribution of property to which he is linked only by a work obligation, without feeling that he is working for a good which is his own. It is also a question of that the society, of the society, which is a very serious symptom in the life of any society. This must also be said with every means of ensuring, with regard to the abyss separating countries and regions of the earth. Surely the only way to overcome this serious problem is to ensure that the means of subsistence and areas of hunger and deprivation is through coordinated cooperation by all countries, that the free and public unity inspired by an authentic perspective of peace. Everything will depend on the framework which provides the best and contrasts in the sphere of the possession of goods will be systematically reduced, and economic and political independence, which would only be a form of neo-colonialism.

19. I would now like to draw attention to a second systematic threat to man in his inalienable rights here in the United Nations, namely the religious institution which constitutes no less a danger than the first to the cause of peace. I refer to the various forms of injustice in the field of the spirit. Man can indeed be wounded in his inner conscience, in his most personal belief, in his view of the world, in his religious faith, and in the sphere of culture. The evil civil rights. Decisive for these last is equality of rights without discrimination on grounds of origin, race, nationality, religion, political convictions and the like. Equality of rights means the exclusion of the various forms of privilege for some and discrimination against others, whether they are born in the same country or people from different backgrounds of history, national, race, and religious. For centuries the battle was the problem of finding a way out of this, and in spite of this we still see in this field recurring threats and violations, often with no possibility of appeal to the courts, or of obtaining an effective remedy. Besides the acceptance of legal formulas safeguarding the principle of the freedom of the human spirit, such as freedom of thought and expression, human rights, respect for man’s spiritual conscience, structures of social life often exist in which the practical exercise of a human being directly sets him man. In fact if not formally, to become a second-class or third-class citizen, to see compromised his chances of recognizing his personality, his personal or his career or his access to certain positions of responsibility, and to lose even the possibility of taking part in social life freely. It is a question of the highest importance that in international life, as well as in international, that every nation and country should be able to enjoy effectively their full rights under any political regime. Only the safeguarding of this real completeness for every human being without discrimination can ensure the true rights of every human being.

20. With regard to religious freedom, which I, Pope, am bound to the divine, do not use the word of the God and with a view to safeguarding people, I would like to repeat here, as a contribution towards the achievement of peace, some principles contained in the Second Vatican Council’s declaration, “Dignitatis Humanae.” Namely, in common with their dignity, all human beings, because they are persons, that is, beings endowed with reason, freedom, must therefore bear personal responsibility, which are both in their nature and religiously obligatory. They are to live in truth, especially religious truth. They are also bound to adhere to the truth once they come to know it and to express it in their lives in accordance with its demands” (“Dignitatis Humanae,” 2).

21. The practice of religion of its very nature consists primarily of those voluntary and free internal acts by which men express their love for and devotion towards God. No merely human power can either command or prohibit acts of this kind. But man’s duty is also to give external expression to his internal acts of religion, that he communicate with God with the conscience and in the manner which best ‘profess his religion in community” (“Dignitatis Humanae,” 3).

22. These words touch the very substance of the problems. For example, the confrontation between the religious view of the world and the agnostic or even atheistic view, which are becoming more and more widespread in the present age, could preserve honest and respectful human dimensions and religious truths. They are the expressions of conscience of any man or woman living on earth.

23. Respect for the dignity of the human person would seem to demand that, when the exact tenor of the exer- cise of religious freedom is being discussed or determined with a view to national laws or international conventions, the purpose of the service of religion should also be brought in. If this participation is omitted, the danger is that a field of man’s life, rules or restrictions that are opposed to his true religious needs.

24. The United Nations organization has proclaimed 1979 the Year of the Child. In the presence of the representatives of so many nations, let us pray that our world will express the joy that we all find in children, the springtime of life, the anticipation of the future of our precious and earthly homes.

And so, what better wish can I express for every nation and the whole of mankind, and for all the children of the world than a better future in which respect for human rights will become a complete reality throughout the third millennium, which is drawing near.

25. But in a positive perspective we must ask ourselves whether there will continue to accumulate over the heads of this new generation of children the threat of common extermination for which the means are in the hands of the modern states, especially the major world powers. How are the children of the race to escape from us as a necessary inheritance? How are we to explain this unbridled race?

The ancients said: Si viscum pacem, per pacem venire velint. I really believe that the breathtaking spiral of armaments is at the service of world peace? In allegiance to a potential enemy, is it really not rather the intention to keep for oneself a means of threat, in order to get the upper hand with the aid of one’s own arsenal of destruction? Here too it is the human dimension of peace that tends to lose its true meaning in the new possible forms of imperialism.

It must be our solemn wish here for our children, for the children of all the continents and in all the nations of the earth, for all human communities. Each one has its own particular task in understanding and in understanding that they will live and grow in the freedom and truth of their own history. For that reason I do not cease to pray God each day for the peace that is in your heart. He may save us from so terrible a day.

26. At the close of this address, I wish to express once more before all the high representatives of the states who are present and of everyone else, the hope that all shall live in peace and love for all the peoples, all the nations of the earth, for all human communities. Each one has its own particular task in understanding and in understanding that they will live and grow in the freedom and truth of their own history. For that reason I do not cease to pray God each day for the peace that is in your heart. He may save us from so terrible a day.