Prayers and Reflections

Opening Prayer
Christ, in your Incarnation, you bestowed on all of us great dignity. Your Church has reinforced this dignity by supporting and promoting the rights of all people. Help us understand the concept of human rights. Help us reflect deeply on them and on the teachings of the Church related to them. Let your truth transform us so our hearts will be on fire for justice and peace.

Reflections
“The Universal Declaration of Human Rights remains one of the highest expressions of the human conscience of our time. [All over the world] men and women of conviction and courage have appealed to this declaration in support of their claims for a fuller share in the life of society.”
Pope John Paul II, Address to the Fiftieth General Assembly of the United Nations, 1995

“Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”
Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)

“Basically we could not have peace, or an atmosphere in which peace could grow, unless we recognized the rights of individual human beings . . . their importance, their dignity . . . and agreed that that was the basic thing that had to be accepted throughout the world.”
Eleanor Roosevelt  (The first U.S. delegate to the UN and a leader at the conference to draft the UDHR)

Closing Prayer
God of Justice,
You have given all of your children
Human dignity and human rights.
Help us recognize the dignity and the rights
Of all of human kind.
Open our hearts to hear your teachings,
Open our eyes to the suffering
Of those who are denied
Their basic economic, social, political and social rights.
Let our voices join in declaring
All humanity is sacred, all human rights must be respected.
Amen
Activities

1. Start with the opening prayer and the reflections on page 1

2. Drafting a Declaration of Rights

   a) In small groups, brainstorm a list of basic human rights that you would like to have. These can include social rights (such as the right to food, the right to medical care, etc.) as well as political and civil rights. Select one group member to write down a list that the group agrees on. Allow about 15 minutes for this initial brainstorming.

   b) When all groups have finished, have each group report their list to the whole. Have one person write the human rights that each group mentions on a flip chart, chalkboard or marker board. When there is duplication of a human right already listed, star it.

   Discuss: What basic rights did everyone agree on? Were there any surprises regarding the human rights group members wanted—or left out?

   c) Next, have one person read the outline of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) on page 3 of this unit out loud. Compare it to the list the group has created. Put a double star on any right on your group’s list that is also part of the UDHR.

   Discuss: What are the similarities, and differences, between the entire group’s list and the UDHR? Are there rights listed in the Universal Declaration (created after WWII by countries around the world) that your groups did not think of? Why do you think the countries of the world included all these rights? (See background Sheet A on page 4.)

3. Human Rights and Catholic Social Teaching

   a) After looking at the UDHR, reflect on the following questions: How does the concept of “universal” human rights relate to the Church’s proclamation of human dignity and solidarity? What are the similarities between the UDHR and basic Catholic Social Teaching beliefs? (See Fact Sheet B on page 5.)

   b) Reflect on the TIMELINE: Catholic Social Teaching, the United Nations and Human Rights. Read the Timeline and go directly into a discussion (see questions below).

   OR

   Complete the Timeline Activity: make copies of the Timeline Outline (with empty boxes) and the Timeline boxes. In small groups, cut up the boxes with printed information and place them into correct timeline sequence. Then discuss the questions below.

   Timeline Discussion Questions
   What are some of the central concerns of the Church during the last century in terms of human rights? What are the similarities between the Church’s teachings during the last hundred years and the development of human rights documents through the United Nations?

   Identify some basic teachings in the Gospel which relate to basic human rights. Why has the Church re-framed some of its basic teachings to a discussion of “rights”? What is the difference between helping the poor and oppressed because “they need charity,” and helping them because “they have basic rights”?

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All human beings

1. Are born free and should all be treated in the same way
2. Are equal despite difference in race, sex, language, etc.
3. Have the right to life and to live in freedom and safety
4. Should be free from slavery
5. Should not be subjected to torture
6. Have the right to be recognized before the law
7. Have the right to be treated equally before the law
8. Have the right to ask for legal help when their rights are not respected
9. Have the right to not be imprisoned unjustly
10. Have the right to a fair trial
11. Have the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty
12. Have the right to privacy
13. Have the right to travel within and to and from their own country
14. Have the right to political asylum
15. Have the right to a nationality
16. Have the right to marry
17. Have the right to own property
18. Have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion
19. Have the right to freedom of opinion and expression
20. Have the right to meet with others
21. Have the right to take part in government matters and to vote
22. Have the right to social security (i.e., to have basic needs met)
23. Have the right to work and to join a trade union
24. Have the right to rest and leisure
25. Have the right to an adequate standard of living and medical help
26. Have the right to an education
27. Have the right to take part in their community’s cultural life
28. Are entitled to a social and international order that can provide these rights
29. Must respect the rights of others
Fact Sheet A: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Q. Why is the United Nations concerned about human rights?
   A. The Holocaust and World War II drew the world’s attention to human rights; Non-governmental organizations pushed the United Nations (UN) to explicitly include the protection of human rights in the Charter; Human rights were being newly seen as not merely a domestic issue but as an international concern; The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) established the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) in 1946 and began work on the first ever Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

