

This December marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Adopted by the United Nations on 10 December 1948, the Declaration was developed in response to gross human rights violations leading up to and during the Second World War. The Declaration—a list of thirty articles describing civil, political, economic, cultural, social and religious rights—has come to be accepted by almost all nations of the world as a gauge to measure government adherence to human rights norms.¹

For Catholics, the Declaration has become an important part of our contemporary social justice tradition and is therefore a document to honor. Joining the world in celebrating the Declaration's fiftieth anniversary, the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace organised the first-ever World Congress of the Pastoral Promotion of Human Rights in July. In his address to the World Congress, Pope John Paul II confirmed that the defense and promotion of human rights is "closely connected to the mission of the church."

Exploring the history of the church's stance on human rights and following its treatment of the Declaration over the past fifty years is important in order to understand that church teachings on human rights can and do change and develop. That the Catholic Church once favoured slavery and coercion by torture—and now condemns these practices—is proof of this evolution.



A Culture on Human Rights

A look at the Catholic Church's evolving support for the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights

by Serra Sippel

The Church's relationship with human rights movements has a tumultuous history. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the church neglected and violated human rights with the Inquisition and the conquest of the Americas. In keeping with its conservative tradition, the church was adverse to the civil rights movements and revolutions in England, America and France during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Only

after Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903) delivered the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), defending the rights of workers, did the church shift its position on human rights, giving birth to modern day Catholic social thought.

The church's position as a world leader in human rights evolves out of a mixed history of sound church leadership, and the voices and worlds of the faithful. Catholics who challenged and dissented from official church teachings that harmed others have

spurred the church to forge its current Catholic human rights tradition—for example, Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, who challenged the church’s abuse of the indigenous people in the Americas in the sixteenth century; Félicité de Lamennais in France who, because of the church’s alliance with the throne, spoke out against the church and called for freedom of religion and opinion during the nineteenth century;² and Dorothy Day, cofounder of the Catholic Worker movement, who called upon the church to teach peace during the Second World War, and advocated for the rights of workers in the twentieth century.

Until the Second World War, the church viewed human rights movements as individualistic, secular, and liberal threats. But in two Christmas radio broadcasts, first in 1942 and then in 1944, Pope Pius XII responded to the atrocities of the war, calling for the restoration of dignity to human persons, and defending the rights of all citizens to a share in public life. It was during this time and out of moral necessity that the United Nations Organization was formed and the development of human rights law began.

The church, however, did not speak out in full support of the Declaration until the papacy of John XXIII (1958-1963). In his 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, Pope John not only upheld the Declaration as a viable means to safeguard the rights of individuals; he also provided a list of Catholic recognised rights and duties that mirrored

the Declaration. With its connection to the struggle for human rights fully established, the church quickened its pace in the global struggle to promote and protect the rights and dignity of human persons.

Since the 1960s, the Vatican has sought to educate the world on human rights and on the Declaration itself through encyclicals, messages, and addresses. Of significance to the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration are those occasions that the church has used to bring attention directly to the Declaration. In December 1968, Pope Paul VI (1963-1978) delivered a message on the twentieth anniversary of the Declaration. Recalling the tragedies of the Second World War, he stated that the Universal Declaration on Human Rights must continue to be followed in order to achieve peace. Later that month, he delivered a message for the 1969 World Day of Peace entitled, “The Promotion of Human Rights, the Road to Peace.”

In 1973, his message commemorating the Declaration’s twenty-fifth anniversary, Pope Paul VI contended that the Declaration “remains one of the greatest claims to fame” of the United Nations Organization. During his papacy, he instituted the Pontifical Commission *Justitia et Pax* (now the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace). In 1974, the Commission delivered *The Church and Human Rights*, a history of the church’s fragmented human rights tradition that “has been characterised by hesitations, objections, reservations, on occasion, even vehement

reaction...” Its purpose was to make people of the church aware of their responsibilities to promote and defend human rights.

