Pope Francis tells diplomats 'right to life' is a foundational human right

By Courtney Mares

Pope Francis told diplomats at the Vatican Monday that it is “painful” for him to see more countries move away from “their inalienable duty to protect human life” from conception to natural death.

“The pandemic forced us to confront two unavoidable dimensions of human existence: sickness and death. In doing so, it reminded us of the value of life, of every individual human life and its dignity, at every moment of its earthly pilgrimage, from conception in the womb until its natural end,” Pope Francis said in his annual address to diplomats accredited to the Holy See on Feb. 8.

". . . under the pretext of guaranteeing presumed subjective rights, a growing number of legal systems in our world seem to be moving away from their inalienable duty to protect human life at every one of its phases . . . "

“It is painful, however, to note that under the pretext of guaranteeing presumed subjective rights, a growing number of legal systems in our world seem to be moving away from their inalienable duty to protect human life at every one of its phases,” the pope said.

Speaking from the Apostolic Palace’s Hall of Blessings, the pope told the representatives of the 183 states that currently have diplomatic relations with the Holy See that the “right to life” is a foundational human right.

“For each human person is an end in himself or herself, and never simply a means to be valued only for his or her usefulness. Persons are created to live together in families, communities and societies, where all are equal in dignity. Human rights derive from this dignity, as do human duties, like the responsibility to welcome and assist the poor, the sick, the excluded,” Francis said.

“If we deprive the weakest among us of the right to life, how can we effectively guarantee respect for every other right?”

In his nearly one hour speech, the pope said that the world is facing crises caused by the pandemic, climate change, economics, and politics. Pope Francis remained standing throughout

the speech, which had been postponed from its original date due to pain caused by the pope's sciatica.

Pope Francis appealed for government leaders around the world to work to ensure "universal access to basic healthcare." He also said that shared initiatives are needed at the international level "to support employment and to protect the poorest sectors of the population" after entire sectors faced serious repercussions from the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

"Economic stability must be ensured for all, so as to avoid the scourge of exploitation and to combat the usury and corruption that afflict many countries in the world, together with the many other injustices that occur daily under the weary and distracted gaze of our contemporary society," he said.

He also warned that "the increased amount of time spent at home has also led to greater isolation as people pass longer hours before computers and other media, with serious consequences for the more vulnerable, particularly the poor and the unemployed."

"They become easier prey for cybercrime in its most dehumanizing aspects, including fraud, trafficking in persons, the exploitation of prostitution, including child prostitution, and child pornography."

Pope Francis expressed support for several international treaties and multilateral commitments, particularly mentioning the "**New START**" nuclear weapons treaty between the United States and Russia.

"Our world has too many weapons," the pope said, adding that disarmament should also be applied to chemical and conventional weapons.

The pope also appealed for a renewed political commitment to fostering the stability of **Lebanon** , which he said "risks losing its identity and finding itself caught up even more in regional tensions" due to its economic and political crisis.

“It is most necessary that the country maintain its unique identity, not least to ensure a pluralistic, tolerant and diversified Middle East in which the Christian community can make its proper contribution and not be reduced to a minority in need of protection,” he said.

“A weakening of the Christian presence risks destroying internal equilibrium and the very reality of Lebanon,” he said. “Moreover, without an urgently needed process of economic recovery and reconstruction, the country risks bankruptcy, with the possible effect of a dangerous drift towards fundamentalism.”

“It is therefore necessary for all political and religious leaders to set aside their personal interests and to commit themselves to pursuing justice and implementing real reforms for the good of their fellow citizens, acting transparently and taking responsibility for their actions.”

This year will mark the 10th anniversary of the start of the Syrian war and the 20th anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the United State, Pope Francis pointed out.

“How I wish that 2021 may be the year when the conflict in Syria, begun ten years ago, can finally end,” the pope said, adding an appeal to the international community to “address the causes of the conflict with honesty and courage.”

Pope Francis condemned terrorism, which he said has intensified in the last twenty years since the Sept. 11 attacks, particularly in **sub-Saharan Africa**.

He said: “The targets of these attacks are often precisely places of worship where believers are gathered in prayer. In this regard, I would like to stress that the protection of places of worship is a direct consequence of the defence of freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and is a duty incumbent upon the civil authorities, regardless of their political persuasion or religious affiliation."

The pope said that he also has been following with particular attention the deterioration of

relations on the **Korean Peninsula**, the situation in the South Caucasus, and the political and social tensions in the Central African Republic.

He also expressed concern regarding the recent coup d'état in **Myanmar**, food insecurity in **Yemen**
, and the displacement of peoples in Africa's Sahel region.

"The closing of borders due to the pandemic, combined with the economic crisis, have also aggravated a number of humanitarian emergencies, both in conflict areas and in regions affected by climate change and drought, as well as in refugee and migrant camps," Francis said.

"I think especially of **Sudan**, where thousands of people fleeing the Tigray region have sought refuge, as well as other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, or in the Cabo Delgado region in Mozambique, where many have been forced to leave their own lands and now find themselves in highly precarious conditions."

Pope Francis said that he is hopeful that the next United Nations Climate Change Conference in Glasgow this November will lead to an effective agreement addressing the consequences of climate change.

He said that he could not fail to mention "the increased warming of the earth, which has caused devastating fires in Australia and California" and the floods in Vietnam and the Philippines.

"In Africa too, climate change, aggravated by reckless human interventions – and now by the pandemic – is a cause of grave concern. I think particularly of food insecurity, which in the last year has especially affected Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, with millions of people suffering from hunger. In South Sudan too, there is a risk of famine," the pope said.

The pope ended his speech to the diplomats from around the world with a note on the **pandemic's implications for religious freedom**
.

“Even as we seek ways to protect human lives from the spread of the virus, we cannot view the spiritual and moral dimension of the human person as less important than physical health,” he said.

“Freedom of worship, furthermore, is not a corollary of the freedom of assembly. It is in essence derived from the right to freedom of religion, which is the primary and fundamental human right. This right must therefore be respected, protected and defended by civil authorities, like the right to bodily and physical health."

"For that matter, sound care of the body can never ignore care of the soul.”

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