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**INTERVENTO DEL PRESIDENTE DELLA PONTIFICIA ACCADEMIA DELLE SCIENZE SOCIALI  
AL DIBATTITO INFORMALE DELL'ASSEMBLEA GENERALE DELL'ONU SU "CIVILIZATIONS  
AND THE CHALLENGE FOR PEACE: OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES" (10 - 11 MAGGIO  
2007)**

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Pubblichiamo di seguito il testo dell'intervento tenuto ieri , giovedì 10 maggio, dalla Prof.ssa Mary Ann Glendon, Presidente della Pontificia Accademia delle Scienze Sociali e Docente di Diritto presso la "Harvard University", alla tavola rotonda su "La Religione nella società contemporanea" nel corso del Dibattito informale dell'Assemblea delle Nazioni Unite a New York, sul tema: "Le civiltà e la sfida della pace: ostacoli e possibilità":

**● INTERVENTO DELLA PROF.SSA MARY ANN GLENDONProspects for Cross-Cultural and Inter-Religious  
Relations  
in Contemporary Society**

This afternoon's panelists have been asked to discuss the challenge of promoting a culture of mutual respect and tolerance in contemporary societies. In theory, the accelerated movement of people and ideas in today's world might be expected to foster cooperation rather than conflict, mutual understanding rather than mutual suspicion. And to some extent it has, especially as people get to know each other on a personal level. The problem is how to seize the available opportunities and to reduce the incidence of misunderstandings, tensions and violence.

For those who would like to take a hopeful view, I suggest that we need not look far to find an encouraging example of a cross-cultural dialogue that overcame enormous obstacles to yield one of the UN's most enduring contributions to peace. I am referring to the debates that led up to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Today, many have forgotten that that historic document was the product of an impressively multicultural collaboration. Nor do many remember how deep were the divisions that had to be overcome by a drafting group that included a Confucian scholar from China, Muslims from Egypt and Iran, a French Zionist, an Indian woman of Hindu origin, members of various Christian denominations, and four devout Marxists. Hardly anyone thought that group would be able to agree on a few basic principles of human decency. But the Declaration--with its

affirmation that we all belong to one human family--remains a beacon of inspiration for everyone who holds hopes for cross-cultural collaboration. At the same time, it is a sober reminder that, while high-level dialogue has an important role to play, its role is a limited one--an element in a never-ending process that must be nourished within the capillaries of society.

Therein, of course, lies a challenge for religious and cultural leaders: that of motivating their followers to meet others on the plane of reason and mutual respect, while remaining true to themselves and their own beliefs.

Why has it been so difficult to meet that challenge? For one thing, religion has often been exploited for political purposes. But many obstacles cannot be blamed on outside forces. They include not only misunderstandings about the faith of others, but also a poor grounding in one's own faith. Thus, another crucial task for leaders and educators is to find resources *within their own traditions* for promoting respect and tolerance, and to draw upon those resources as they transmit their traditions to their followers.

Such efforts at the local level may well prove decisive, for religious communities have great potential to help heal wounds, to build bridges, and to band together against extremists who would manipulate religion to promote hatred and violence. What Eleanor Roosevelt once wrote about bringing human rights to life applies equally to creating a culture of mutual respect among peoples: "Where," she asked, "do human rights begin? In small places, close to home--so close and small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world.... Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere."

That wise observation, I venture to suggest, provides grounds to be cautiously hopeful about our present situation. For, increasingly, religious and cultural pluralism is a fact of life. More and more people are getting to know members of other cultures and religions. Many, especially young people, are building lasting friendships--in schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces. In "small places" like these, people are beginning to move beyond mere tolerance. They are beginning to learn from one another, and to have their horizons enlarged by one another. As Pope John Paul II put it in his 1995 address to the United Nations, "The 'difference' which some find so threatening can, through respectful dialogue, become the source of a deeper understanding of the mystery of human existence."

To be sure, the path beyond tolerance will be strewn with obstacles. But there really is no alternative if human beings are to improve the chances for peace on our increasingly interdependent, yet conflict-ridden planet. To give up on the possibility of meaningful "dialogue with all those seriously concerned for humanity and for the world in which we live" (Pope Benedict XVI, *DCE*, 27) would be to give up on the dreams of the men and women who created the great organization where we meet today.

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