



Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to Participants in the Fifteenth Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences



Dear Brothers in the Episcopate and the Priesthood,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you gather for the fifteenth Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, I am pleased to have this occasion to meet with you and to express my encouragement for your mission of expounding and furthering the Church's social doctrine in the areas of law, economy, politics and the various other social sciences. Thanking Professor Mary Ann Glendon for her cordial words of greeting, I assure you of my prayers that the fruit of your deliberations will continue to attest to the enduring pertinence of Catholic social teaching in a rapidly changing world.

After studying work, democracy, globalisation, solidarity and subsidiarity in relation to the social teaching of the Church, your Academy has chosen to return to the central question of the dignity of the human person and human rights, a point of encounter between the doctrine of the Church and contemporary society.

The world's great religions and philosophies have illuminated some aspects of these human rights, which are concisely expressed in "the golden rule" found in the Gospel: "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (*Lk* 6:31; cf. *Mt* 7:12). The Church has always affirmed that fundamental rights, above and beyond the different ways in which they are formulated and the different degrees of importance they may have in various cultural contexts, are to be upheld and accorded universal recognition because they are inherent in the very nature of man, who is created in the image and

likeness of God. If all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, then they share a common nature that binds them together and calls for universal respect. The Church, assimilating the teaching of Christ, considers the person as “the worthiest of nature” (St. Thomas Aquinas, *De potentia*, 9, 3) and has taught that the ethical and political order that governs relationships between persons finds its origin in the very structure of man’s being. The discovery of America and the ensuing anthropological debate in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe led to a heightened awareness of human rights as such and of their universality (*ius gentium*). The modern period helped shape the idea that the message of Christ – because it proclaims that God loves every man and woman and that every human being is called to love God freely – demonstrates that everyone, independently of his or her social and cultural condition, by nature deserves freedom. At the same time, we must always remember that “freedom itself needs to be set free. It is Christ who sets it free” (*Veritatis Splendor*, 86).

In the middle of the last century, after the vast suffering caused by two terrible world wars and the unspeakable crimes perpetrated by totalitarian ideologies, the international community acquired a new system of international law based on human rights. In this, it appears to have acted in conformity with the message that my predecessor Benedict XV proclaimed when he called on the belligerents of the First World War to “transform the material force of arms into the moral force of law” (“Note to the Heads of the Belligerent Peoples”, 1 August 1917).

Human rights became the reference point of a shared universal *ethos* – at least at the level of aspiration – for most of humankind. These rights have been ratified by almost every State in the world. The Second Vatican Council, in the Declaration *Dignitatis Humanae*, as well as my predecessors Paul VI and John Paul II, forcefully referred to the right to life and the right to freedom of conscience and religion as being at the centre of those rights that spring from human nature itself.

Strictly speaking, these human rights are not truths of faith, even though they are discoverable – and indeed come to full light – in the message of Christ who “reveals man to man himself” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22). They receive further confirmation from faith. Yet it stands to reason that, living and acting in the physical world as spiritual beings, men and women ascertain the pervading presence of a *logos* which enables them to distinguish not only between true and false, but also good and evil, better and worse, and justice and injustice. This ability to discern – this radical *agency* – renders every person capable of grasping the “natural law”, which is nothing other than a participation in the eternal law: “*unde...lex naturalis nihil aliud est quam participatio legis aeternae in rationali creatura*” (St. Thomas Aquinas, *ST I-II*, 91, 2). The natural law is a universal guide recognizable to everyone, on the basis of which all people can reciprocally understand and love each other. Human rights, therefore, are ultimately rooted in a participation of God, who has created each human person with intelligence and freedom. If this solid ethical and political basis is ignored, human rights remain fragile since they are deprived of their sound foundation.

The Church’s action in promoting human rights is therefore supported by rational reflection, in such a way that these rights can be presented to all people of good will, independently of any religious affiliation they may have. Nevertheless, as I have observed in my Encyclicals, on the one

hand, human reason must undergo constant purification by faith, insofar as it is always in danger of a certain ethical blindness caused by disordered passions and sin; and, on the other hand, insofar as human rights need to be re-appropriated by every generation and by each individual, and insofar as human freedom – which proceeds by a succession of free choices – is always fragile, the human person needs the unconditional hope and love that can only be found in God and that lead to participation in the justice and generosity of God towards others (cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, 18, and *Spe Salvi*, 24).

This perspective draws attention to some of the most critical social problems of recent decades, such as the growing awareness – which has in part arisen with globalisation and the present economic crisis – of a flagrant contrast between the equal *attribution* of rights and the unequal *access* to the means of attaining those rights. For Christians who regularly ask God to “give us this day our daily bread”, it is a shameful tragedy that one-fifth of humanity still goes hungry. Assuring an adequate food supply, like the protection of vital resources such as water and energy, requires all international leaders to collaborate in showing a readiness to work in good faith, respecting the natural law and promoting solidarity and subsidiarity with the weakest regions and peoples of the planet as the most effective strategy for eliminating social inequalities between countries and societies and for increasing global security.

Dear friends, dear Academicians, in exhorting you in your research and deliberations to be credible and consistent witnesses to the defence and promotion of these non-negotiable human rights which are founded in divine law, I most willingly impart to you my Apostolic Blessing.