

**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS  
POPE PAUL VI  
FOR THE CELEBRATION OF THE  
DAY OF PEACE**

**1 JANUARY 1977**

**IF YOU WANT PEACE, DEFEND LIFE**

*Leaders and people in posts of responsibility!  
People uncountable and unknown!  
Friends!*

Here we are again, for the tenth time, speaking to you, with you!

At the dawn of the new year 1977, we stand at your door and knock (cf. *Rev 3: 20*). Please open to us. We are the usual Pilgrim, travelling the roads of the world, without ever growing weary, without losing the way. We are sent to bring you the usual proclamation; we are a prophet of Peace! Yes, "Peace, Peace," we cry as we go along, as a messenger of a fixed idea, an ancient idea, but an idea ever new through the recurring necessity that demands it, like a discovery, like a duty, like a blessing! The idea of Peace seems to have taken hold, as an expression that equals and perfects civilization. There is no civilization without Peace. But in reality Peace is never complete, never secure. You have seen how the very achievements of progress can be the cause of conflicts, and what conflicts! Do not think our annual message on behalf of peace superfluous and therefore boring.

After the last World War, on the clockface of the human mind there struck an hour of good fortune. Upon the vast ruins - widely differing, it is true, in the different countries, but universal - Peace alone was seen to be victorious, at long last. And immediately there sprang up the works and institutions proper to Peace, like fresh spring leaves. Many of them still persist and flourish; they are the conquests of the new world, and the world does well to be proud of them and to preserve their efficiency and development. They are the works and institutions that mark a step up in the progress of humanity. Let us listen for a moment, at this point, to a voice both authoritative, paternal and prophetic, the voice of our revered Predecessor, Pope John XXIII:

"And so, venerable Brothers and dear sons and daughters, we must think of human society as being primarily a spiritual reality. Through it enlightened men can share their knowledge of the truth, can claim their rights and fulfil their duties, receive encouragement in their aspirations for moral goodness, share their enjoyment of all the wholesome pleasures of the world, strive continually to pass on to others all that is best in themselves, and make their own the spiritual riches of others. These are the values which exert a guiding influence on culture, economics, social institutions, political movements and forms, laws, and all the other components which go to make up the external community of people and its continual evolution" (Encyclical Letter *Pacem in Terris*, 11 April 1963: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 55, 1963, p. 266).

But this healing phase of Peace gives way to new challenges, whether as the aftermath of reawakening contests, only provisionally settled, or as new historical phenomena stemming from social structures in continual evolution. Peace once more begins to suffer, first in people's feelings, then in partial and localized disputes, and then in frightening programmes of armament, which coldly calculate the potential for terrifying destruction -

destruction greater than our capacity to imagine it. Here and there most praiseworthy attempts to ward off such conflagrations appear; and we hope that these attempts will prevail over the measureless dangers which they are seeking to remedy in advance.

Brethren, this is not enough. The concept of Peace as the ideal that gives direction to the concrete activity of human society seems destined to succumb to an inevitable victory of the world's incapacity to govern itself in and through Peace. Peace does not generate itself, even though the deepest impulses of human nature tend towards Peace. Peace is order, and order is what everything, every reality, aspires to as its destiny and the justification for its existence. Order is a pre-established destiny and justification for existence, but it is brought about together with and in collaboration with many factors. Thus Peace is a pinnacle that presupposes a complex inner supporting framework. Peace is like a flexible body that needs a stout skeleton to give it strength. The stability and beauty of the structure of Peace depend on the support of various causes and conditions. These are often absent. Even when they exist, they are not always strong enough for their function of ensuring that the pyramid of Peace should have a solid base and a lofty summit.

In this analysis of Peace we have seen again its beauty and its necessity, but we have also noted its instability and fragility. We conclude it by reaffirming our conviction that Peace is a duty, Peace is possible. This is the message we keep repeating, a message that makes its own the ideal of civilization, echoes the aspirations of peoples, strengthens the hope of the lowly and weak, and ennobles with justice the security of the strong.

It is a message of optimism, a presage of the future. Peace is no dream, no utopia, no illusion. Nor is it a labour of Sisyphus. No, Peace can be prolonged and strengthened. Peace can write the finest pages of history, inscribing them not only with the magnificence of power and glory but also with the greater magnificence of human virtue, people's goodness, collective prosperity, and true civilization: the civilization of love.

