

Grace Ceremony – Spirituality and Justice
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco
13 November 2019

Wendy O'Brien

Good afternoon, Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

It is indeed an honour and a pleasure to join you for this important event, and I extend my thanks to the organisers for the invitation that I share a few words with you on this special occasion.

My UNODC colleague Jean-Luc Lemahieu has eloquently articulated the range of contemporary challenges that exacerbate the risks of deepening divisions in society, and the deepening hardships faced by individuals and communities.

In such times it is all the more important that we reflect on, and bring to the fore, that which binds us in strength: our common humanity - our shared human dignity.

The international community has long upheld a shared commitment to human rights and human dignity. These principles are enshrined in the UN Charter, which recognizes the *dignity and worth of the human person*. Further, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, affirms that the *inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world*.

The precious concept of human rights is predicated on the idea that we hold human rights by virtue of our humanity. This is an inherently inclusive concept. We are all *born free and equal in dignity and rights*. This is a beautiful, life-affirming, and unifying concept – we *all* hold human rights. But this does *not* mean that we are all *the same*.

Indeed, central to human rights is the recognition of the diversity of humankind, and the principle of non-discrimination ensures that individuals are entitled to all human rights without distinction of any kind: race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion. . . or other status.

Our diversity, globally, in terms of culture, religion, history, is to be celebrated as a reflection of the profound richness of humankind. The abundant diversity

of humanity is the birthright of our children, and their children, and this is something that we must strive to preserve in the contemporary era in which the speed and pace of global communications, and the rapid advances in the development of technologies, such as artificial intelligence, pose fundamental questions about what it is to be human. Further, we must remain vigilant against a socio-political context, globally, in which our differences are too often framed, speciously, as the source of our problems, rather than our strength. Divisive discourses that promote hate proliferate in contexts where we fail to embrace... to celebrate ...the beauty of our diversity.

And this is why the event today is so important – as a celebration of our diversity, and an affirmation of the profound importance of our coming together in respectful dialogue to promote peace. In addition, and given my role at UNODC in working to prevent violence, in particular violence against children, permit me to briefly reflect on the important role of civil society, and faith-based organisations, in the prevention of crime. The literature on crime prevention demonstrates the role that strong families and strong communities play as protective factors against crime. The strength of communities, the strength of families, and the strength and resilience of individuals is fostered by support structures and sources of care that are close to home. Strong social functioning is supported in schools, in community-based organisations, through sporting clubs and special interest or hobby groups and, in so many communities around the world, faith-based organisations play a fundamental role as leaders in the community, and in offering hubs of support for individuals and families.

This is something that we recognize in our work at UNODC.

UNODC conducts work in regions around the world to support family skills programmes, in partnership with civil society, including initiatives on crime prevention through sport, and on values-based education for children. Work of this kind includes the promotion of knowledge and skills that foster concepts of fairness, peaceful dialogue, non-discrimination, and resilience.

Strengthening communities at the grassroots level is key to ensuring strong social functioning, social cohesion, and the well-being of individuals, families, and communities. These are then natural supports for the perpetuation of strong communities into the future – as well as natural safeguards against crime, and the contexts of hardship and social isolation in which division and hate flourish.

In the best interests of our communities, and in the best interests of our children and their children to come, it is incumbent on us to harness the positive energy of our commitment to peace and social harmony. With this, I extend my thanks to you for your kind attention. May this important occasion contribute to fruitful and ongoing discussions - and the very best outcomes in our shared endeavours.