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Semicircles of long desks with chairs and people with a raised dais with large screens and the

This is an overview of the General Assembly hall at U.N. headquarters in New York City Oct. 12, 2022. Archbishop Gabriele Caccia, the Holy See's permanent observer to the U.N., addressed a General Assembly meeting March 21, 2023, that addressed the urgency of combating racism and racial discrimination 75 years after the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (OSV News photo/David Delgado, Reuters)

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The "distorted" thought that one person is better than another goes against Catholic teachings and flies in the face of universal principles laid out in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Holy See's United Nations envoy told a U.N. General Assembly meeting in New York.

The theme of the March 21 meeting at U.N. headquarters was the urgency of combating racism and racial discrimination 75 years after the adoption of that declaration by the U.N. General Assembly.

Quoting from the international declaration, Archbishop Gabriele Caccia told the U.N. meeting that racism hinged "upon the distorted belief that one person is superior to another, standing in stark contrast with the fundamental principle that 'all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.'"

Despite the commitment of the international community to eradicate it, racism was continuing "to reemerge," warned Caccia, the Vatican's permanent observer to the U.N.

"It is as if it were 'a virus that quickly mutates and, instead of disappearing, goes into hiding and lurks in waiting,'" the archbishop told the U.N. meeting, quoting this time from Pope Francis' 2020 encyclical, "Fratelli Tutti."

He appealed to the world's governments to enact legislation that addressed "overt racism" and to promote "a culture of encounter, solidarity and authentic human fraternity" to "effectively" counter what he said were racial prejudices existing at an even "deeper level … embedded in all aspects of society."

Then, referring to the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, the 2004 work requested by St. John Paul II to consolidate and organize church social doctrine, Caccia told the U.N. General Assembly, "Only the recognition of human dignity can make possible the common and personal growth of everyone and every society."

"To stimulate this kind of growth, it is necessary in particular to ensure conditions of equal opportunity for men and women, and guarantee an objective equality between all human beings," he said.

The archbishop concluded his comments by expressing the Holy See's concern over the racism and racial prejudice sometimes directed against migrants and refugees.

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For her part, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield noted that although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stated all human beings were born free and equal in dignity and rights, the U.S. had "not always done right by this commitment."

"We have a long history of racial discrimination … no one denies that. And I have been discriminated against myself," said Thomas-Greenfield, who is one of only two Black women to have served as the U.S. ambassador to the U.N.

"And yet, I am proud, I am so proud of my country and the progress we have made, and that we are still making today to address these issues," she told the General Assembly.

New York City Mayor Eric Adams, a guest speaker at the U.N. meeting, recounted facing racism as well, and explained what his city was doing about it.

"As New York City's second Black mayor, I know what it feels like to be rejected, and understand the pain of so many who face daily obstacles to opportunities," Adams said in his address.

Discrimination, he said, "has no borders."

"We see it in education, we see it health care, we see it in climate change," Adams said. "We see it in access to clean water, and healthy food."

New York City was now "leading the way" to fight against such racial discrimination, explained Adams, through investments in community organizations aimed at embracing diversity and countering bias, and by closing opportunity gaps through more jobs, job training and affordable housing.

"We are making progress, but we must keep climbing ... as city, as a nation, and as an international community," he said.