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FOCUSING ON PEOPLE:
STRIVING FOR PEACE AND A DECENT LIFE ON A SUSTAINABLE PLANET

Mr. President,

On behalf of His Holiness Pope Francis, I am pleased to congratulate Your Excellency on your election as President of this august Assembly and to commend you on the choice of the topic for this General Debate: *“Focusing on People: Striving for peace and a decent life on a sustainable planet.”*

It is a congenial topic for the Holy See. Pope Francis never tires of insisting on people first, especially those who suffer, those who are excluded, marginalized and left behind. The Catholic Church expresses the meaning of focusing on people in these words: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men [and women] of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted... are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ,” because “indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.”¹

Focusing on people means not only protecting them from heinous crimes but also placing them ahead of all national and geopolitical interests and fulfilling all the international political commitments undertaken along the history of the United Nations that relate to social and economic development, starting with those contained in the Charter of the United Nations (Charter of the United Nations, paragraph 4 of the Preamble, article 1.3 and chapter IX).

Mr. President,

Putting people always first means protecting, at every stage and in every circumstance, the dignity of the person, and its human rights and fundamental freedoms, and in a specific way, the rights to life and to freedom of religion from which all other rights flow and which are therefore the common foundation of the pillars of peace and security and integral human development. These two human rights are indivisible from those other rights and fundamental freedoms relating to a dignified spiritual, material and intellectual life for each citizen and for their families – among others, the right to food, the right to water, the right for housing, the right to a safe environment and the right to work.²

With the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the international community committed itself to effective measures to eradicate the root causes of various evils and indignities that many people in the world today are facing. Moments before this Assembly adopted the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, Pope Francis defined the Agenda as an “important sign of hope.”³

One of the fundamental reasons of this hope is that world leaders agreed on “a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity,” “determined to end poverty and hunger, in all their forms and dimensions,” and to ensure “that all human beings can fulfil their potential in dignity and equality and in a healthy environment.”⁴ Their common resolve to “leave no one behind” articulates the core of this focus on people.

Regarding political commitments, Pope Francis has also warned this Organization and the international community against falling into what could be called “declarationist nominalism”. We must, for that reason, guard against “assuaged consciences” and “feeling good,” simply because the 2030 Agenda and other important international accords have been adopted. On the contrary, we must not rest until the legal commitments have been truly accomplished and the political promises have been fulfilled in the lives of people. This requires taking a hard and honest look at the principal challenges that peoples of the world are facing today and will face tomorrow. With this in mind, responsible compliance with the Climate Framework Convention and its Paris Agreement, as well as the implementation of the Addis Ababa Action Agenda and of the 2030 Agenda could be a way of focusing all countries and international organizations on working together for peace, leaving aside the dangerous game of exchanging threats.

From this perspective, the Holy See sees the forthcoming “reform and fine-tuning of the UN Development System”⁵ as an additional opportunity to place people and their needs at the centre of our action. In doing so, as Pope Francis reminded us here two years ago, we have to “allow them to be dignified agents of their own destiny.”⁶

Mr. President,

Christian Churches, in particular the Orthodox and the Catholic Churches, celebrate together on 1 September the *World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation*, to heighten public awareness of their shared responsibility to take care of our common home and to contribute to reversing environmental degradation. To mark the *World Day of Prayer* this year, Pope Francis and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew released a Joint Message affirming that: “The earth was entrusted to us as a sublime gift and legacy, for which all of us share responsibility... Our human dignity and welfare are deeply connected to our care for the whole of creation.”⁷

This call for responsible stewardship finds particular urgency before the deteriorating conditions of our common home and an often purely utilitarian

worldview concerning the things that surround us. Any harm done to the environment is harm done to humanity, of today and tomorrow. Thus, the misuse and destruction of the environment are also accompanied by a relentless process of exclusion, as the deterioration of the planet affects, first and foremost, the many billions imprisoned in poverty and in conditions of environmental stress across the globe. This dramatic reality of exclusion and inequality must lead all of us to take stock of our shared and individual responsibilities. The pressing call and challenge to care for creation invite all of humanity to work without hesitation toward sustainable and integral development.

