



# The Holy See

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***ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE MEMBERS OF THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE  
OF HUMANITARIAN LAW\****

*Tuesday, 18 May 1982*

*Dear friends,*

The International Institute of Humanitarian Law, which you represent, is of relatively recent foundation, but the aims that it pursues correspond to age-old aspirations of the human race. Indeed, it exists to further the protection by international law of rights that are part of man's very nature. I am therefore very happy to meet you and to express to you my appreciation of your work.

The growing body of international humanitarian law safeguarding man's primary requirements - such as life and physical integrity, freedom and moral dignity - finds solid foundation and true value only in connection with human rights that exist prior to the drawing up of agreements between States on the matter. The State authorities have the obligation to respect these rights both in international relations and in dealing with their own citizens.

The Charter of the United Nations and many other documents provide a solid basis today for this view. Man can no longer be considered merely as an object to be dealt with by international law, as some would have had it: he is the original subject of basic rights not conferred on him extrinsically, rights that have direct relevance for international order and that are binding on all authorities.

International humanitarian law has experienced a considerable development in recent times. Christianity offers this development a basis in its affirmation of man's autonomous value and pre-eminent dignity as a person with his own individuality, complete in his essential constitution, and endowed with rational consciousness and freedom of will. In past centuries too, the Christian view of man inspired the tendency to mitigate the traditional ferocity of war, so as to ensure more

human treatment for those involved in the hostilities. It made a decisive contribution to the affirmation, both morally and in practice, of the rules of humaneness and justice that are now, in duly modernized and specified form, the nucleus of our present-day international conventions.

It is because international humanitarian law has as its basis the rights of which the human person is the original and autonomous subject that that law is universal in its application. It applies everywhere and in every circumstance, in peace and in war, in normal times and in emergencies due to internal political disturbances and tensions or caused by natural disasters.

In spite of the efforts made in modern times on the juridical level to rule out the use of war as a legitimate means of dealing with international disputes, armed conflicts of various kinds continue to be stirred up in one area or another. International humanitarian law must be imposed in the conflicts. There are recognized rules limiting the violence of war and protecting its victims, rules that have now been universally accepted by the common conscience of the peoples of the world, and these rules must be observed.

But international humanitarian law must also give attention to the fate of the growing number of refugees seeking asylum: those people, young and old, who require every kind of material and moral assistance after being forced to leave their original community and often after seeing their family broken up. It must give attention to the peoples of the Third World condemned to underdevelopment and hunger, while a ruinous competition goes on for the possession of ever more plentiful and murderous weaponry. It must give attention to those who are persecuted for political reasons, many of them arrested and detained without any safeguards against the abominable practice of torture, and in some cases made to disappear while their relatives grieve and the authorities keep silence. It must give attention to the victims of natural disasters and those provoked by man, in order that international solidarity may come to their aid in the fullest way and with the most effective means available.

In short, international humanitarian law is for the whole of suffering mankind: for the injured, prisoners, the weak, the helpless, the poor, the oppressed. Its observance or non-observance is a real test for the ethical foundation and for the very reason for existence of the international community.

I pray God to assist your esteemed institute in spreading knowledge of humanitarian law, in fostering its development and in ensuring its concrete application at all levels. May God bless your efforts, both as individuals and as a group, in pursuit of these noble aims. And may he also inspire many others to work generously and wholeheartedly for this all-important cause.

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*\*Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II, vol. V, p.1751-1753.*

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