

## Humanity's finest Consensus

75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights  
and 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Pacem in Terris*

*A Statement of the Executive Committee of Justice and Peace Europe on the occasion of the International Human Rights Day 2023*

*On 10 December 1948 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Seventy-five years later Justice and Peace Europe wishes to underline the enduring importance of this document. The Universal Declaration, together with the encyclical letter *Pacem in Terris*, published 60 years ago, inspires us in our mission to promote human rights. The lack of respect throughout the world for their contents is deeply worrying.*

### Universal Declaration and *Pacem in Terris*

We consider the Universal Declaration of Human Rights the finest consensus of humanity in modern times. However, in a world scarred by cruel wars and deadly famines, and torn apart by so much censorship and intolerance, it may also be the most fragile. For us as the Executive Committee of Justice and Peace Europe a second, equally important source of inspiration is the encyclical letter *Pacem in Terris*. Pope Saint John XXIII published it sixty years ago on 11 April 1963, to the attention "of all men of good will". It was the first time that an encyclical letter referred to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and it is therefore appropriate to remember both documents together by recalling their key provisions.

### Human rights are universal and inalienable

The Universal Declaration established the normative profile of human rights: „All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights “(Art.1). Thus, it was recognized that this dignity is inherent ... and not bestowed by human authority, and that these fundamental human rights are inalienable ...and cannot be disenfranchised. The encyclical letter *Pacem in Terris* repeats this central tenant of human rights. They are not manmade, they preexist. Pope Saint John XXIII notably added that the human person has not only rights but also duties, which both are then “universal, inviolable, therefore altogether inalienable” (N° 9).

### The right to life and liberty

Among the rights of the Universal Declaration, we recall in the first place the right to life, liberty and security of the person (Art. 3), to which *Pacem in Terris* adds the right “to the means necessary for the proper development of life” (N°11). Thus, it is saddening to see that despite important progress extreme poverty remains a reality for every tenth person in the world. We also recall the demand of the Universal Declaration “that no one shall be held in slavery and servitude” (Art.4). In *Pacem in Terris* we read that true freedom is that freedom which most truly safeguards the dignity of the human person”. (N°14). In this respect we are concerned to see that the number registered victims of human trafficking has increased again since the outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic (+9,5% in the European Union).

### Migration, and the right to seek asylum

Art. 13 of the Universal Declaration enounces freedom of movement within the borders of each state and the right to leave any country, including one's own. Art. 14 defines the right of everyone “to seek and enjoy in other countries asylum from prosecution.” *Pacem in Terris* acknowledges the right to “emigrate and immigrate”. More generally speaking, people should have the right to stay or to migrate, as Pope Francis recently stressed. In an era of mass migrations because of hunger, war, and climate related natural disasters,

respecting these rights is challenging for every government. It is, however, unacceptable that the borders of our continent, in the image of the Mediterranean Sea, have become cemeteries for those who just sought a better future. Pope Francis has incriminated “cruel trafficking and the fanaticism of indifference” for this scandal (22 September 2023 in Marseille). We expect European governments to fulfill their moral and legal obligation to rescue people in distress.

#### The Family – a primary unit

When it comes to the family, both documents converge. In Art. 16 the Universal Declaration defines the family as “the natural and fundamental group unit of society”. N° 16 of the *Pacem in Terris* suggests that “the family, founded upon marriage freely contracted, ..., must be regarded as the natural, primary cell of human society” and goes on to request that “the interests of the family, therefore, must be taken very specially into consideration in social and economic affairs”. In the European Union, family/children benefits rose about 50% between 2000 and 2020 without, however, affecting birth rates, which are well below the replacement fertility rate. In addition to sufficient financial support for parents and family caregivers, it is crucial to shape the structures in the economy and society in such a way that they make it possible to reconcile family life and professional career

#### Freedom of religion or belief

Freedom of conscience and religion, as expressed in Art. 18 of the Universal Declaration, and the freedom “to profess religion both in private and public” as reads *Pacem in Terris* (N°14) have deteriorated globally in recent years. In particular, autocratic rule and ethnically and nationalistically charged tensions are a major threat to religious freedom. Lately, countries like Afghanistan, China, Cuba, Iran, Nicaragua, Russia, Saudi Arabia witnessed significant regression of religious freedom. In our view, the freedom to practice religion in private and in public prevailing in most European countries is a privilege, which comes with the duty to promote this fundamental right where it is threatened. European governments and the institutions of the European Union should reinforce their commitment to religious freedom globally. For example, the European Union should ensure that its “Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief” are applied consistently.

#### Cultural, economic and social rights

One fifth of the articles of the Universal Declaration are dedicated to social rights and they are extensively echoed in the encyclical letter of Pope Saint John XXIII. The latter determines furthermore that “the right to own private property entails a social obligation as well” (N°22). However, in many regions of the world social rights are probably the most disrespected. Currently, global inequalities are still at the level of the beginning of the 20th century with the average income of the global top 10% around forty times higher than average income of the bottom 50%. Reducing inequality by 2030 was one of the 17 UN sustainable development goals (SDGs) agreed by the international community in 2015. Urgent action is needed especially in light of the differing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on rich and poor. Tackling poverty and inequality should become a priority for the new European Parliament and the next European Commission in 2024.

#### Conclusion

After the atrocities of World War II, mankind has made progress in implementing legal tools and institutions on national and international level, through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In the past 75 years a strong common ground to defend human dignity has developed across all boundaries. In Europe we are particularly grateful for the European Convention on Human Rights. 60 years after the publication of the encyclical letter *Pacem in Terris* the Catholic Church has become a more explicit and much stronger promotor of human rights and the dignity of the human person. Both documents will continue to orientate our work as Justice and Peace Europe, whilst a huge lack of respect for human rights in many parts of our planet remains. Indeed, the finest consensus of Humanity, as expressed in these two documents, is also the most fragile. The efforts of all people of good will, will surely be needed to preserve it.

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The Executive Committee of Justice and Peace Europe