Francis, the comic strip
Pope Francis speaks to members of the Italian Catholic Jurists Union at the Vatican Dec. 10, 2

Pope Francis speaks to members of the Italian Catholic Jurists Union at the Vatican Dec. 10, 2021. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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Catholics must contribute to helping protect the rights of the defenseless, weak and rejected, Pope Francis said.

"This is an intrinsic call to our faith" and not some insignificant or "passing" moral norm, he said in an audience at the Vatican with Italian legal experts, lawyers and judges.

"Even the least, the defenseless, weak individuals have rights that must be respected and not trampled on," he said.

The pope met Dec. 10 with members of the Italian Catholic Jurists Union who were in Rome attending a national congress Dec. 9-11 dedicated to the legal protection of those who are vulnerable.

"Never before have Catholic jurists been so called upon to affirm and protect the rights of the weakest within an economic and social system that pretends to include diversity but, in fact, systematically excludes those who have no voice," Pope Francis said.

"The rights of workers, migrants, the sick, unborn children, people nearing death and the poorest are increasingly neglected and rejected in this throwaway culture," he said. "Those who are not able to spend and consume seem to be worthless."

"But to deny fundamental rights, to deny the right to a dignified life, to physical, psychological and spiritual care, and to a fair wage means denying human dignity," he said, highlighting the way many seasonal workers are treated and literally "used" to pick fruit or vegetables "and then paid miserably and thrown out, without any social protection."

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He said he can still see and feel what he experienced at the Mytilene refugee camp in Lesbos, Greece, during his recent trip there, and repeated his call that all people and their human rights be protected, and that "the dignity of each person should come before everything."

"Yet, how far we are from this kind of respect!" the pope said. "Abuse, violence, neglect and omissions only increase the throwaway culture. And those without protections will always be marginalized."

"You, as Catholic jurists, are asked to contribute to 'reversing the course,' promoting awareness and the sense of responsibility" in the ways their roles or authority allow, he said.

"Recognizing rights in principle and guaranteeing them in practice, protecting the weakest, is what makes us human," the pope said. "Otherwise, we allow ourselves to be dominated by the law of the strongest and give free rein to oppression."

The recognition of the rights of the weakest "does not derive from a governmental concession. And Catholic jurists are not asking for favors on behalf of the poor but are firmly proclaiming those rights that derive from the recognition of human dignity," he said.

That is why the role of Catholic jurists, whether they are consultants, lawyers or judges, "is to contribute to the protection of the human dignity of the weak by affirming their rights" so that they can contribute to upholding human fraternity and not "disfigure the image of God imprinted in each person," he said.