

The commitment of the Institute for Human Rights

Dearest Sisters,

The recurrence of the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights urges me to speak with you on some aspects that challenge us as an Institute called to educate the young generations in the perspective of preventive education.

The celebration of this anniversary helps us to not only remember it, but to verify if human rights have been respected with concrete actions and not only with proclamations; if in the world there has been a significant change and to what extent our Institute today is committed to defending children, young people, women, often violated in their dignity with new forms of slavery. I think that there is little knowledge on the part of adults and, even more so, of the younger generations, even if an ever greater sensitivity has developed in this regard.

I therefore consider it important to re-propose, in an essential way, the historical path of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*; indicate what this important Document represents for the Church and what position it has taken in these 70 years. Lastly, to recall how our Institute has repeatedly called us to put the person at the center of educational action, urging us to promote and defend the rights of those who risk being marginalized, discarded from social life, as Pope Francis often emphasizes.

I invite you to feel involved as FMA, together with the whole educating community, in collaborating directly and according to your possibilities in the Church, as a Salesian Family, and with the various civil Institutions to form young people “to become aware of the important issues of our times, and to be able of contributing with competence and a Gospel spirit, to the building of a society more in keeping with the aspirations of the human person”(C 72).

The historical context of the Declaration

In 1948, after the tragedy of World War II, the nations that had given life to the United Nations in 1945, understood that “The recognition of the dignity of all the members of the human family and of their equal and inalienable rights constitutes the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world”. This is what we read in the *Preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

On December 10, 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in Paris, marking an important milestone in the history of humanity.

“All men and women are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and must act in a spirit of mutual fraternity” states article 1 of the Declaration. Everyone has freedom of thought and expression, everyone is equal before the law and can apply for asylum. Everyone has the right to life. Everyone has the right to education and to achieve a dignified life. All this: beyond religion, race, and sex and beyond the state in which they live. Never before have such clear words been written. Furthermore: *rights and responsibilities* are necessarily linked

The Declaration ends by recognizing that the individual does not live alone; they must know how to move and live together within society. This coexistence, therefore, also implies responsibilities towards others.

For the first time with an international Declaration, it was affirmed that universal rights exist inherent in the human being as such: rights valid in every historical epoch and in every part of the world, and that must be recognized, affirmed, promoted.

It is remarkable to note that although the Member Nations, which at the time formed the United Nations, had different ideologies, different political systems, different religious and cultural beliefs, as well as different models of socio-economic development, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* represented a common text of goals and aspirations. There is a shared vision of how the world should have become according to the international community of the time: a world where human coexistence is possible in the desire for peace, development, and mutual respect.

A Declaration based on the dignity of the human person

The Declaration includes a vast and detailed order of rights, sub-divided into 30 articles. The document declares these rights to be *interdependent and indivisible*, recognizing the dignity of every human being. The reference to human dignity is not accompanied by an explanation of its origin, but human rights documents offer important indications to grasp its content. Dignity is ‘recognized’, it is not granted. It does not depend on a decision, but on an observation. In fact, it expresses the value of the human person as a subject and as an end, never as a means; it is ‘inherent’ to the human being and is therefore the reason for the equality of all men and women. Although the difference that characterizes us are apparent - each one is ‘unique and unrepeatable’ - there is a common denominator that every person has for the sole fact of existing as a person.

Without wishing to analyze the content of the Declaration and not even the subsequent evolution of successive Pacts and Conventions, it seems to me interesting to recall what the High Commissioner of Human Rights - Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein - stressed on 18 June 2018 in the opening speech of the 38th session of the Human Rights Council. He stated that the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* proposed “the advent of a world where all human beings will enjoy freedom of speech and of belief and freedom from fear and need ... proclaimed as the highest aspiration of ordinary people”.

Worrisome is the increase in violence and conflict in various Countries, made even more serious because it is accompanied by impunity. The violation of human rights today will lead to the conflicts of tomorrow. Anniversaries, as in this case the Declaration, have therefore also the task of reminding us of the disasters, the catastrophes that can occur when these rights are violated.

The text of the Declaration is the basis of civil life and significant are its analogies with the teaching of Jesus, who in His becoming man made known the authentic face of God who participates in the dramas of humanity, is close to everyone, and wants everyone to be recognized in their dignity. In this text we do not speak of God, of Jesus, of the Church, but behind the proposal of the rights of the human person we perceive God's plan for humanity.

As already mentioned, their universality is founded on the principle of the dignity of every human being, with the inalienable rights that ensue as they are a clear expression of the nature that unites the human race. On this basis, the *Preamble* of the Universal Declaration is in harmony with the biblical understanding of the human being created in the image and likeness of God, called to fraternal love.

Pope Francis in his speech at the beginning of the year to the Diplomatic Corps, had the opportunity to reiterate this convergence, recalling the 70th anniversary of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (January 8, 2018).

