



Statement by His Excellency Archbishop Ivan Jurkovič
Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the UN and Other International Organizations in Geneva
at the 42th Session of the Human Rights Council
Annual Panel on Indigenous Peoples

18 September 2019

Mr. President,

With Resolution 71/178, the UN General Assembly decided that 2019 would be the International Year of Indigenous Languages.¹ It is a year in which the international community has chosen to redouble its efforts “to preserve, promote and revitalize”² Indigenous Languages, so often in danger of extinction.

“Protecting indigenous peoples and their lands represents a fundamental ethical imperative and a basic commitment to human rights”³ for all. In particular, international human rights law is clear in framing the protection of traditional languages within the wider spectrum of political, social, economic and cultural rights to which indigenous persons are entitled, regardless if they living in indigenous communities or in urbanized settlements.

Moreover, from the perspective of the commitments contained in the 2030 Agenda, indigenous peoples should be engaged as essential partners in implementing the Seventeen Goals, not just as recipients, but as “dignified agents of their own destiny, taking into consideration that integral human development and the full exercise of human dignity cannot be imposed, but rather allowed to unfold for each individual, for every family, in relation to others, and in a right relationship with those areas in which human social life develops.”⁴

Pope Francis has emphasized that “the central issue is how to reconcile the right to development, both social and cultural, with the protection of the particular characteristics of indigenous peoples and their territories”.⁵

The crucial role played by indigenous communities in relationship with their ancestral lands, calls for a different model of development, which takes into consideration

¹ A/RES/71/178, OP13.

² *Ibid.*, PP11.

³ Preparatory Document for the Synod on the Pan Amazon Region, N.5.

⁴ Letter from the Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General, dated 25 September 2016, A/71/430, N.7.

⁵ Pope Francis, Discourse to Participants in the III Global Meeting of Indigenous Peoples Forum, 15 February 2017.

the connection between the centrality of the human person and the environment, a model which finds important elements in many indigenous customs and values.

The cultural heritage of indigenous peoples, of which languages are of pivotal importance, should not be considered a burden, but rather an enrichment of a State's cultural identity. The preservation of indigenous languages, therefore, makes the whole family of nations richer in humanity and provides a wider range of most needed knowledge in relation to the preservation of the environment.

Mr. President,

The Holy See continues to promote indigenous languages; by building centres of study, overseeing the composition of grammar books and the commissioning of numerous translations into those languages. An assortment of such collections is available for research in some Pontifical Universities and institutes of higher education.⁶ Moreover, in various places around the world, as in the Amazon Region, for example “there are already some social communication centres run by indigenous people themselves; [where] they experience the joy of being able to express their own words and voice not only to their own communities but also to the outside world.”⁷

Finally, Mr. President,

next month in Rome there will be the meeting of the Synod of Bishops on the Pan-Amazonian region, called for by Pope Francis, which will aim to reflect on, among other issues, the contribution of indigenous peoples living in that region to the culture of the world and the commitment of the Catholic Church to protect and promote their heritage.

Thank you, Mr. President.

⁶ Statement of the Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, New York, 20 April 2010.

⁷ Pan-Amazon Synod. The Working Document for the Synod of Bishops, N.141.