Q. Who wrote the Declaration?
   A. The UN Commission on Human Rights, with members from countries all over the world, spent its first three years drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Q. Where did the ideas come from?
   A. Initial outlines included proposals presented by the governments of Chile, Cuba, Panama, the United Kingdom and the United States, as well as elements drawn from 55 national constitutions, recommendations of non-governmental human rights organizations and suggestions of private citizens.

Q. When was it finished?
   A. The Declaration was finalized by the Commission and adopted by the General Assembly on December 10, 1948.

Q. What has been its impact?
   A. The UDHR has promoted peace and justice and a growing awareness of the importance of respecting human rights. Initially an expression of shared values bearing moral weight on UN Member States, the Declaration has also led to the adoption of many legally binding international human rights treaties, giving human rights new international legal status.
Fact Sheet B: Catholic Social Teaching and Human Rights

Why is the Church concerned about human rights?
- God has endowed every human person with an inherent and inalienable dignity which entails basic rights.
- Respect for human rights is the requisite for peace.
- The Church is mandated to protect human rights and to educate its members about the dignity, liberty and equality of all humans.

The Church’s mission of peace covers the whole human race. “Peace and rights,” says Pope Paul II, “are two benefits directly related to each other as cause and effect. There can be no peace where there is no respect for, defense and promotion of human rights.”

From this it follows that the Church is obliged to work for peace and human rights at the same time because both are the fruit of love and liberation which Our Savior came to bring to all.

The Church’s main contribution to the realization of human rights consists in a continuous and eminently practical process of education, first of all among her own members.

The purpose of this education is to make Christians ever more conscious of the dignity of the human person, the unity of the human family, the liberty and equality which all humans share. Above all, the Church endeavors to implant, foster and bring to flower the will to respect these fundamental rights in every moment of daily life.

From The Church and Human Rights, by the Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace, Vatican City, 1975

Human rights “are by nature universal for they have as their source the equal dignity of every person.”

“Respect for human rights is possible only when the dignity of every human being is recognized and respected.”
Archbishop Renato Martino to the UN General Assembly, November 9, 1999
The Church’s emphasis on human rights arises from its concern for the dignity of every human person. All of the Church’s pronouncements on rights emphasize this dignity. The United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights echoes the importance of the dignity of all human beings in the global community.

1891 In the Papal encyclical On the Condition of Labor, Pope Leo XIII strongly affirms the belief that the human person has basic rights, especially the rights to food, clothing, shelter, and a living wage. He also declares that rights of the poor must be “specially cared for and protected by the government.”

1931 In The Reconstruction of the Social Order and in Divine Redemption, Pius XI focuses on the right to life and to the economic means of existence, the right to follow one’s path marked out by God, the right to free association, and the right to possess and use private property.

1942 Pope Pius XII, in his Christmas message, emphasizes the right to maintain and develop one’s life completely, the right to work and freely choose one’s state in life, the right to marry and have a family, and the right to material goods.

1948 The United Nations, founded after World War II, adopts the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), a vision statement that, while without the legally binding character of the later Human Rights UN covenants, had significant force in the international community. The UDHR includes the rights to work; to health; to education; to such basic needs as food and shelter; to freedom of thought and expression; to freedom from slavery, torture, and illegal arrest; and to equality before the law.

1963 In Peace on Earth, Pope John XXIII emphasizes that all human beings are “the children and friends of God,” and so every human being, regardless of his or her culture or nationality, is entitled to civil, political, social, and economic rights. These “universal and inviolable” rights include the right to life and bodily integrity; the right to food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, education, and social services; the right to respect; the right to freedom in searching for the truth, expressing opinion, and worshiping; the right to choose one’s state in life, to marry and to have a family; the right to work for a just wage in a safe environment.