The current cultural context and the commitment of the Church

If in 1948, the international community had solemnly proclaimed universal rights as the foundation of a new order after the horrors of war, today this precious patrimony is seriously questioned, both in theory and in practice.

There are many violations, even in Countries that had signed it with conviction.

The multicultural context in which we live challenges the universality of these rights and undermines the possibility that they will continue to mark the common horizon for the construction of our societies, to be the obligatory reference point for the exercise of political power, the indicator of an indispensable way for the international community to promote the totality of the human being and of human beings in the world.

Despite the overall growth of the world economy, entire populations remain in misery. The model of development we are pursuing is not sufficiently inclusive. Poverty in its various forms is growing all over the world. Many populations are suffering from hunger for several reasons. In many Western societies we are witnessing the disintegration of the social fabric, with the increasing impoverishment of some sectors of the population, the precariousness of work, the reduction of the protection systems for weak categories. The discourse on human rights no longer assumes a binding value, and this at the expense of recognizing the dignity of the human person, especially the most vulnerable. Meanwhile laws are being multiplied in favor of particular individual rights, but poor in social justice. We know, however, that where everything can become a right, then nothing is really right.

Our multicultural societies clash with different visions of the human person, with relativism on one side and fundamentalism on the other. Even democracy, which was the background for the affirmation of rights, is often questioned and we witness serious violations of these rights.

Furthermore, the emphasis on *rights* had overshadowed the importance of the *duties* that each citizen is called to recognize, that the face of the other challenges him/her and obliges him/her to respect his/her dignity and inalienable value as a human person.

It is only in a context of renewed awareness of *rights-duties* that we can go back to talking about universal rights and, above all, to promote them with responsibility respectful of every people, culture, person.

In the Church, which combines evangelization and human promotion, human rights have always been welcomed. In a speech to the UN dated 2 October 1979, St. John Paul II affirmed that this document “is a milestone on the long and difficult journey of humankind. We need to measure the progress of humanity not only with the progress of science and technology ... but at the same time and even more so with the primacy of spiritual values and with the progress of the moral life”. And Pope Benedict XVI, also in a speech at the UN (18 April 2008), observed that the Declaration “is the result of a convergence of religious and cultural traditions, all motivated by the common desire to place the human person at the heart of institutions, laws, and interventions of society, and to consider the human person essential for the world of culture, religion, and science”.

Today, Pope Francis indicates its harmony with the Christian vision, confirms its foundation, and warns against a risk: a reductive vision of the human person paves the way for the spread of injustice, social inequality, and corruption. “These rights - said Pope Francis in the Discourse to the Diplomatic Corps - derive their presupposition from the nature that objectively links humankind. They have been enunciated to remove the walls of separation that divide the human family and favor what the social doctrine of the Church calls *integral human development*” (January 8, 2018).

The attention of our Institute to human rights

As Church and in the light of the teachings of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello, we recognize that at the center of our mission there are young people with their search for meaning and need for life. The first article of our Constitutions reminds us of this, indicating the specific nature of our mission: “to be a response of salvation to the profound hopes of girls and young women”.

The integral education of the person in the various cultural contexts and in different environments has been, from the beginning, the response we have given as a contribution of the Salesian charism to the Church and to society.

In particular, the history of the last General Chapters attests that the Institute has always been careful to recall the centrality of the person, the promotion and defense of their rights, starting with those who run the risk of remaining on the margin, excluded, forgotten.

GC XX reaffirmed Don Bosco's choice to regenerate society by educating young people and showed how Mother Mazzarello did not neglect anything so that our communities would be educating communities, where everyone could feel they are growing together, and young people were respected in their fundamental needs for maturation. “Becoming aware of the many violations of human rights, we felt called upon to promote respect for the dignity of every person”. We are committed “to researching channels in the world public opinion that promote the recognition of people's rights, the autonomy of peoples, and their dignity”, and we concluded with conviction: “We believe we have to be present, with simplicity and courage, where decisions are made about young people and life to join the Gospel with history”.

In GC XXI we renewed the “commitment to education with the prophetic power of the Preventive System in educating to justice and peace”, convinced that “living evangelical citizenship today means for us *to be responsible*, individually and communally, where there is violence, corruption ... and human rights are denied”. Here too, we reaffirmed “the choice of evangelizing education as a charismatic task ... to defend the rights of all, especially the young and the weakest, and value dialogue and the possibilities of coexistence between different cultures, ethnic groups, and religious confessions”.

Rediscovering the missionary audacity of the *da mihi animas cetera tolle*, according to GC XXII, includes the commitment to “make each person a protagonist of their own growth, capable of offering their own contribution to a society founded on the values of peace, justice, the protection of creation”. In this way we witness to “the foreseeing love of God on *ever new frontiers and on the new frontiers* of education to reach the young people *where* they are and welcome them *as they are*”.

