

**Speech Title: Building New Frameworks for Multilateralism and International Law**

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Dear Chair,

Distinguished co-panelists,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me begin by expressing my sincere gratitude to the Fondazione Centesimus Annus Pro Pontifice for convening this timely and deeply needed reflection. I am equally honored to share this panel with such distinguished colleagues, and to engage with all of you on a topic that goes to the heart of our common future.

The theme guiding this conference - a fragmented world in search of spirituality, freedom, and pluralism - is profoundly relevant. Yet, there is a tragic irony that frames our discussion today: at a moment when multilateralism is more necessary than ever, it is simultaneously facing an unprecedented wave of contestation, aggressive attacks, and profound distrust.

We live in an era of overlapping crises - climate change, technological disruption, geopolitical fragmentation, and deepening inequalities. All these crises are transboundary by nature. None can be addressed by any single nation alone. They demand collective action, shared norms, and cooperative institutions. In other words, they demand multilateralism.

Nevertheless, the very system designed to enable such cooperation is being challenged- politically, intellectually, and, increasingly, normatively. There is an extra challenge. If the historian Eric Hobsbawm were alive today, I have the impression he would have looked at our fractured landscape and added a final

volume to his history of eras: *The Age of Radical Uncertainty*. This reality only makes our task more complex.

## **LOOKING BACK**

To navigate this tension, it is useful to recall where we come from.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, humanity faced a fundamental question: how to rebuild the social contract at the global level. The response was not only institutional - it was civilizational. The creation of the United Nations system embodied a profound belief that peace, development, and human dignity required shared rules, shared responsibilities, and shared values.

UNESCO, in particular, articulated this vision with remarkable clarity. As stated in its Constitution, “since wars begin in the minds of men and women, it is in the minds of men and women that the defenses of peace must be constructed.” This was not a metaphor—it was a program of action. The founding vision of UNESCO placed at its core the idea that peace is inseparable from knowledge, and that knowledge depends fundamentally on the free flow of information and ideas. In today’s language, we would say that peace requires inclusive and open knowledge societies.

## **PATH DEPENDENCE**

This historical perspective matters because, as the economist Douglass North reminded us, institutions evolve through path dependence. The choices we made in the past shape the possibilities available to us today. Rethinking multilateralism, therefore, is not about starting from a blank page - it is about understanding the path we have traveled.

And indeed, there is a growing consensus that we need a renewed global social contract. But renewal does not mean rupture. It means anchoring ourselves in the fundamental achievements of the past 80 years, while correcting our shortcomings and adapting to new realities.

## **INNOVATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS**

This brings me to a critical point: we must deconstruct the false narrative that innovation is in opposition to the protection and promotion of human rights. In reality, it is exactly the opposite.

The technological revolution we are living through did not emerge in a vacuum. It was made possible by an international rule of law system that protected academic freedom, supported the mobility of researchers, and enabled the global circulation of ideas and the guarantee of contracts. It was enabled by environments in which scientists could work freely, journalists could report independently, and citizens could access information. Innovation flourishes where freedom is protected.

As Saint Thomas Aquinas taught, the human intellect is ordered toward truth. In our multilateral policies, we would emphasize, in a similar way, that information and knowledge are public goods and, as such, must be nourished and protected. More recently, my dear friend Maria Ressa warned us: “Without facts, you cannot have truth; without truth, you cannot have trust; and without trust, you cannot have democracy.”

## **GOVERNANCE CHALLENGE**

The challenge we face today is not simply technological. It is profoundly political and ethical: how to ensure that technological transformation supports human dignity, democratic values, and shared prosperity.

This takes us directly to the question of governance—and to the importance of multi-stakeholder frameworks. One of the most significant evolutions within the UN system over the past decades has been the recognition that governance cannot be limited to states alone. The complexity of our challenges requires the meaningful participation of civil society, academia, the private sector, and local communities.

In this regard, the concept of multi-stakeholderism has deep affinities with principles embedded in Catholic social doctrine. We see powerful historical examples of this in Latin America, particularly in the experience of the *Comunidades Eclesiais de Base* (CEBs). Propelled by essential figures like Dom Hélder Câmara and Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns, and educators such as Paulo Freire, these communities were built on the idea that true social transformation must emerge from inclusive dialogue and shared responsibility. They created spaces where ordinary citizens could actively participate in shaping public policy. As Dom Hélder Câmara famously noted

regarding institutional accountability: “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.” Genuine participation is about asking those structural questions.

## **NEW CONTEXT**

However, we must also recognize that the context today is fundamentally different from that of the post-war period.

At that time, democratic values and human rights were our guiding beacons. Today, those very foundations are under strain. We are witnessing increasing attacks on independent judges, independent journalists, and independent scientists and comedians, specially comedians - the core accountability systems of our societies. Furthermore, where we once thought the key particle of the universe was the atom, intellectuals like Yuval Noah Harari now point out that the key particle of our new reality is *information*.

This forces us to ask a difficult multilateral question: what are the implications for human freedom when the distribution of this “key particle” is concentrated in the hands of a tiny handful of private companies?

## **MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS**

This is exactly the warning issued by Pope Leo XIV in his groundbreaking new encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*. His Holiness warns us that when such immense technological power is concentrated in the hands of a few corporate actors, it becomes opaque, evades public oversight, and gives rise to new forms of dependence and inequality. The Holy Father explicitly links this to the dramatic amplification of disinformation and the manipulation of information, calling on us to protect the shared pursuit of honest communication and social trust.

We need a new global social contract, yes. But it must be a contract that preserves our key historical achievements. It must protect and reinforce human rights, strengthen accountability systems, and deepen multi-stakeholder participation. Most critically, it must bring back a shared public sphere of discussion where accurate and reliable information is the norm, not the exception. Without a shared understanding of facts, multilateralism becomes impossible.

## **FUTURE**

There is no other way forward but to do this together.

For UNESCO, this means continuing to defend accountability systems—free media, independent science, and open institutions. It means challenging the false dichotomy between innovation and human rights, and advancing global governance of digital and information ecosystems anchored in international human rights law. We must guarantee freedom of expression and access to information for all, and not just for a few.

As Mark Twain reminded us: *“against the assault of laughter, nothing can stand.”*

In rebuilding trust, renewing solidarity, and reimagining multilateralism, keeping our sense of humor may also be part of our shared responsibility.

In a fragmented world, the search for spirituality, freedom, and pluralism is inseparable from the search for trust, truth, and shared responsibility. Ultimately, that is the very essence of multilateralism.

Thank you.

