



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS

POPE JOHN PAUL II

FOR THE XXV ANNUAL WORLD DAY OF PRAYER FOR PEACE

BELIEVERS UNITED IN BUILDING PEACE

1 January 1992

1. As is now customary, on 1 January next the annual World Day of Peace will be celebrated.

Twenty-five years will have passed since this celebration was begun, and it is entirely natural that on this anniversary I should recall with undimmed admiration and gratitude the beloved figure of my venerable predecessor Paul VI, whose keen pastoral and pedagogical insight led him to invite all "true friends of peace" to join together in order to reflect on this "primary good" of humanity.

But it is likewise natural, a quarter of a century later, to look back at this period as a whole, in order to determine if the cause of peace in the world has actually made progress or not, and if the tragic events of recent months — some of which are regrettably still going on — have marked a substantial setback, revealing how real is the danger that human reason can allow itself to be dominated by destructive self-interest or inveterate hatred. At the same time, the progressive rise of new democracies has given back hope to entire peoples, inspired confidence in more fruitful international dialogue and made possible a long-awaited era of peace.

Against this background of light and shadows, this yearly Message is not meant to offer either a progress report or a judgment, but only a new, fraternal invitation to consider present human events, in order to raise them to an *ethical and religious vision*, a vision which believers should be the first to live by. Precisely because of their faith, believers are called — as individuals and as a body — to be messengers and artisans of peace. Like others and even more than others, they are called to seek with humility and perseverance appropriate responses to the yearnings for security and freedom, solidarity and sharing, which are common to everyone in this world, which as it were

has become smaller. A commitment to peace of course concerns every person of good will, and this is the reason why the various Messages have been addressed to all the members of the human family. Yet, *this is a duty* which is especially *incumbent upon all who profess faith in God* and even more so *upon Christians*, who have as their guide and master the "Prince of Peace" (Is 9:5).

The moral and religious nature of peace

2. The longing for peace is deeply rooted in human nature and is found in the different religions. It expresses itself in the desire for order and tranquillity, in an attitude of readiness to help others, in cooperation and sharing based on mutual respect. These values, which originate in the natural law and are propounded by the world's religions, require, if they are to develop, the support of everyone — politicians, leaders of international organizations, businessmen and workers, associations and private citizens. What we are speaking of is a precise duty incumbent on everyone, and more so if one is a believer: bearing witness to peace and working and praying for peace are a normal part of good religious behaviour.

This also explains why in the sacred books of the different religions references to peace occupy a prominent place in the context of man's life and his relationship with God. For example, we Christians believe that Jesus Christ, the Son of the One who has "plans for welfare and not for evil" (Jer 29:11) is "our peace" (Eph 2:14); for our Jewish brothers and sisters, the word "shalom" expresses both a wish and blessing in a situation in which man is in harmony with himself, with nature and with God; and for the followers of Islam the term "salam" is so important that it constitutes one of the glorious divine names. It can be said that a religious life, if it is lived authentically, cannot fail to bring forth fruits of peace and brotherhood, for it is in the nature of religion to foster an ever closer bond with the Godhead and to promote an increasingly fraternal relationship among people.

Rekindling the "spirit of Assisi"

3. Convinced of this agreement about this value, five years ago I wrote to the leaders of the Christian Churches and the major world religions in order to invite them to a *special meeting of prayer for peace*, which was held in Assisi. The memory of that significant event has led me to return to and suggest once more *the theme of the solidarity of believers* in the same cause.

At Assisi the spiritual leaders of the major religions from the different continents gathered together: the meeting was a concrete witness to the universal dimension of peace, and confirmed that peace is not only the result of skilful political and diplomatic negotiations or a compromise between economic interests, but depends in a fundamental way upon the One who knows human hearts and guides and directs the steps of all mankind. As people concerned for the future of humanity, we fasted together, meaning thereby to express our compassion and solidarity with the millions

and millions who are victims of hunger throughout the world. As believers concerned with the events of human history, we went on pilgrimage together, meditating silently on our common origin and our common destiny, our limitations and our responsibilities, and on the prayers and expectations of all our many brothers and sisters who look to us for help in their needs.