1965 The Second Vatican Council issues The Church in the Modern World, which notes the growing interdependence of the international human family and the importance of safeguarding every human’s basic rights. The Council also issues the Declaration on Religious Freedom, which calls for the right to religious liberty.

1966 The United Nations adopts the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Known as the “first generation rights,” these include the right to life, to political participation, to free access to information, and to a fair trial, as well as to freedom of expression, assembly, and association. Also included is freedom from slavery, from torture, and from cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment. Countries that sign this convention agree to implement it by 1976.

1966 The United Nations adopts the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Again, all countries that sign agree to implement it by 1976. Known as “second generation rights,” these include the rights to work, to adequate food and shelter, to health care, and to education.

1967 In The Development of Peoples, Pope Paul VI focuses on the economic rights and the economic well-being of all persons, noting we are all responsible for each other and that the economic development of the poor and the moral development of those with means are interlinked.

1975 The Vatican’s Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace publishes The Church and Human Rights, supporting the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, reaffirming basic economic and civil rights, and calling attention to the rights of women and of ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities.
“The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is one of the highest expressions of the human conscience of our time.” Pope John Paul II, 1995

1979 The United Nations adopts the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to eliminate persistent social, cultural, and economic discrimination against women. It affirms women’s rights to political participation, nationality, health, and freedom from violence.

1986 The U.S. Catholic Bishops, in Economic Justice for All, reaffirm that the UDHR and internationally accepted human rights standards “are strongly supported by Catholic teaching.” Human rights are “moral issues” because they are “all essential to human dignity and to the integral development of both individuals and society.”

1987 Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical On Social Concerns, emphasizes that economic development must respect all the economic, social, political, and civil rights of every human being in every part of the global community.

1989 The United Nations adopts the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), emphasizing the right of children to be protected from the illicit use of narcotic drugs, from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, from recruitment into the armed forces, from economic exploitation, and from hazardous working conditions.

1991 Pope John Paul II, in On the 100th Anniversary of On the Condition of Labor, declares that the right to ownership must be balanced with the common good of all, and affirms the right to share in work that makes wise use of the earth’s resources. He also reaffirms the rights to life, to family, and to religious freedom.

1993 Responding to human rights violations throughout the world, the United Nations’ World Conference on Human Rights adopts the Vienna Declaration and Program of Action. It reaffirms a commitment to previously recognized human rights, with special recognition of the right to development and to economic, social, and cultural rights. It calls for an end to discrimination, poverty, and violence in all its forms.

1994 The United Nations drafts the Declaration on Human Rights and the Environment, which focuses on the rights to a healthy environment and to safe and healthy food and water, and on the right to benefit from nature.

1998 Pope John Paul II declares in his World Day of Peace Message that the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “one of the UN’s principal titles to glory,” must be “observed integrity both in its spirit and letter,” and that social, economic and cultural rights must be fully observed.

1999 Pope John Paul II declared that, despite the unprecedented violence of our century, there are “many sources of hope for the Third Millennium. There has been a growing consciousness . . . of universal human rights, proclaimed in solemn and binding international declarations.”

2000 Pope John Paul II hails the UN Development Report and declares: “Essential food, health care, education, and work are not just the goals of development but they are fundamental rights, which are still denied to millions . . . Human rights and human development must walk hand in hand . . . this calls for greater international collaboration in favor of the most disadvantaged peoples . . .”

2003 In John Paul II’s World Day of Peace Message, he praises movements supporting human rights for all: “Inspired by the conviction that every human being is equal in dignity, and that society therefore had to adapt its form to that conviction, human rights movements . . . have demonstrated in practice that peace and progress could only be achieved by respecting [this] universal moral law written on the human heart.”

2005 In May 2005, Pope Benedict XVI echoed support for human rights: “to continue in this direction [of peace and solidarity], the Church does not cease to proclaim and defend fundamental human rights, unfortunately still violated in different parts of the world, and works so that the rights of every human person will be recognized to life, food, a roof, work, health care, protection of the family, the promotion of social development, and respect of the dignity of man and woman, created in the image of God.” You may be sure that the Church will continue to offer her collaboration to safeguard the dignity of every man and to serve the common good . . . In the concert of nations, she always wishes to foster understanding and cooperation among peoples, based on an attitude of loyalty, discretion and cordiality.”
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