

Keynote Meditation at the United Nations September 11, 2017 Prayer Service
 Most Reverend John O. Barres, STD, JCL
 Bishop of Rockville Centre (Long Island, New York)

Mr. Secretary General, Mr. President of the General Assembly, [Mr. President of the 71st Session,] Archbishop Auza, Your Excellencies, Esteemed Diplomats, United Nations Staff and NGO delegates, fellow religious leaders, and dear Ladies and Gentlemen:

As we ponder together the critical themes of the 72nd General Debate “Focusing on People: Striving for peace and a decent life for all,” we also remember, on this 16th Anniversary of 9/11, the souls of those who were killed on that day.

Many of us remember *The New York Times* series after 9/11 that gave individual portraits of every person who was killed. There were portraits of employees of the Windows of the World restaurant from hard-working immigrant families, investment bankers, security guards, office workers, firefighters, police officers and other first responders.

The people represented a huge variety of religions, ethnic backgrounds and economic levels. The journalists from *The Times* captured each person’s particular humor and personality, their hopes and dreams, their relationships with their families, friends and co-workers.

The underlying theme of this series was that those who died on 9/11 still matter, still inspire us and are, mysteriously, still with us.

For Christians who believe in the Communion of Saints and for all those who believe in relationships that bridge the chasm of death,¹ we draw inspiration from these souls and from the sacrifices that we witnessed on 9/11. Each one of us here, the tens of thousands associated in the mission of peace of the United Nations, all those involved in “Focusing on People and Striving for a decent life for all on a sustainable planet,” find in the 9/11 heroes’ ongoing witness a calling to expand our souls and our global vision of peace and justice in the world and to commit ourselves anew to the sacrifices necessary to make that vision a reality.

On September 25, 2015, Pope Francis addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations. Citing his encyclical on the Care for our Common Home, *Laudato Si’*, he emphasized that the “defense of the environment and the fight against exclusion demand that we recognize a moral law written into human nature itself.” By this Pope Francis was pointing out that the inherent ethical law inscribed in our humanity bears witness to human dignity and is the foundation for all human rights. It is the cornerstone for an integral ecology and the basis of ecological conversion. The protection and promotion of human life in all its stages that flows from it provide the starting point for every human-centered approach and for the striving for a decent life for all on a sustainable planet that is at the heart of the 2030 Agenda.

The dignity of human life is at the core of a humane, ethical and compassionate approach to the global reality of migration. When human life is not recognized as inviolable, all barriers fall.

¹ Cf. Bishop Michael Saltarelli’s 2002 Pastoral Statement to the People of God of the Diocese of Wilmington entitled *September 11th One Year Later*. Bishop Barres was the primary writer of the statement.

Human rights and the preservation of the environment become simply options without particular normative value. The tragic deaths of migrants fleeing war and conflict sadly become mere statistics that are easily forgotten and eventually consigned to the back rows of dusty archives.

When Pope Francis traveled in February 2016 to Ciudad Juarez, on the border of Mexico and the United States, he described why the migration crisis ultimately derives from inadequate respect for the human person. It is above all, he indicated, a “human tragedy” that cannot be quantified only “in numbers and statistics,” but must be measured “with names, stories, families.” (Homily at Ciudad Juarez on the Border, February 17, 2016)

A few weeks ago on Long Island, where I became the bishop in January, we were visited by Cardinal Gregorio Rosa Chavez of El Salvador. Cardinal Rosa Chavez was a close friend and right hand of El Salvador’s courageous Archbishop and martyr, Oscar Romero, who was murdered in 1980 while celebrating Mass in a hospital caring for the terminally ill. He was assassinated minutes after he had summoned soldiers conscientiously to obey God in respecting the human dignity of their neighbors rather than follow the directives of government and military leaders ordering them to violate their neighbors’ human rights through torture, slaughter and other evils.

Cardinal Rosa Chavez and I jointly made an appeal for comprehensive immigration reform in this country and globally, grounding that appeal in the principles of the dignity of the human person, human life and the family, and in the social justice practice of going to the roots of social problems and systematically addressing poverty. We also appealed to gang members on Long Island and throughout the United States, who are enmeshed in the evil of human trafficking and drug cartels, to reject the culture of death and dehumanization and embrace a culture of life and love.

Archbishop Romero was executed because he would not bend in this defense of the intrinsic value of the lives of all people, especially the poorest and most marginalized. His message in support of life and dignity has never faded but instead has become louder and more powerful with every passing year. How moving it was that in March 2015, to mark the 35th anniversary of his death, there was a stunning exhibition at the Curved Wall of the UN Conference Building detailing his life, work and martyrdom, and illustrating how his example of service and leadership in the cause of human dignity continues to shine as a summons for all peoples of the world to emulate.

Archbishop Romero — like the heroes of 9/11, like so many agents of the United Nations who give their lives to travel into areas of war and abject poverty to save lives or provide them with a better life — is one in a firmament of bright stars illuminating the world’s darkest nights and indicating to us all the path to personal fulfillment through lifting others up. He humbly shows us how to focus on people and strive effectively for peace and a decent life for all.

As we come together tonight in prayer on the vigil of the beginning of the 72nd session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, we ask God to bless the efforts of all those associated

with the UN to advance human dignity and the human rights that flow from it, to protect us and the world from the scourge of war and environmental destruction, and to lift up all those who are on the margins. We ask him to bestow on us wisdom, prudence, perseverance and integrity, to give us courage not to give up when we encounter obstacles and mercifully to draw long-term good even from our failures. We ask him in a special way to grant the leaders and all those who work at or for the United Nations, the gift of compassion and passion, so that, like Archbishop Romero, hearing the cries of the poor, needy and abandoned, they may live up to the high hope the peoples of the world place in them and, indeed, lead the way to a more united, fraternal, just and merciful world.

May God bless you all and help you bring great fruit from the 72nd Session that begins tomorrow.