What we did on that occasion by praying and demonstrating our firm commitment to peace on earth, we must continue to do now. We must foster the genuine "spirit of Assisi" not only out of a duty to be consistent and faithful, but also in order to offer a reason for hope to future generations. In the town of Saint Francis, the Poor Man of Assisi, we began *a common journey which must now continue*, obviously without excluding the search for other ways and new means for a solid peace, built on spiritual foundations.

The power of prayer

4. But before having recourse to human resources, I wish to reaffirm the need for intense, humble, confident and persevering prayer, if the world is finally to become a dwelling-place of peace. Prayer is *par excellence* the power needed to implore that peace and obtain it. It gives courage and support to all who love this good and desire to promote it in accordance with their own possibilities and in the various situations in which they live. Prayer not only opens us up to a meeting with the Most High but also disposes us to a meeting with our neighbour, helping us to establish with everyone, without discrimination, relationships of respect, understanding, esteem and love.

Religious sentiment and a prayerful spirit not only help us to grow inwardly; they also enlighten us about the true meaning of our presence in the world. It can also be said that the religious dimension encourages us to make an even more committed contribution to the building of a well-ordered society in which peace reigns.

Prayer is the bond which most effectively unites us: it is through prayer that believers meet one another at a level where inequalities, misunderstandings, bitterness and hostility are overcome, namely before God, the Lord and Father of all. Prayer, as the authentic expression of a right relationship with God and with others, is already a positive contribution to peace.

Ecumenical dialogue and inter-religious relations

5. Prayer cannot remain isolated and needs to be accompanied by other concrete actions. Each religion has its own outlook regarding the actions to be accomplished and the paths to be followed in order to attain peace. The Catholic Church, while clearly affirming her own identity, her own doctrine and her saving mission for all humanity, "rejects nothing of those things which are true and holy" in other religions; "she regards with respect those ways of acting and living and those precepts and teachings which, though often at variance with what she holds and expounds,

frequently reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens everyone" (*Nostra aetate*, n. 2).

Without ignoring differences or playing them down, the Church is convinced that, in promoting peace, there are certain elements or aspects which can be profitably developed and put into practice with the followers of other faiths and confessions. Inter-religious contacts and, in a unique way, ecumenical dialogue lead to this. Thanks to these forms of encounter and exchange the various religions have been able to attain a clearer awareness of their considerable responsibilities with regard to the true good of humanity as a whole. Today they all seem to be more firmly determined not to allow themselves to be used by particularistic interests or for political aims, and they are tending to assume a more conscious and decisive attitude in the shaping of social and cultural realities in the community of peoples. This enables them to be an active force in the process of development and thus to offer a sure hope to humanity. In a number of instances, it has become evident that their activity would have proved more effective had it been carried out jointly and in a coordinated manner. Such a way of working among believers can have a decisive effect in fostering peace among peoples and overcoming the still existing divisions between "zones" and "worlds".

The path to be travelled

6. There is still a long way to go to reach this goal of active cooperation in the cause of peace: there is the path of mutual knowledge, assisted today by the development of the means of social communication and facilitated by the beginning of a frank and wider dialogue; there is the path of generous forgiveness, fraternal reconciliation, and collaboration in areas which though limited or secondary are nonetheless directed to the same cause; finally, there is the path of daily coexistence, sharing efforts and sacrifices in order to reach the same goal. Perhaps it is on this path that individual believers, people who profess a religion, even more than their leaders, must face the hard work and at the same time have the satisfaction of building peace together.

