



Pope Francis delivers his speech during an audience with members of the Italian Air Force, in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican, Friday, Dec. 10, 2021. (Vincenzo Pinto/Pool photo via AP)

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A consortium of Catholic women's groups is calling on the Holy See to join the Council of Europe and to sign the European Convention on Human Rights, arguing that the Vatican should show consistency by expressing its firm commitment to protecting human rights.

In a petition marking the Human Rights Day declared by the United Nations, the groups said the Holy See is recognized internationally as a sovereign state and presents itself as a firm promotor of human rights and dignity. Yet they noted the Vatican hasn't followed up by adhering to the European Convention, regarded as the gold standard for rights protections around the world.

"For years, the Holy See has acted like a state in its own right. This gives rise to rights, but also to duties," wrote the signatories, which are European members of the Catholic Women's Council, an international umbrella group, .

The Holy See enjoys observer status at the United Nations and the Council of Europe, and has ratified a host of U.N. and Council of Europe conventions. They include the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, the U.N. Convention against Torture, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and other weapons conventions.

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But it has never signed the European Convention on Human Rights, which to date has been ratified by 47 European states.

The convention obliges signatories to respect human rights, including the right to life, liberty, security, freedom of expression, assembly, religion and conscience. It prohibits torture, slavery, forced labor and discrimination based on race, religion, gender or political beliefs.

Signatories must also ensure that defendants receive fair trials before independent and unbiased judges. The convention provides recourse to the European Court of Human Rights for ultimate appeals after national appeals are exhausted.

The Vatican is an absolute monarchy in which the pope wields supreme legislative, executive, and judicial power. It would be loath to allow European commissions to evaluate its policies forbidding the ordination of women, for example, or to subject decisions of the Vatican's criminal or ecclesial tribunals to appeals at the Strasbourg-based European Court of Human Rights.

Yet the pope frequently lectures European leaders on protecting human rights and human dignity, most recently during a visit this month to Cyprus and Greece where he chided Europe for its failure to welcome migrants.

During that trip, Francis lamented that authoritarian rule was on the rise in Europe as democracy wanes.

The women's groups that participated in the petition include Catholic Women Speak in Britain; We Are Church in Ireland, Germany and Austria; Women for the Church in Italy; Voices of Faith in Rome and Liechtenstein, as well as similar progressive Catholic groups in Spain, France, Croatia and Switzerland.