Improving climate conditions and the natural environment is possible only if we accept the need to change the way we perceive the world and if we change the way we relate to it. Although our common home is falling into serious disrepair, we can reverse the trend of environmental degradation. Indeed, as Pope Francis underlined in his Encyclical *Laudato Si'*, while we are capable of the worst, we are also capable of the best, rising above ourselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start.⁸

Mr. President,

The duty to prevent wars and violent conflicts is an essential component of the Responsibility to Protect. Thus, the Holy See appreciates the Secretary General's explicit and strong emphasis on preventive diplomacy and concurs with his assessment that the "most serious shortcoming" of "the entire international community is the frequent inability to prevent crises."⁹ Prevention requires, first of all, restoring faith in the capacity of humankind for dialogue. An environment of trust is urgently needed. All countries should take a decisive and urgent step back from the present escalation of military preparations. The largest countries and those who have a stronger tradition of respecting human rights should be the first to perform generous actions of pacification. All the diplomatic and political means of mediation should be engaged to avoid the unspeakable.

Mr. President,

Allow me to recall the appeal of Pope Pius XII to all nations on the eve of the Second World War: “the way of justice is promoted by the strength of reason and not with the force of arms... The danger is imminent, but there is still time... nothing is lost with peace. With war, everything is lost. May people come back to understand each other and take up again negotiations. By negotiating with good will and with respect for mutual rights, they will realize that sincere and active negotiations never precludes an honourable success.”¹⁰

In such a context, I would like to recall that a dozen years have passed since the historical gathering of world leaders in this Hall for the 2005 World Summit. Focusing on people, the heads of state and government of the members of this Organization reached consensus on the responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.¹¹ There is no doubt that a collective political consensus is necessary, but a reflection on articles 2.7 and 39 of the Charter of the United Nations is also needed.

The Holy See thus supports all those initiatives that will facilitate the observance of obligations under the Responsibility to Protect, but it would like to remind the international community, once again, that without a legal framework and a fair respect of the international rule of law, the application of the Principle is not feasible.

The war in Yemen is causing a humanitarian catastrophe of apocalyptic proportions. The tragedy from the war in Syria continues to grow every day. Involved players should sit at the UN negotiating table with the sole pre-condition of respecting human rights law and principles and allowing humanitarian access and assistance. At the same time, States, especially those who at some time in recent history have been directly or indirectly involved in the conflict, must undertake all means to reach a ceasefire, a first step towards peace.

The Holy See is particularly concerned for the political divisions and instability in Venezuela with its humanitarian crisis. Also, the complex political and diplomatic tensions in the Arabian Peninsula and the violence, together with the

various humanitarian situations, in the Middle East must be adequately addressed by the international community. All must strive for an end to violence and reach “a solution which can enable Palestinians and Israelis alike to live at last in peace within clearly established and internationally recognized borders, thus implementing the ‘two state solution’”.¹² The ongoing violence and intense political tension in the Democratic Republic of the Congo necessitate an urgent and efficient commitment from all parties to find a solution to the constitutional crisis. Furthermore, there is a need to promote a genuine public awareness of certain ongoing situations of conflict with a view to reaching a negotiated and peaceful solution, especially in Ukraine, South Sudan and Central African Republic, among others.

Along the same lines, as Pope Francis has stated, there is “another kind of conflict which is not always so open, yet is silently killing millions of people. Another kind of war experienced by many of our societies as a result of the narcotics trade”.¹³ The drug trade has joined other forms of corruption and has “penetrated to different levels of social, political, military, artistic and religious life, and, in many cases, has given rise to a parallel structure which threatens the credibility of our institutions”.¹⁴

In the same vein, the Holy See is concerned with the challenges of fighting corruption and terrorism and with promoting stable peace and a sustainable development in many countries of the world. The Holy See also wishes to stress again that terrorism can only be countered by more cohesive and coherent measures at the international level. As terror knows no border, the international community must act as a whole.¹⁵

Mr. President,

The full protection of people is only possible with a durable peace. However, the protection of civilian populations must be assured also during warfare. The recent and gangrening conflicts both weaken, as well as reveal the shortcomings, of the international order, and they cause inexplicable suffering, massive displacements, blatant violations of universal human rights and fundamental

freedoms and extreme poverty. There is no worse manmade crisis than violent conflicts. They drive people forcibly to migrate or become refugees. They engender mass atrocities and crimes against humanity. Indeed, as Pope Francis told this Assembly, “War is the negation of all rights.”¹⁶ The lamentable situation of the hundreds of millions of migrants and refugees fleeing from wars, persecutions, natural disasters and extreme poverty, especially in Nigeria, Myanmar, Somalia, and some countries of the Sub-Saharan region, among others, is a great responsibility for all without exception.

