

70th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Special Event: "Dignity of Life"

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Introduction to the Panel on the Universality of the UDHR

by the moderator, H.E. Ambassador Marie-Thérèse Pictet-Althann

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For over 9 centuries, the hospitaller vocation of the Order of Malta has been at the centre of its worldwide activities. Through its many hospitals, clinics and medical facilities, also under difficult conditions and in far to reach places, the upholding of the right to life is a priority, in particular in crisis situations which require special attention with regard to the protection of displaced persons. Through its spiritual dimension and its mission to alleviate suffering and care for the poor and the sick without distinction of religion, race, origin and age, the Order is particularly committed to ensure the dignity and sanctity of human life. In this spirit, it established in 2005 the International Association of Catholic Bioethics (IACB), which since 2017, is the centre of expertise for all questions the Order of Malta's Sovereign Council has on bioethics. This Association is a resource for promoting ethical reflection and practice in the healthcare works of the Order. At its international colloquium on "Globalization and the Culture of Life", it clearly affirms "that the right to life is inalienable" and "the Church's traditional position that assisted suicide and euthanasia are morally illicit".

We are privileged to have amongst us today Professor Bill Sullivan, member of the IACB Governing Council and its Academic Director who will be speaking during the second panel. Thank you for coming to Geneva in order

to participate in our discussions and also for having contributed an inspirational article on the topic “Is there a Right to Die” to the booklet published for this event entitled “Right to Life and Human Dignity”.

The Order of Malta’s universal character brings me to our discussion on the universality of the UDHR and its challenges. In its article 3, the 1948 Declaration provides an extremely brief and concise definition: “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.” Since then a number of international instruments have been developed, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam, the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the International Convention on the Protection of Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Although, these texts do not necessarily contradict the UDHR, their intention is to provide an approach adapted to specific cultural, social, religious, ethnic or even economic needs. This evolution presents a challenge to the 1948 notion of universality. For instance, in the recently adopted General comment N° 36, paragraph 9, on the right to life of the Human Rights Committee on Civil and Political Rights, the proposed new language gives us food for thought, in particular with regard to the words “facilitate the termination of life” and “wish to die with dignity”. We look forward to the presentations by our distinguished panellists that will guide our discussions on these and other related issues and thank them for sharing with us their knowledge and expertise.