The United Nations

Background

• In 1945, at the end of World War II, the United Nations was founded by 51 countries to preserve peace through international cooperation and collective security. Today, 191 countries are members of the United Nations and are under the UN Charter, a treaty agreed to by all members, which sets basic principles for international relations. (The UN is not a world government, but an organization of member states.)

• The UN's six main branches are the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the Trusteeship Council, the Secretariat, and the International Court of Justice.

• In 1948, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a visionary statement which has had significant impact in the international community. In his speech to the UN in 1995, Pope John Paul II declared: “The UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights is one of the highest expressions of the human conscience of our time.”

• The UN includes “humanitarian bodies,” such as the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Program (WFP), the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Promoting Peace

• The United Nations provides the means to help resolve international conflicts and formulate policies for peacemaking. The 15-member UN Security Council (currently made up of Germany, Guinea, Mexico, Pakistan, Russian Federation, Spain, Syrian Arab Republic, United Kingdom, United States, Angola, Bulgaria, Cameroon, China and Chile) has the primary responsibility for this role. Under a mutually agreed upon structure, decisions of the Council require nine yes votes; a decision cannot be taken if there is a no vote, or veto, by one of the five permanent members (China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States.)

• The UN attempts to address the root causes of war and to establish stable peace and international security. The UN is charged with working to prevent conflicts, as well as to resolve ongoing conflicts through means of peacemaking (bringing parties to agreement through diplomatic means), peacekeeping (deployment of military to control armed conflict by creating a buffer zone), and humanitarian assistance.

• The UN has taken an active role in ceasing the spread of arms and weapons of mass destruction. In its efforts to do so, the UN has made recommendations, supported continuous studies and supported negotiations in this area of concern.

• One of the UN’s central mandates is to promote peace through social development—to work to alleviate poverty by improving economic, health, and social conditions. The UN and its agencies provide development assistance in poor countries. (The UN also provides emergency relief and at least one third of the world’s food aid.)

“The Church deeply appreciates the effort of the UN to establish peaceful cooperation among nations.”

Pope John Paul II, Address to the Diplomatic Corps, 2001
Discussion Questions

Why do you think countries around the world, including the U.S., felt a need for an international, united organization after World War II?

Why have there been misunderstandings and fears about the United Nations in some parts of the U.S. during the last decade?

Why has the Catholic Church, especially Pope John Paul II, been so supportive of the United Nations?

Activities

1. Understanding the United Nations

Go to the UN web site (www.un.org) and print out information on the main branches, the humanitarian bodies, and other aspects of the UN. Divide the information among small groups and have each group put together a creative way to inform the entire group or class about this information, using visuals, role play, skits, etc. After 20-30 minutes, have groups make their presentations. End with prayer below.

Prayer For A Uniting of Nations, for the United Nations

O loving and gracious Creator,
Your love embraces all members of the human family,
Your care extends to the least of those among us,
to all our brother and sisters in every part of the earth.

You call us to a mature love and concern for the entire human community.
You call us as individuals, as a nation, as a united community of nations.
Let us hear this prayer in our hearts and respond with faith and good will.

Bless all efforts toward uniting peoples and nations.
Bless the United Nations
As it strives to be an authentic community,
As it witnesses to the needs of all, to the rights of all,
As it toils in the difficult work of peacemaking in all its aspects.

Grant us the wisdom and the grace
To become a true global family
And witness Your Reign on this earth.

Amen.

2. United Nations Debate on Iraq

Divide your group or class into 16 teams representing the 15 members of the UN Security Council (currently Germany, Guinea, Mexico, Pakistan, Russian Federation, Spain, Syrian Arab Republic, United Kingdom, United States, Angola, Bulgaria, Cameroon, China and Chile), and a Vatican delegation. Have team members research the positions and perspectives of their assigned country (including the Vatican) on the current situation in Iraq. Teams may do their research using news journals and/or the Internet.

After the teams have completed their research, convene a mock UN Security Council meeting, in which the different members of the council, along with the Vatican representative, explain their positions on the current situation in Iraq. Time should be allotted for discussion and debate. After a set amount of time and an equal opportunity for every group to be heard, conduct a debriefing session, discussing what was learned in the exercise, both about the content and the process of the current UN Security Council debate.