

THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

60 YEARS LATER

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This December 10, 2008, brings the 60th anniversary of the official signing of the United Nations' landmark *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. To mark this special occasion and to evaluate the current status of this key document, the Embassy of the U.S.A. to the Vatican City State organized a series of conferences.

The theme of the daylong forum held on October 16 was “For Everyone, Everywhere: Universal Human Rights and the Challenge of Diversity.” The meeting hall at the host *Istituto Maria Santissima Bambina* was bulging with prelates, ambassadors, professors, and students who came to learn from the stellar speakers on the program.

For six decades the *Declaration* has been bandied about by supporters and detractors. During his May 2008 appearance at the United Nations Pope Benedict XVI indicated some threats and opposition to the document in current times, and highlighted the need to scrutinize progress and bolster this modern *magna carta*.

In response to the papal invitation to evaluate this Human Rights Project, Mary Ann Glendon , U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See, opened the forum with a paper by University of Chicago political theorist, Jean Bethke Elshtain. Professor Elshtain explained how the universality of the *Declaration* has been questioned by some factions in recent times, who consider it a “Western document” which reflects only the thinking of the European-influenced parts of the world and by particular interest groups in the West. Such attitudes contribute to the fragmentation of the *Declaration*, as though it was offering a buffet of choices. Both groups reinterpret the document because they choose to ignore its fundamental, understanding of the dignity of the human person, the most

important contribution of Catholic social teaching to the formulation process of the *Declaration*.

In another presentation Ambassador Glendon paid tribute to the “great generation” of diplomats who served on the composing commission of 18 members which was headed by Eleanor Roosevelt. She pointed out that the *Declaration’s* adoption without a single dissenting vote was a near miracle, considering the cultural diversity of the commission and the political minefield in which they had to work.

In the troubled times of the late 1940s relations between the Soviet Union and the West were deteriorating rapidly, Glendon explained, and conflicts were erupting in many areas of the world, especially in Palestine, Greece, Korea, and China. Yet only eight of the 58 member states abstained: Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and the six-member Soviet bloc. And despite the Chinese civil war that spawned the People’s Republic of China in the year following the *Declaration’s* adoption, one of the principal authors of the document was the Chinese delegate, Confucian philosopher P’eng ch’un Chang.

Glendon also commented on the remarkable collaboration of René Cassin, a backer of the State of Israel, and the Lebanese delegate, Charles Malik, a staunch Christian who was at that time the leading spokesman for the League of Arab States. They found common ground to work together in producing the *Declaration* under emotionally charged conditions.

Melding the wisdom of many cultures and the efforts of many minds, the *Declaration* seemed universal when the 48 nations adopted it. Does it still speak to all peoples? Ambassador Glendon pointed out that some authoritarian regimes began to complain of “Western cultural imperialism” in the human rights project. Those charges, she noted, were followed by efforts of special interest groups to formulate their agendas in terms of human rights. “The more the Human Rights Project showed its power in places like South Africa and Eastern Europe,” she commented, “the more

intense became the efforts to capture its prestige for various ends, not all of which were respectful of human dignity.”

She concluded her address by strongly encouraging all participants to celebrate this 60th anniversary by carefully reading the document, not as simply of list of statements, but as a “whole with mutually conditioning parts.”

Following Ambassador Glendon’s challenging analysis came an extraordinary panel who spoke in a session chaired by Japanese Ambassador to the Holy See, Kagefumi Ueno. The speakers were Professor Hsin-chi Kuan of the University of Hong Kong and Habib Malik, son of the UN charter delegate Charles Malik and professor at the Lebanese American University in Beirut. Their compelling interventions were frank and forthright about past and present situations, and supported the proposition that there has been and is a universal basis for the notion of human rights that resonates with people of the East and Middle East as well as the West.

Other papers by Cardinal Renato Martino and Professor Janne Matlary related Catholic social thought to the *Declaration* and re-established the *Declaration* in the original vision of its authors as an integral text with interdependent parts.

The closing session of the day was an address by Father Thomas Williams, author of *Who Is My Neighbor? Personalism and the Foundations of Human Rights*. He tackled the thorny question of how to recognize a universal foundation for human rights. The framers of the *Declaration* based it on the centrality of the idea of human dignity. But others in later years chipped away at that very foundation causing a fragmentation of the notion of universal human rights. Father Williams contrasted two incompatible visions of human dignity: one that sees dignity possessed by all human beings in equal measure, and only by human beings; and a second outlook that sees degrees of dignity both among human beings and among other species as well. Naturally only the first vision is capable of grounding universal human rights. Otherwise, without that grounding, the Human Rights Project will devolve into a

simple list of special interests determined by consensus and subject to the power plays of pressure groups.

The entire text of the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* – Preamble and thirty articles – may be found on the Internet at www.un.org/Overview/rights.