Is Peace possible? Yes, it is. It must be. But let us be sincere: Peace, as we have already said, is a duty and is possible, but it is so only with the concurrence of many and not easy conditions. We are aware that to discuss the conditions for Peace is a very long and very difficult task. We shall not make bold to undertake it here. We leave it to the experts. But we will not be silent on one aspect, one which is clearly of basic importance. We shall merely remind you of it and recommend it to the reflection of good and intelligent people. This aspect is the relationship between Peace and the concept that the world has of human life.

Peace and Life. They are supreme values in the civil order. They are also values that are interdependent. Do we want Peace? Then let us defend Life!

The phrase "Peace and Life" may seem almost tautological, a rhetorical slogan. It is not so. The combination of the two terms in the phrase represents a hardwon conquest in the onward march of human progress - a march still short of its final goal. How many times in the drama of human history the phrase "Peace and Life" has involved a fierce struggle of the two terms, not a fraternal embrace. Peace is sought and won through conflict, like a sad doom necessary for self-defence.

The close relationship between Peace and Life seems to spring from the nature of things, but not always, not yet from the logic of people's thought and conduct. This close relationship is the paradoxical novelty that we must proclaim for this year of grace 1977

and henceforth for ever, if we are to understand the dynamics of progress. To succeed in doing so is no easy and simple task: we shall meet the opposition of too many formidable objections, which are stored in the immense arsenal of pseudo-convictions, empirical and utilitarian prejudices, so-called reasons of State, and habits drawn from history and tradition. Even today, these objections seem to constitute insurmountable obstacles. The tragic conclusion is that if, in defiance of logic, Peace and Life can in practice be dissociated, there looms on the horizon of the future a catastrophe that in our days could be immeasurable and irreparable both for Peace and Life. Hiroshima is a terribly eloquent proof and a frighteningly prophetic example of this. In the reprehensible hypothesis that Peace were thought of in unnatural separation from its relationship with Life, Peace could be imposed as the sad triumph of death. The words of Tacitus come to mind: "They make a desert and call it Peace" (*ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant. Agricola, 30*). Again, in the same hypothesis, the privileged Life of some can be exalted, can be selfishly and almost idolatrously preferred, at the expense of the oppression or suppression of others. Is that Peace?

This conflict is thus seen to be not merely theoretical and moral but tragically real. Even today it continues to desecrate and stain with blood many a page of human society. The key to truth in the matter can be found only by recognizing the primacy of Life as a value and as a condition for Peace. The formula is: "If you want Peace, defend Life". Life is the crown of Peace. If we base the logic of our activity on the sacredness of Life, war is virtually disqualified as a normal and habitual means of asserting rights and so of ensuring Peace. Peace is but the incontestable ascendancy of right and, in the final analysis, the joyful celebration of Life.

Here the number of examples is endless, as is the case-history of the adventures, or rather the misadventures, in which life is put at peril in the face of Peace. We make our own the classification which, in this regard, has been presented according to "three essential imperatives". According to these imperatives, in order to have authentic and happy Peace, it is necessary "to defend life, to heal life, to promote life".

The policy of massive armaments is immediately called into question. The ancient saying, which has taught politics and still does so - "if you want peace, prepare for war" (*si vis pacem, para bellum*) - is not acceptable without radical reservation (cf. *Lk 14:31*). With the forthright boldness of our principles, we thus denounce the false and dangerous programme of the "arms race", of the secret rivalry between peoples for military superiority. Even if through a surviving remnant of happy wisdom, or through a silent yet tremendous contest in the balance of hostile deadly powers, war (and what a war it would be!) does not break out, how can we fail to lament the incalculable outpouring of economic resources and human energies expended in order to preserve for each individual State its shield of ever more costly, ever more efficient weapons, and this to the detriment of resources for schools, culture, agriculture, health and civic welfare. Peace and Life support enormous and incalculable burdens in order to maintain a Peace founded on a perpetual threat to Life, as also to defend Life by means of a constant threat to Peace. People will say: it is inevitable. This can be true within a concept of civilization that is still so imperfect. But let us at least recognize that this constitutional challenge which the arms race sets up between Life and Peace is a formula that is fallacious in itself and which must be corrected and superseded. We therefore praise the effort already begun to reduce and finally to eliminate this senseless cold war resulting from the progressive increase of the military potential of the various Nations, as if these Nations should necessarily be enemies of each other, and as if they were incapable of realizing that such a concept of international relations must one day be resolved in the ruination of Peace and of countless human lives.