Inter-religious contacts, together with ecumenical dialogue, now seem to be obligatory paths, in order to ensure that the many painful wounds inflicted over the course of centuries will not be repeated, and indeed that any such wounds still remaining will soon be healed. Believers must work for peace, above all by the personal example of their own right interior attitude, which shows outwardly in consistent action and behaviour. Serenity, balance, self-control, and acts of understanding, forgiveness and generosity have a peace-making influence on people's surroundings and on the religious and civil community.

It is for this reason that on the next World Day of Peace I invite all believers to make a serious *examination of conscience*, in order to be better disposed to listen to the voice of the "God of peace" (cf. 1 Cor 14:33) and to devote themselves to this great undertaking with renewed trust. I am convinced that they — and, I hope, all people of good will — will respond to this renewed appeal of mine, which I make with an insistence which matches the seriousness of the moment.

Building peace in justice together

7. The prayer of believers and their joint action for peace must face the problems and legitimate aspirations of individuals and peoples.

Peace is a fundamental good which involves respecting and promoting essential human values: the right to life at every stage of its development; the right to be respected, regardless of race, sex or religious convictions; the right to the material goods necessary for life; the right to work and to a fair distribution of its fruits for a well-ordered and harmonious coexistence. As individuals, as believers and even more as Christians, we must feel the commitment to living these *values of justice*, which are crowned by the *supreme law of love*: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Mt 22:39).

Once more I wish to emphasize that rigorous respect for religious freedom, and for the corresponding right to it, is the source and foundation of peaceful coexistence. I look forward to the time when it will be commitment which is not merely affirmed but really put into practice both by political and religious leaders, and by believers themselves: it is on the basis of the recognition of this right that the transcendent dimension of the human person assumes importance.

It would be a mistake if religions or groups of their followers, in the interpretation and practice of their respective beliefs, were to fall into forms of fundamentalism and fanaticism, justifying struggles and conflicts with others by adducing religious motives. If there exists a struggle worthy of man, it is the struggle against his own disordered passions, against every kind of selfishness, against attempts to oppress others, against every type of hatred and violence: in short, against everything that is the exact opposite of peace and reconciliation.

Necessary support from world leaders

8. Finally, I call upon the Leaders of the Nations and of the international community always to show *the greatest respect for the religious conscience of every man and woman* and for the special contribution of religion to the progress of civilization and to the development of peoples. They should not succumb to the temptation of exploiting religion as a means of power, particularly when it is a matter of opposing an adversary by military means.

Civil and political authorities ought to accord the various religions respect and juridical guarantees — at the national and international levels — ensuring that their contribution to peace is not rejected, or relegated to the private sphere, or ignored altogether.

Again I call upon public authorities to strive with vigilant responsibility to prevent war and conflict, to work for the triumph of justice and right, and at the same time to support development which benefits everyone, and primarily those oppressed by poverty, hunger and suffering. The progress

already made in the reduction of arms is worthy of praise. The economic and financial resources hitherto devoted to the production and sale of so many instruments of death can be used from now on for man and not against him! I am certain that millions of men and women throughout the world, who have no way of making their voices heard, share my positive judgment.

A special word for Christians

9. At this point I cannot fail to address a particular invitation to all Christians. Our common faith in Christ the Lord obliges us to bear a united witness to "the Gospel of peace" (Eph 6:15). It falls to us, first of all, to be open to other believers so as to undertake together with them, courageously and perseveringly, the immense work of building that peace which the world desires but which in the end it does not know how to achieve. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you", Christ has said to us (Jn 14:27). This divine promise fills us with the hope, indeed the certainty of divine hope, that peace is possible, because nothing is impossible with God (cf. Lk 1:37). For true peace is always God's gift, and for us Christians it is a precious gift of the Risen Lord (Jn 20:19-26).

Dear brothers and sisters of the Catholic Church, we must respond to the great challenges of the contemporary world by joining forces with all those who share with us certain basic values, beginning with religious and moral ones. And among these challenges still to be faced is that of peace. To build peace together with other believers is already to live in the spirit of the Gospel Beatitude: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Mt 5:9).

From the Vatican, 8 December 1991.

JOHN PAUL II