Our common humanity impels us all, as Pope Francis has proposed, to welcome, to protect, to promote and to integrate those who flee from such adverse conditions.¹⁷ These four actions are based on the proposition that migrants, in spite of many real or imagined challenges, are a good for society, and on the principle of solidarity with those in need. In particular, they express our shared responsibility toward the victims of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity that the international community has failed to prevent or stop, in blatant neglect of the principles of international law.

The Holy See will vigorously work to have these four concepts enshrined and reflected in the future Global Compact on safe, orderly and regular migrations, and the Global Compact for refugees. The Holy See believes that these UN-led processes offer a unique opportunity to respond together to challenges through international cooperation and shared responsibility. The Holy See urges the international community to overcome the current political impasse and to go beyond the negative sentiments that we face in opening safe, orderly and regular pathways for migration. In order to achieve the desired outcome, the contribution of political communities, civil societies and all stakeholders is indispensable, each according to their own responsibilities.

While some migrants may be motivated by the legitimate desire of improving their already acceptable situation, most would likely choose not to migrate if they enjoyed peace and economic security in their home countries. It is a basic human right to live in one’s own country, but that right is effective only if the root causes that force people to migrate — such as wars and conflicts, mass atrocities and

persecutions, and dire economic and environmental hardships — are given adequate solutions. Indeed, if basic necessary conditions are met, people will not feel forced to leave their homes, making migration manageable and voluntary. Thus, the focus in negotiating the Compacts should not be limited to stopping migrants in their tracks or confining refugees in camps, but instead, it should address the causes that deprive them of living with dignity and that force them to make life-threatening journeys. This should be our goal. And this should be a key part of the Global Compact for Migration.

Mr. President,

Another great challenge facing the international community is trafficking in persons. At the root of this and other contemporary forms of slavery are wars and conflicts, extreme poverty, underdevelopment and exclusion, lack of education, lack of employment opportunities and environmental catastrophes. But we ought to recognize that on the demand side of such criminal trafficking there is also a crass selfishness, which reaches unimaginable levels of moral irresponsibility in the case of the trafficking of children, organs, tissues and embryos and in the so-called transplant tourism. Such execrable trade is exacerbated by corruption on the part of public officers and common people willing to do anything for financial gain. Indeed, the migration and refugee crises are facilitating an increase in trafficking in persons and other contemporary forms of slavery.

The Holy See and the Catholic Church have long spoken out against the evil of trafficking in persons and through the dedicated work of so many individuals and institutions, they have sought to fight its root causes, to care for the victims, to raise awareness about it, and to work with anyone and everyone to try to eliminate it. Pope Francis calls trafficking in persons an “open wound on the body of contemporary society”¹⁸ and an “atrocious scourge that is present throughout the world on a broad scale.”¹⁹

At the heart of this evil, however, is the utter loss of respect for human dignity and the total indifference to the sufferings of fellow human beings. Modern slavery

happens when “people are treated as objects,” which leads to their being “deceived, raped, often sold and resold for various purposes, and in the end either killed or left devastated in mind and body, only to be finally thrown away or abandoned.”²⁰ Refocusing on people, putting people first in the overall work of this Organization ought unhesitatingly to support the fight against trafficking in persons and other contemporary forms of slavery.

Pope Francis calls on all, in particular the competent authorities, to address such a heinous crime through effective juridical instruments, to punish those who profit from it, to assist the healing and the reintegration of its victims, and to eradicate its root causes. Our response must be commensurate to this great evil of our time.

Mr. President,

The world is awash with all types of weapons, from nuclear weapons to small arms and light weapons. The arms trade, both licit and illicit, keeps on growing. The proliferation of arms, including weapons of mass destruction, among terrorist groups and other non-state actors has become a real danger.