Following the lead of his predecessors, Pope John Paul II (1978-) has diligently advocated for human rights in the civil society, while, many note, taking a narrow view of women’s human rights and human rights in the church.³ He has asserted that education is the way to prevent human rights abuses. Through various public arenas, the pope has raised the consciousness of the world toward the Declaration of Human Rights and the need to protect the rights of humanity.

In 1978 the pope issued a message commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the Declaration in which he proclaimed the church’s “constant interest and solicitude for fundamental human rights whose expression we find clearly taught in the Gospel message itself.” In 1979, he professed to the United Nations that fundamental human rights are directly linked to civil rights—what good is freedom of religion and speech without food and shelter.⁴ His message held fundamental human rights and civil rights in tension in order to promote a common good for all. Furthermore, in his message for the fortieth anniversary of the Declaration, John Paul II once again upheld the Declaration of Human Rights and challenged nations and peoples to evaluate the “status of the promotion of rights and freedoms.”

The U.S. Catholic bishops

have responded to Pope John Paul's call for education on human rights and have advocated the protection of human rights. In the bishop's pastoral letter, "Economic Justice for All" (1986), they wrote that justice is obtained through respect for the human rights of each person. And in "The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace" (1993), the bishops' statement on the moral dimensions of peacemaking after the Cold War, they instructed that human rights must be observed in order to secure peace.

John Paul II's support for human rights culminated on the World Day of Peace, held on 1 January 1998, which he dedicated with the theme: "From the Justice of Each Comes Peace for All." His message called for the promotion and protection of human rights as a matter of priority for the international community during the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration. He stressed the particular importance of the educational dimension of promoting human rights, stating that "education in respect for human rights will naturally lead to the creation of a true culture of human rights..."

Seeking a "human rights culture," the church realises it has not reached the pinnacle of its human rights tradition. The church—the worldwide community of Catholics—will continue to respond to and change with the conditions and situations of society as it has done over the centuries. If the institutional church seeks to create a true culture on human rights, it is imperative that the church

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leadership actively encourage and support the human rights work that many Catholics do throughout the world, and within the church itself. For without the efforts to promote and foster human rights, the Vatican's educational efforts on human rights would be futile.

Pope John Paul once stated to the Tribunal for Roman Rota, "The task of the church, and her historical merit, of proclaiming and defending man's [sic] fundamental rights at all times and places, does not exempt her but, on the contrary, obliges her to be a *speculum iustitiae* before the world."⁵ As the institutional church continues to develop and solidify its stance on human rights during the Declarations' fiftieth anniversary, let us hope that in addition to acknowledging the church's broadly stated concerns for human rights and dignity, that the church will indeed be a "mirror of justice" and set an example

by actively safeguarding the human rights of women, as well as the human rights of all within the church and in civil societies throughout the world. And in order to do this, the church, as an institution, must uphold the world of lay and religious people and organisations who take on day-to-day human rights activities.

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Notes:

¹ United Nations, *The International Bill of Human Rights* (New York: United Nations, 1993), 3. The complete text of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is posted on the United Nations Website at <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>.

² Peter Steinfels, "The Failed Encounter: The Catholic Church and Liberalism in the Nineteenth Century," in *Catholicism and Liberalism: Contributions to American Public Philosophy*, eds. R. Bruce Douglass and David Hollenbach (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 19.

³ For further discussion on the Vatican's narrow approach to human rights concerning women see *Conscience* 16 no. 3 (Autumn 1995); and *Equal is Equal Does: Challenging Vatican Views on Women* (Washington, DC: Women-Church Convergence, 1995). Evidence of the pope's narrow view of human rights within the Catholic church is presented in Kenneth A. Briggs, *Holy Siege: The New Year That Shook Catholic America* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).

⁴ Peter Hebblethwaite, *Pope John Paul II and the Church* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1995), 21.

⁵ Giorgio Filibeck, ed., *Human Rights in the Teaching of the Church: From John XXIII to John Paul II* (Vatican City: Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 1994), 109-110.