

## The Church and the United Nations

The Church's generally positive view on international organizations is based on two criteria<sup>1</sup>:

- 1) Recognition of the noble contribution that such institutions have made to promote peace, development and human dignity
- 2) The phenomenon of 'globalization of problems' means that individual nations can no longer solve many issues and thus there is a need of an international body.

### Noble Contributions

Since John XXIII there has been a series of recognitions of the work that the United Nations has achieved for the world. In his speech to the General Assembly on the twentieth anniversary of its founding, Paul VI expressed the thanks of the Catholic Church for the contribution to peace of the United Nations:

*"Our thanks to you, glory to you, who for twenty years have labored for peace and who have even suffered the loss of illustrious men in this sacred cause. Thanks and glory to you for the conflicts which you have prevented and for those which you have brought to an end. The results of your efforts on behalf of peace, including the most recent, even if they are not yet decisive, are such as to deserve that We, presuming to interpret the sentiments of the whole world, express to you both praise and gratitude."*<sup>2</sup>

The Pope also underscored the important mission of the UN to promote human solidarity, a goal that he says is deserving of praise and support.<sup>3</sup> It is a mission that helps makes the world one human family which is a reflection of God's plan for humanity. As he states:

*This is the finest aspect of the United Nations; it is its most truly human aspect; it is the ideal that mankind dreams of on its pilgrimage through time; it is the world's greatest hope; it is, We presume to say, the reflection of the loving and transcendent design of God for the progress of the human family on earth a reflection in which We see the heavenly message of the Gospel.*<sup>4</sup>

In this light, the work of the UN to promote human development in the poorer nations has also been signaled out by the Pope<sup>5</sup> as part of this most noble mission.

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1) <sup>1</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005, 190.

<sup>2</sup> Paul VI, *Address to the United Nations General Assembly, Au Moment de Prendre*, Oct. 4, 1965, 8. The speech on the Vatican web site cannot be found in English, but a translation of it is found at the following site: <http://www.christusrex.org/www1/pope/UN-1965.html>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* Also see John Paul II, *Address to the Fiftieth General Assembly of the United Nations*, Oct. 5, 1995, 14: "The United Nations Organization needs to rise more and more above the cold status of an administrative institution and to become a moral centre where all the nations of the world feel at home and develop a shared awareness of being, as it were, a "family of nations". The idea of "family" immediately evokes something more than simple functional relations or a mere convergence of interests. The family is by nature a community based on mutual trust, mutual support and sincere respect. In an authentic family the strong do not dominate; instead, the weaker members, because of their very weakness, are all the more welcomed and served." Also *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Paul VI, *Address to the United Nations General Assembly*, 13. Also see John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 40.

John Paul II in his first visit to the United Nations in 1979, emphasized especially the important role the UN played in the promotion of human rights. Calling the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights one of the greatest documents of our time, he points to it as one of the most important reasons that Human Rights awareness and respect for these rights has increased in recent times.<sup>6</sup> He cites this example numerous times in both his remarks to the UN and in other documents.<sup>7</sup>

The Pope also credits the United Nations as one of the forums to realize the “rights of nations.” The respect for each nation, and to see that they have a right to their particular culture and model of development is an important theme in John Paul’s teaching, perhaps underscored because of the difficult history of his own country to achieve political independence. He observes that the Holy See has always supported the idea of a right of nations and that the UN is the key to making that right a reality.<sup>8</sup>

Thus the first reason given for the strong support shown towards the United Nations by the Holy Fathers is the positive contribution the organization has made to the cause of peace and human development, to the promotion of human rights and the rights of nations, and to its fundamental role in promoting the idea of one human family which reflects the divine plan for humankind.