Finally, GC XXIII, recognizing that we are living in times of considerable change, affirmed the great steps taken in the defense of human rights, in volunteering, in feeling we are citizens of the world, and stressed that “we are called to cooperate so that the world will become a more livable place for all”.

Welcoming the invitations that emerged from the General Chapters and bearing in mind what is being done to promote and defend the right to education and everything that helps the right to a dignified life, in 2008 the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians obtained the recognition of Consultative Status from the United Nations. In this way, it can be present where educational policies are decided and where one can be the voice of those working in the field. The same recognition was requested and obtained by VIDES international in 2003.

To make this recognition operative, in 2007 the General Council established the *Human Rights Office* in Geneva (Switzerland), which is the seat of the UN Human Rights Council. The Community of Veyrier (Lombard Province) was ready to welcome the Institute's *Human Rights Office*.

Its action is oriented to the promotion and defense of the *right to education*, conjugated as *education to human rights*, using the methodology suggested by Mother Antonia Colombo at the time of the Office's start: *positive denunciation*.

Through oral and written statements, the presentation of *good practices* in the field of education, participation in work groups, and dialogue with representatives of Nations and independent experts, it is possible to make known what the VIDES association and the Institute as a whole are accomplishing for the defense of the rights of children and young people.

The formation courses for FMA, lay people, and young people who participate in them, help to rethink and rediscover the Preventive System based on the language of human rights.

It seems to me very significant to have succeeded in having the situation of young people inserted into the agenda of the Human Rights Council. The different countries are asked to highlight what is being done to help young people to be active members of society through their participation, and the recognition of their rights. The esteem and appreciation received from the representatives of the Countries present at the meetings, the experts of the Committees, and the representatives of other NGOs make us more aware of the importance that our Institute gives to the social dimension of evangelization through Salesian educational methodology of *knowing how to foresee in order to be able to prevent* and share good practices.

From the perspective of preventive education

The commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* is an opportunity to reaffirm that today the way of human rights passes through education because *prevention is more important than protection*. The passion of the *da mihi animas cetera tolle*, the heart of the Preventive System, guides our educational path in promoting the rights and dignity of young people and women.

From the beginning, Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello relied on education to promote in the young generations the awareness of their *rights* and their responsibility for the corresponding *duties*. The professional schools set up by Don Bosco, the employment contracts demanded from the employers are a testimony to his commitment to these rights. Also Mother Mazzarello, in starting the tailoring workshop, intended to contribute to the social and spiritual elevation of the girls.

In continuity with the charismatic experience of the origins, in every corner of the world FMA and educating communities are committed to promoting the rights of children, young people, and women. Visiting the Provinces I can attest to this with joy.

If educating is a *human reawakening*, education necessarily translates into the commitment to support what fosters the dignity of the person of the young. Human rights are a privileged way, indeed, the way to do it. Education *to* human rights and *for* human rights makes us more aware that the person is the source of rights and duties because the other's face obliges us to recognize, respect, promote them in their originality, and awaken their responsibility. Each person contributes to the spiritual, moral, and material well-being of the social community

The Salesian charism offers us one more motivation to educate to human rights because it recognizes the image of God in every young person. Young people are a generation to be loved with the original dedication of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello and with the creative audacity of the whole educating community.

Human rights education begins in the community. The climate of respect, attention, and responsibility towards each member is the essential context for increasing sensitivity for preventive education.

When human rights education starts from the existential and geographical peripheries, where the degradation is more evident, it becomes truly inclusive and qualifies as preventive. Among the categories of youth poverty, we favor the education of the young woman because among the poor, she is the most discriminated against and defenseless.

This is a comforting reality that I can note with deep gratitude and that I want to encourage. Evangelizing by educating is not something different than educating *to and for* human rights.

May Mary Help of Christians help us to enter into this perspective and accompany us to realize God's plan for the young of our time.

The Synod of Bishops on young people, now in the final stages, fills us with new hope and renews us in the awareness that dedicating ourselves to the young to educate in an integral way is a source of joy and charismatic fruitfulness. Moreover, it prepares a new future for humanity, characterized by the 'civilization of love', as the great, recently canonized Pope Saint Paul VI had hoped for.

God bless you.

Rome, 24 October 2018

Aff.ma Madre

New Provincials 2019

America

Province "Our Lady of Peace" <i>Sr. Lucila GUERRA</i>	BOL
Province "Mary Help of Christians" <i>Sr. Maria Adriana SILVA (da)</i>	BRE
Province "O. L. of the Rosary of Chiquinquirá" <i>Sr. Edith FRANCO RUÍZ</i>	CBC
Province "Our Lady of the Snow" <i>Sr. Cecilia CAMACHO</i>	CBN
Province "St. Raphael Archangel" <i>Sr. Marciana TOLEDO</i>	PAR