Statement of H.E. Archbishop Ettore Balestrero
Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations and other
International Organizations in Geneva, at the
Global IHL Dialogue organized by Switzerland
and the International Committee of the Red Cross - Opening Plenary
Geneva, 3 November 2026

Excellencies, Madam President,

At the outset, allow me to thank Switzerland and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) for convening this dialogue in the lead-up to the High-Level Conference on "Humanity in War", to be hosted in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan on 7 December 2026.

Amidst the persisting climate of conflicts and the trail of suffering and devastation they cause, the Holy See decided to adhere to and actively engage with the *Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment to International Humanitarian Law*. For the Holy See, the drafted outcome documents propose a way forward to advance toward a more tangible implementation of the principles and obligations set out by International Humanitarian Law (IHL).

Indeed, it is precisely in the current troubling context that it becomes even more important to reaffirm the respect for the rules and principles of IHL. Their implementation is not simply a matter of compliance with the law. These rules and principles have an ethical foundation inspired by the consciences of peoples - matured through tragedies and experiences of devastation - and reflect the necessity that the God-given dignity of every human being must always be recognized and respected by all, even in times of armed conflict. With this in mind, looking ahead to the adoption of the Political Declaration at the conclusion of the High-Level Conference, the Holy See believes that it is crucial to stress the following:

1) Firstly, international humanitarian law forbids hostilities conducted amidst and against civilian population. It is extremely regrettable that this still frequently occurs, also at the expense of civilian infrastructures that are essential for the survival and well-being of the population, including schools and hospitals. Moreover, the Holy See reiterates the importance of ensuring that the Global Initiative placed due and specific emphasis on protecting places of worship, which constitute a fundamental part of the cultural and spiritual heritage of peoples and which, alas, are ever more often destroyed, damaged, and misused. To raise awareness on this tragic reality, last February, the Holy See, together with the

ICRC, Jordan, and Kazakhstan, co-organized the high-level event entitled "Respecting Sacred Grounds: Ensuring Protection of Places of Worship during Armed Conflicts as a Legal Obligation, a Preventive Measure, and a Foundation for Peace". In light of the continued and appalling violations of IHL concerning these places of worship, the Holy See urges all States participating in the Global Initiative to explicitly reaffirm in the Political Declaration their commitment to protecting them. In fact, their deliberate destruction "causes far more than material loss; it strikes at the very "soul" of a people and disfigures the human dignity, both of the attacker and of the victim"[1], while further hindering the necessary process of reconciliation and fueling new cycles of hatred and violence.

2) Secondly, since the rapid development and increasing application of artificial intelligence in the military domain is changing the nature of the conduct of hostilities, it is essential to recall that IHL imposes obligations on States, parties to armed conflict, and individuals, not on machines or algorithms. Therefore, responsibilities regarding the violations of IHL must not be shifted from human actors. This is essential for ensuring the safe, transparent, and responsible use of AI in the security sector. As Pope Leo XIV has recalled: "No algorithm can make war morally acceptable. AI does not remove the intrinsic inhumanity of conflict"[2]; if AI is "detached from ethics and responsibility, [it] will render decisions about life and death more rapid and impersonal and will present the use of force as an immediate and viable option."[3]

Excellencies,

The current situation, while daunting, demands tireless and concrete efforts that these discussions, and the collective will of the international community, can help to provide. History is not merely a record of human violence, but also a witness to humanity's capacity to create institutions that protect our shared life. The ICRC itself is one such example, as Pope Leo XIV has recently recalled in his Encyclical "*Magnifica Humanitas*".[4] International humanitarian law, "in addition to guaranteeing a minimum of humanity during the ravages of war, is a commitment that States have made". This commitment must be undertaken without ever losing sight of the fact that "the protection of the principle of the inviolability of human dignity and the sanctity of life always counts for more than any mere national interest".[5]

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[1] Cf. Opening remarks by Rev. Msgr. Daniel Pacho, Undersecretary for the Holy See's Multilateral Sector, Section for Relations with States and International Organizations of the Secretariat of State, at the High-Level Event: "Respecting Sacred Grounds: Ensuring Protection of Places of Worship during Armed Conflicts as a Legal Obligation, a Preventive Measure, and a Foundation for Peace", 25 February 2026.

[2] Pope Leo XIV, Encyclical Letter *Magnifica Humanitas*, n. 188.

[3] *Ibid*. n. 181.

[4] *Ibid.*, n. 123.

[5] Pope Leo XIV, *Address to Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See*, 9 January 2026.

Thank you.