### **A Global Response to Global Problems**

To understand the second reason that the Holy See “has supported the ideals and goals of the United Nations Organization from the very beginning,”<sup>9</sup> we need to look briefly at one the guiding principles of Catholic Social doctrine, that of subsidiarity. Certain historical factors were key in leading to the development of this principal by Pius XI in *Quadagesimo Anno* in 1931:

- 1) The centralized and all pervasive control of the social and economic system played out by the fascist government in Italy and the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917, led to an all pervasive power of the state over economic life.
- 2) The destruction of associations (syndicates) in the liberal economic revolution of the previous century.

Thus as an attempt to place a break on the all consuming appetite of the state to assume power, and to defend the rights of trade associations to have a role in the economic development of their people, Pius XI laid out one of the central doctrines of Catholic Social teaching. He first places it in the context of recognizing that certain things trade associations did in the past they could no longer accomplish because of changing times. However, he warns against losing sight of the basic principal<sup>10</sup>, since it is a “disturbance

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<sup>6</sup> Also see John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 145: “A clear proof of the farsightedness of this organization is provided by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights passed by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948.”

<sup>7</sup> John Paul II, *Address to the United Nations*, 1979, 7, 9, 11. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 26. *Address to the Fiftieth General Assembly of the United Nations*, 1995, 2. And Messages for the World Day of Prayer for Peace in 1980, 7. ; 1998, sec.1; 1999, sec.2.

<sup>8</sup> John Paul II, *Centisimus Annus*, 21.

<sup>9</sup> John Paul II, *Address to the Fiftieth General Assembly of the United Nations*, 1995, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Pius XI, *Quadagesimo Anno*, 79: “As history abundantly proves, it is true that on account of changed conditions many things which were done by small associations in former times cannot be done now save by

of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do". In other words, the basic principal is that "lesser" structures on the organizational later of society should take responsibility and have the right to perform actions to solve the problems they are able to resolve. At the same time, there is recognition that all problems are not solvable at those lesser levels, and it is here that an important role of the State emerges.

It is the last point that leads to the support for the United Nations on the part of the Popes. There is, obviously, no suggestion that there be an abolition of nation-states and that one entity assumes all the power. That would go against the basic principal of subsidiarity which would maintain that nation-states must find solutions for the issues that they can solve on their own. The second part of this principle, however, says that as problems grow in complexity and interconnected, higher levels of authority are needed to address them. In the light of changing times, it becomes clear to the popes that many problems are now "global" and thus global solutions and global institutions are necessary to solve them. These international organizations, "and first among them the United Nations Organization,"<sup>11</sup> have been established precisely in light of the global nature of today's problems. "A new humanism supports them and holds them in honour. A solemn obligation unites their members. A positive and worldwide hope recognizes them as instruments of international order, of solidarity and of brotherhood among the peoples. In these institutions peace finds its own home and its own workshop."<sup>12</sup>

This need of international organizations, and particularly the United Nations, is seen in several areas:

- 1) The need of an international instrument to assure peaceful resolution of conflicts<sup>13</sup>

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large associations. Still, that most weighty principle, which cannot be set aside or changed, remains fixed and unshaken in social philosophy: Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them.

80. The supreme authority of the State ought, therefore, to let subordinate groups handle matters and concerns of lesser importance, which would otherwise dissipate its efforts greatly. Thereby the State will more freely, powerfully, and effectively do all those things that belong to it alone because it alone can do them: directing, watching, urging, restraining, as occasion requires and necessity demands. Therefore, those in power should be sure that the more perfectly a graduated order is kept among the various associations, in observance of the principle of "subsidiary function," the stronger social authority and effectiveness will be the happier and more prosperous the condition of the State."

<sup>11</sup> Paul VI, *Message for the World Day for Peace, Peace is Possible*, 1973.

