

OPENING REMARKS
ARCHBISHOP FRANCIS CHULLIKATT

“Youth Protecting and Promoting Human Dignity”

CHURCH OF THE HOLY FAMILY
NEW YORK, 25 JULY 2011

Your Excellencies, Reverend Fathers, Dear Sisters, Distinguished Guests,

It is my distinct privilege, as the Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, to welcome you here today at this gathering entitled “Youth Protecting and Promoting Human Dignity”.

I would like to thank the organizations that are represented by our presenters: Students for Life of America, chastity.com, Catholic Answers, the Catholic Near East Welfare Association, and Grassroots Films.

It gives me great joy that you responded to the invitation to gather here at this Church of the Holy Family. Thank you for coming. I am looking forward to hearing Kristan Hawkins, Leah Darrow, Megan Knighton, Jeffrey Azize and Michael Campo.

Last August, the United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, launched the UN International Year of Youth. He said “Youth should be given a chance to take an active part in the decision-making of local, national and global levels”. I could not agree more. We are here today so that your voice can be heard.

A month ago this Mission of the Holy See sponsored a Youth Event at the United Nations. When they were given the chance to speak about the issues facing the world, what did they say?

One of the young, a student at Columbia University, remarked:

“we *need* a meaning to life, a reason to live, a purpose for our existence.... Reality is indeed meaningful.... [We are] characters in a drama we didn’t create. At the most basic level, what it means is that there is a cosmic Author to this tale, and that we are not Him.... So even when I don’t like it, there really are some things that I simply should not do, ways that my character in this story is simply not supposed to act... The Natural Law is... ‘written on the heart’, even when we try hard to scribble over it with my own justifications”.

The young voices we heard were also hopeful about the future. They made a pledge, a pledge for life, and they encouraged their young counterparts to make the same pledge. Let me read some of it for you.

“We, the youth who are passionate for life, recognizing that our life is a gift to us and to the world; sensing that we are the survivors of darkening horizons; convinced that the truth alone shall make us free; unafraid of the challenge that lies before us, of the eclipse of truly human values: we pledge to bring a sunrise of hope, a radiant springtime, a clear and united voice, the voice of the Culture of Life, the voice of honor and authentic freedom”.

That is the voice that needs to be heard. Those young people, like Kristan, Leah, Megan, Jeffrey and Michael, are the young leaders who are determined to make a great contribution to the future.

Dear young friends, you can look ahead to the future stretching out before you, so rich in promise. However, there are times when people try to make you feel worthless and make you die inside. But, remember, for God, you are always inestimably valuable, a precious son or daughter of God. So, don’t let them fool you. You are worth far beyond what anyone can imagine.

Everyone is born for a purpose in this world. Do not let the failures and frustrations of life be a setback to your dreams. We were created by God to transcend our mere mortal selves—we were made to be more.

The dignity of the human person is a transcendent value, always recognized as such by those who sincerely search for the truth. Indeed, the whole human history should be interpreted in the light of this certainty (World Day of Peace Message,

1999, #2). Any human society, if it is to be well-ordered and productive, must establish as its foundation this principle, namely, that every human being is a person with God-given dignity.

Respect for the human person entails respect for the rights that flow from his dignity. These rights are prior to society and must be recognized by it. They are the basis of the moral legitimacy of every authority: by flouting them, or refusing to recognize them in its positive legislation, a society undermines its own moral legitimacy (*Pacem in Terris*, #65).

In this sense, I am of the conviction that youth have a significant part to play in the transformation of our society. Ours is a culture of instant gratification, of quick fixes and the quick buck. Today's culture is eager to sideline God to the margins of our society. So, yours is the duty to transform culture following Gospel values and principles which are meant to renew societies as well as individuals. This is the challenge that lies before you.

The Panelists:

Kristan Hawkins has been an advocate for the unborn and pro-life speaker/trainer since high school, when she was asked to volunteer at a Pregnancy Resource Center during her sophomore year of high school. After spending 3 months counseling women not to abort their children, Kristan started the first pro-life group at her high school and eventually was asked to be the West Virginia Teens for Life President. It was during high school, where Kristan organized her first political protest and events aimed at educating students about abortion.

After graduating high school as Valedictorian, Kristan went on to college and again started the first pro-life group on her college campus. In 2005, she graduated Summa Cum Laude from Bethany College in West Virginia with a major in Political Science. In 2006 she became the Executive Director of [Students for Life of America](#).

Kristan will speak about her work promoting a culture of life on college campuses around the United States.

From the hit reality TV Show, America's Next Top Model to now Catholic Speaker, Leah Darrow is the self professed 'Prodigal Daughter'. For Leah, her slow fade from her Catholic faith didn't happen overnight; it developed with bad choices, missed opportunities and choosing a comfortable life versus an extraordinary life. All this changed during one special photo shoot in which God allowed her to see her soul in its current state. This extraordinary and supernatural grace gave her the courage to change every aspect of her life. Leah currently is pursuing a Masters in Pastoral Theology at Ave Maria University. She also is a full time staff member of [Catholic Answers](#) working in both the apologetics and chastity departments.

Leah will speak about her own experience discovering the virtue of modesty and the value of chastity in a western culture that idolizes appearances and pleasure.

A native of Houston, Texas, Megan received her B.A. in History and Applied Sociology from Texas State University and her M.A. in History from Sarah Lawrence College. She has worked with various ecumenical Christian social service organizations in India, Indonesia and Guatemala. While overseas, she was introduced to the work of the [Catholic Near East Welfare Association](#) where she now serves as a development officer. In addition to raising funds and mission awareness for CNEWA and the people and institutions it serves, she is co-founder of ByArtists, a non-profit networking platform for emerging artists. She also provides pro-bono development assistance to start-up non-profits in Manhattan.

Megan will speak about CNEWA's work of upholding human dignity, including providing emergency shelter and medical care, micro-credit programs, and charitable service of the sick and disabled.

Michael Campo and Jeffrey Azize come to us from Grassroots Films.

Michael is a writer, associate producer and co-founder of [Grassroots Films](#), an independent film production company, which has produced inspirational and thought-provoking pictures such as *God in the Streets of New York City*, *Fishers of Men* and *The Human Experience*, of which the new Archbishop of Philadelphia said, “Grassroots Films has produced an astonishing witness to the beauty of the human person under the most trying conditions. For anyone committed to the cause of human dignity, or simply hungry to again see the beauty in life, it shouldn’t be missed.”

Jeffrey co-stars in the critically-acclaimed movie, *The Human Experience*, which tells the story of his travels as he searches for answers to the question: “What does it mean to be human?” The journeys take him and his friends to encounters with homeless New Yorkers, Peruvian orphans and isolated Ghanaian lepers. The film has won over thirty awards and festival accolades internationally, including the *Audience Choice Award* at the 2009 American Cinematic Experience at Tribeca, *Best Documentary* at the 2009 Atlanta International Documentary Film Festival and a 2011 *Christopher Award*.

Behind the camera, Jeffrey works as a production management assistant for Grassroots Films. He is associated with the [St. Francis House](#), a home that helps troubled teenage boys and young men.