

10 September 2002

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Jan Kavan,
President of the 57th Session of the General Assembly,
at the International Prayer Breakfast**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honor for me to join you all here today. I would like to express my deep appreciation to the organizers of this important gathering - the Christian Ministries of the United Nations, the Abraham International Leadership Ministries and the Christian Embassy. It is a special pleasure for me, since it is the first event in which I am participating as President of the UN General Assembly.

It is on all our minds that our Prayer Breakfast last year was so tragically marked by the horrible attacks against the United States, in particular our host city of New York. In the aftermath of September 11th, religious fundamentalism has been the subject of many discussions. Unfortunately, sometimes these simplify the notion of religion and downgrade it to its most extreme form.

We are gathered here to emphasize and celebrate a more balanced perspective on religion - the perspective of everyday people around the world, to whom it gives a set of beliefs and values, as well as an ultimate account of their place and purpose in the world. For hundreds of millions, spiritual inspiration provides them with the moral strength and the ethical guidance for living. Personal spirituality and collective faith have helped shape the history of humankind through contributions to learning, art, the spirit of inquiry, and people's peace of mind.

The current process of globalization has enabled the people of the world to become increasingly aware of the multitude of world views - and religion is no exception. Religion may either embrace the global world - or reject it. I suggest that it is our responsibility to encourage and celebrate our common humanity in this interdependent world, rather than to vilify other people on the basis of prejudice. History has taught us that, while great acts of giving are common, people also do unspeakable things to one another. This is especially true of people who feel threatened; whether their fear is of outsiders, economic forces, or things they do not understand.

Globalization can make those threats - whether real or perceived - even more profound. I suggest it is therefore imperative for us to continue in our efforts towards deeper mutual understanding of how we may listen to and assist one another as citizens of a common planet. Ultimately, then, our common struggle in the realm of spirituality is against those forces that threaten human dignity. We need to seek what is common to the various religious traditions, and continue to build mutual respect among worldviews, in full recognition of their differing attitudes, beliefs, values and

lifestyles. Every religion contains universal principles, something that is essentially human in us all. In contemporary society, much of the cherished wisdom of the human race is drawn from different religious traditions and practices. I believe it is important for us also to stress religious tolerance and individual religious freedom as part of what is essentially wise and human.

The United Nations stands in the center of the global effort to bring nations, cultures, and religions together with the ultimate goal of building a world society that will live in peace, based on the shared principles of justice, human rights and mutual toleration.

Let this noble goal stay in our prayers today.