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_mes\\_19721208\\_vi-world-day-for-peace\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/messages/peace/documents/hf_p-vi_mes_19721208_vi-world-day-for-peace_en.html)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 7: "Men's common interests make it imperative that at long last a world-wide community of nations be established." *Gaudium et Spes*, 82. Paul VI, *Address to the United Nations General Assembly*, 9, states: "you have performed and you continue to perform a great work: the education of mankind in the ways of peace. The United Nations is the great school where that education is imparted, and We are today in the Assembly Hall of that school. Everyone taking his place here becomes a pupil and also a teacher in the art of building peace. When you leave this hall, the world looks upon you as the architects and the builders of peace." John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 26: "Today perhaps more than in the past, people are realizing that they are linked together by a common destiny, which is to be constructed together, if catastrophe for all is to be avoided." John Paul II, *Address to the UN General Assembly*, 1979, 23, concludes saying: may "the United Nations Organization always remain as the

- 2) The need to promote economic development and a more equitable sharing of the resources of the world in the light of an ever increasing interdependent world<sup>14</sup>
- 3) Emergency response to world problems such as refugees, hunger, etc.<sup>15</sup>

The fundamental basis for all these, lies in the growing interdependence of the world since it is a clear “sign of the times” that we grow “daily more dependent on one another,” in “a world becoming more unified every day.”<sup>16</sup> The problems in one place affect every place else as “every day human interdependence grows more tightly drawn and spreads by degrees over the whole world. As a result the common good... today takes on an increasingly universal complexion and consequently involves rights and duties with respect to the whole human race.”<sup>17</sup>

The solution to the globalization of problems is an effective global organization which leads to solidarity. For John Paul II there is an intimate relationship between recognition that we live in an interdependent world, and the need for “globalization with solidarity.”<sup>18</sup> From his perspective solidarity becomes a moral imperative and it is based on the reality of our mutual interdependence and the fruit of this solidarity is peace.<sup>19</sup> This work of solidarity finds an important partner in the United Nations and its agencies. As John Paul remarked in the General Assembly: “The fifty-one States which founded this Organization in 1945 truly lit a lamp whose light can scatter the darkness caused by tyranny — a light which can show the way to freedom, peace, and solidarity.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Strengthening International Institutions**

The global problems that face us, as mentioned above, require global organizations, first of which is the United Nations in the eyes of the Popes. However, it is also recognized

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supreme forum of peace and justice: an authentic place of liberty of peoples and of human beings in their aspiration for a better future.” Translation my own since no English version is available on the Vatican web site and no other translation on the internet could be found. John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 27. Also John Paul II, *Message On The Fiftieth Anniversary of the End of the Second World War In Europe*, 13 cites John XXIII: “In this regard we need to recall that it was precisely the terrible experience of the War which led to the birth of the United Nations Organization, which Pope John XXIII of venerable memory considered a sign of our times for the ‘maintenance and consolidation of peace among peoples’.”

<sup>14</sup> There are numerous references to this in the social teaching of the Popes. Some examples are: John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 41. Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, 43. *Gaudium et Spes*, 84. John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 9, 43.

<sup>15</sup> Pontifical Council “Cor Unum”, *Refugees: A Challenge To Solidarity*, 18.

[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/corunum/documents/rc\\_pc\\_corunum\\_doc\\_25061992\\_refugees\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/corunum/documents/rc_pc_corunum_doc_25061992_refugees_en.html) On world hunger see John Paul II, *Address to the Fiftieth General Assembly of the United Nations*, 1995, 13. Pontifical Council “Cor Unum”, *Hunger in the World*, Oct. 1996 mentions many of the UN organizations involved in a significant way with coordinating efforts to combat world hunger. Also John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 40.

<sup>16</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 24. Also see John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 17.

<sup>17</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 26.

<sup>18</sup> Term used by John Paul II, *World Day of Peace: From The Justice of Each Comes Peace For All*, 1 January 1998, 3.

<sup>19</sup> John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 38. In no. 39 the Pope states: “In this way, the solidarity which we propose is the path to peace and at the same time to development. For world peace is inconceivable unless the world's leaders come to recognize that interdependence in itself demands the abandonment of the politics of blocs, the sacrifice of all forms of economic, military or political imperialism, and the transformation of mutual distrust into collaboration.”

