The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE CONFERENCE ON
INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

Clementine Hall
Saturday, 28 October 2017

[Multimedia]

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am pleased to welcome you and I thank the Honourable Ministers of the Italian Government for their words introducing this meeting. I cordially greet the civil authorities present and all those taking part in the Third Conference on International Humanitarian Law, devoted to "The Protection of Civilian Population in Warfare – The Role of Humanitarian Organizations and Civil Society".

This theme is particularly significant as we mark the fortieth anniversary of the adoption of the two Protocols Additional to the Geneva Conventions relating to the protection of victims of armed conflicts. While firmly convinced that war is an essentially negative reality, and that the highest aspiration of mankind is its abolition, the Holy See ratified these two agreements for the sake of encouraging a "humanization of the effects of armed conflicts".[1]

In particular, the Holy See expressed appreciation for the provisions regarding the protection of the civilian population and the goods indispensable for its survival, respect for medical and religious personnel, the safeguarding of cultural and religious treasures, and the natural environment, our common home.

The Holy See, while conscious that Protocol Additional II on the protection of the victims of non-international armed conflicts is marked by certain hesitations and omissions, continues to consider these instruments as opening a door to further developments of international humanitarian law.[2] These would take appropriate account of the nature of modern armed conflicts and the physical,

moral and spiritual sufferings that accompany them.

Despite the praiseworthy attempt to lessen, through the codification of humanitarian law, the negative consequences of hostilities on the civilian population, all too often we receive, from various theatres of war, evidence of atrocious crimes and grave offences against individuals and their dignity, perpetrated with utter disregard for the most elementary consideration of their humanity.

Images of corpses, of mutilated or decapitated bodies, of our brothers and sisters who are tortured, crucified, and demeaned even in their remains, are an affront to the conscience of mankind. There are growing reports of ancient cities, whose cultural treasures date back thousands of years, being reduced to ruins. Or of hospitals and schools deliberately attacked and destroyed, thus depriving entire generations of their right to life, to health and to education.

How many churches and places of worship have been the target of deliberate attacks, often at times of prayer, with numerous victims among worshippers and ministers, in violation of the fundamental right to freedom of religion! At times, sad to say, the way such news is reported can lead to a kind of saturation that anaesthetises people and relativizes the gravity of the problems. As a result, they find it more difficult to be moved to compassion and to open their conscience to a sense of solidarity.[3]

If this is to happen, a change of heart is necessary, an opening to God and neighbour, that would encourage people to overcome their indifference and to experience solidarity as a moral virtue and a social attitude capable of inspiring a commitment on behalf of suffering individuals.[4]

At the same time, it is encouraging to see the many examples of solidarity and charity that emerge in times of war. There are so many individuals, so many charitable and non-governmental organizations both within and outside the Church, whose members spare no effort and fear no danger in their efforts to care for the wounded and ill, to bury the dead,[5] to provide food to the hungry and water to the thirsty, and to visit prisoners.

Indeed, the help given to victims of conflicts combines a number of works of mercy, those acts on which all of us will be judged at the end of our lives. May humanitarian organizations act always in accordance with the fundamental principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and autonomy. It is my hope that those principles, which constitute the core of humanitarian law, can *find a place in the conscience* of combatants and humanitarian aid workers, and then be *put into practice*.[6]

Where humanitarian law presents hesitations and omissions, may individual consciences be able to acknowledge the moral duty to respect and protect the dignity of the human person in every circumstance, especially in those situations where it is most endangered. For this to happen, I would like to mention *the importance of prayer* and the need to ensure that, alongside technical

and legal training, spiritual assistance be given to soldiers and humanitarian aid workers.

Dear brothers and sisters, to all those – and some of them are here with us today – who have risked their own lives to save those of others and to alleviate the suffering of peoples affected by of armed conflicts, Jesus' words in the Gospel of Matthew are addressed. He says: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (25:40).

I entrust you to the intercession of Mary Most Holy, Queen of Peace, and I ask you, please, to pray for me. To you and your families I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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[1] *Déclaration du Saint-Siège formulée lors de la ratification du « Protocole additionnel aux Conventions de Genève du 12 août 1949 relatif à la protection des victimes des conflits armés non internationaux »*, 8 June 1977.

[2] Cf. ibid.

[3] Cf. Message for the 2016 World Day of Peace, "Overcome Indifference and Win Peace", 3.

[4] Cf. ibid., 6

[5] Cf. Message for the 2016 World Day of Peace, "Overcome Indifference and Win Peace", 7.

[6] Cf. *Déclaration du Saint-Siège formulée lors de la ratification du « Protocole additionnel aux Conventions de Genève du 12 août 1949 relatif à la protection des victimes des conflits armés non internationaux »*, 8 June 1977.