These trends are deeply worrying, but more disturbing still is the deep chasm that separates commitments from actions in the field of disarmament and arms control. While everyone condemns the grave effects of arms proliferation, nothing has substantially changed on the ground, because, as Pope Francis observed, “We say the words ‘No more war!’ but at the same time we manufacture weapons and sell them... to those who are at war with one another.”²¹

This must change. The proliferation of weapons simply aggravates situations of conflict and results in unimaginable human suffering and material costs, profoundly undermining development, human rights and the search for lasting peace. Without greater international and regional cooperation, especially among weapons-producing States, to control and limit strictly the production and

movement of weapons, a world free of wars and violent conflicts will surely remain an illusion.

When Pope Francis addressed this Assembly two years ago today, he drew attention to the “urgent need to work for a world free of nuclear weapons, in full application of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), in letter and spirit, with the goal of a complete prohibition of these weapons.”²² In his 2017 World Day of Peace Message, Pope Francis once again made a plea for disarmament and for “the prohibition and abolition of nuclear weapons.”²³ Unfortunately, the proliferation of nuclear weapons increases international tensions, as is witnessed in the Korean Peninsula. As history demonstrates, regional and bilateral treaties of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons have been effective in establishing whole regions free of these arms. In this sense, it seems all the more urgent to invest in building those circumstances that would facilitate the creation of new bilateral and regional treaties.

The Holy See has signed the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and has already deposited its ratification, because it believes that it is an important contribution in the overall effort toward complete nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, an advance toward the fulfilment of the commitment of the States Parties to the NPT “to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament,” and a step toward negotiating a “general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.”²⁴

While much remains to be done for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons truly to make a difference and achieve its full promise, the Holy See believes that it is one more blow on the anvil toward the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah: “They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; One nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again.”²⁵

Thank you, Mr. President.

¹ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, Opening paragraph.

² Cfr., Pope Francis, Address during Meeting with Members of the United Nations General Assembly, UN Headquarters, 25 September 2015.

³ Ibid.

⁴ United Nations, Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, Preamble.

⁵ Antonio Guterres, Secretary General designate, Remarks to the General Assembly on taking the oath of office, 12 December 2016.

⁶ Pope Francis, Address during Meeting with Members of the United Nations General Assembly, UN Headquarters, 25 September 2015.

⁷ Joint Message of Pope Francis and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on the World Day of Prayer for Creation, Vatican and Fanar, 1st September 2017. Cfr. also Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* n. 261; Pope Francis, Letter for the Establishment of the World Day of Prayer for Creation, 6 August 2015.

⁸ Cfr., *Laudato Si'*, nn. 13, 58 & 205.

⁹ Antonio Guterres, Secretary General designate, Remarks to the General Assembly on taking the oath of office, 12 December 2016.

¹⁰ Pope Pius XII, Address to Leaders and Peoples in the Imminent Danger of War, 24 August 1939.

¹¹ 2005 Outcome Document 138-139.

¹² Pope Francis, Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See, 12 January 2015.

¹³ Pope Francis, Address during Meeting with Members of the United Nations General Assembly, UN Headquarters, 25 September 2015.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Cfr., Permanent of Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations in New York. Statement at the Sixth Committee of the General Assembly, Item 108, 5 October 2016.

¹⁶ Pope Francis, Address during Meeting with Members of the United Nations General Assembly, UN Headquarters, 25 September 2015.

¹⁷ Pope Francis, Address to Participants in the International Forum on "Migration and Peace", 21 February 2017.

¹⁸ Pope Francis, Address to Participants in the International Conference on Combating Human Trafficking, 10 April 2014.

¹⁹ Pope Francis, Address during the Ceremony for the Signing of the Faith Leaders' Universal Declaration Against Slavery, 2 December 2014.

²⁰ Pope Francis, Address to the New Ambassadors Accredited to the Holy See, 12 December 2013.

²¹ Pope Francis, Interview with the Belgian Catholic weekly, "Tertio", 7 December 2016.

²² Pope Francis, Address during Meeting with Members of the United Nations General Assembly, UN Headquarters, 25 September 2015.

²³ Pope Francis, Message for the Celebration of the Fiftieth World Day of Peace, 1 January 2017.

²⁴ Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Art. VI, 1 July 1968.

²⁵ Isaiah 2:4.