<sup>20</sup> John Paul II, *Address to the Fiftieth General Assembly of the United Nations*, 1995, 4.

that this and other related international institutions do not yet achieve the noble aims for which they were founded.<sup>21</sup> This gives rise to the call that these institutions should be strengthened by international law so that they are better able to function and achieve the aim of ensuring world peace, justice, development and protecting of human and national rights.

Paul VI mentions this need of increasing the authority of the U.N. in his address to that body: “your courage and your work impel you to study ways of guaranteeing the security of international life without recourse to arms. This is an aim worthy of your efforts; this is what the peoples of the world expect of you; this is what you must achieve. And for this, unanimous confidence in this institution must increase, its authority must increase; and this goal, one may hope, will be attained....”<sup>22</sup> And later, when looking at the problem of world poverty and the causes of it to be found in war, economic neo-colonialism, etc., the same pontiff remarks: “Who can fail to see the need and importance of thus gradually coming to the establishment of a world authority capable of taking effective action on the juridical and political planes?”<sup>23</sup>

Such a change in structure, while seen as necessary, is far from being achieved as each nation state is concerned with its own welfare more than what the Church teaches, namely the universal common good<sup>24</sup> built on the principal of solidarity and the universal destiny of God’s creation. As a result of sinful structures we live immersed in a “culture” which lack the hallmarks of the ethical values of solidarity and interdependence. Because of that, the vision of increasing the authority of international institutions suffers. John Paul II recognized this limitation as he remarked in his speech to the Fiftieth General Assembly: “As we face these enormous challenges, how can we fail to acknowledge the role of the United Nations Organization? Fifty years after its founding, the need for such an Organization is even more obvious, but we also have a better understanding, on the basis of experience, that the effectiveness of this great instrument for harmonizing and coordinating international life depends on the international culture and ethic which it supports and expresses.”<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusion

We can summarize much of the perspective of the Church concerning the United Nations with the opening remarks of Paul VI, the first pontiff to speak in the General Assembly: “*Our message is meant to be, first of all, a moral and solemn ratification of this lofty institution. This message comes from Our historical experience. It is as an ‘expert in humanity’ that We bring to this Organization the suffrage of Our recent Predecessors,*

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<sup>21</sup> John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 21.

<sup>22</sup> Paul VI, *Address to the United Nations General Assembly*, 11. Also John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 145: “*It is therefore Our earnest wish that the United Nations Organization may be able progressively to adapt its structure and methods of operation to the magnitude and nobility of its tasks. May the day be not long delayed when every human being can find in this organization an effective safeguard of his personal rights; those rights, that is, which derive directly from his dignity as a human person, and which are therefore universal, inviolable and inalienable.*”

<sup>23</sup> Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 78.

<sup>24</sup> This concept that the common good is now universal can be seen in John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 71, 174 . John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 7 called here “common interest”, also 132, 135. *Gaudium et Spes*, 68, 84. John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 36.

<sup>25</sup> John Paul II, *Address to the Fiftieth General Assembly of the United Nations*, 1995, 14.

*that of the entire Catholic Episcopate, and Our own, convinced as We are that this Organization represents the obligatory path of modern civilization and of world peace. In saying this, We feel We are speaking with the voice of the dead as well as of the living: of the dead who have fallen in the terrible wars of the past, dreaming of concord and world peace; of the living who have survived those wars, bearing in their hearts a condemnation of those who seek to renew them; and of those rightful expectation of a better humanity. And We also make Our own, the voice of the poor, the disinherited, the suffering; of those who long for justice for the dignity of life, for freedom, for well being and for progress. The peoples of the earth turn to the United Nations as the last hope of concord and peace. We presume to present here, together with Our own, their tribute to honour and of hope. That is why this moment is a great one for you also.”<sup>26</sup>*

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<sup>26</sup> Paul VI, *Address to the United Nations General Assembly*, 1.