But it is not only war that kills Peace. Every crime against life is a blow to Peace, especially if it strikes at the moral conduct of the people, as often happens today, with horrible and often legal ease, as in the case of the suppression of incipient life, by abortion. Reasons such as the following are brought forward to justify abortion: abortion seeks to slow down the troublesome increase of the population, to eliminate beings condemned to malformation, social dishonour, proletarian misery, and so on; it seems rather to favour Peace than to harm it. But it is not so. The suppression of an incipient life, or one that is already born, violates above all the sacrosanct moral principle to which the concept of human existence must always have reference: human life is sacred from the first moment of its conception and until the last instant of its natural survival in time. It is sacred; what does this mean? It means that life must be exempt from any arbitrary power to suppress it; it must not be touched; it is worthy of all respect, all care, all dutiful sacrifice. For those who believe in God, it is spontaneous and instinctive and indeed a duty through the law of religion. And even for those who do not have this good fortune of admitting the protecting and vindicating hand of God upon all human beings, this same sense of the sacred - that is, the untouchable and inviolable element proper to a living human existence - is and must be something sensed by virtue of human dignity. Those who have had the misfortune, the implacable guilt, the ever renewed remorse at having deliberately suppressed a life know this and feel this. The voice of innocent blood cries out with heartrending insistence in the heart of the person who killed it. Inner Peace is not possible through selfish sophistries! And even if it is, a blow at Peace - that is, at the general system that protects order, safe living in society, in a word, at Peace - has been perpetrated: the individual Life and Peace in general are always linked by an unbreakable relationship. If we wish progressive social order to be based upon intangible principles, let us not offend against it in the heart of its essential system: respect for human life. Even under this aspect Peace and Life are closely bound together at the basis of order and civilization.

The discussion can continue by reviewing the hundred forms in which offences against life seem to be becoming normal behaviour: where individual crime is organized to become collective; to ensure the silence and complicity of whole groups of citizens; to make private vendetta a vile collective duty, terrorism a phenomenon of legitimate political or social affirmation, police torture an effective means of public power no longer directed towards restoring order but towards imposing ignoble repression. It is impossible for peace to flourish where the safety of life is compromised in this way. Where violence rages, true peace ends. But where human rights are truly professed and publicly recognized and defended, Peace becomes the joyful and operative atmosphere of life in society.

The texts of international commitment for the protection of human rights, for the defence of children and for the safeguarding of fundamental human freedoms are proofs of our civil progress. They are the epic of Peace, in so far as they are the shield of Life. Are they complete? Are they observed? We all note that civilization is expressed in such declarations, and finds in them the guarantee of its own reality. This reality is full and glorious if these declarations are transfused into consciences and moral conduct; it is mocked and violated if they remain a dead letter.

Men and women, men and women of the last part of the twentieth century, you have signed the glorious charters of the human fullness you have achieved, provided such charters are true. You have sealed for history your moral condemnation, if they are documents of empty rhetorical wishes or juridical hypocrisy. The measure is there: in the equation between true Peace and the dignity of Life.

Accept our suppliant plea: that this equation should be fulfilled and that over it be raised a new pinnacle on the horizon of our civilization of Life and Peace - the civilization, we say again, of love.

Has everything been said ?

No. There remains an unresolved question: how can such a programme of civilization be realized? How do we truly unite Life and Peace?

We answer in terms that may be inaccessible to those who have closed the horizon of reality to natural vision alone. Recourse must be had to that religious world which we call "supernatural". Faith is needed to discover the system of forces working within the whole human situation, into which the transcendent work of God is inserted and makes it capable of higher effects which humanly speaking are impossible. We need the help of the "God of peace" (*Phil 4:9*).

Happy are we if we acknowledge and believe this, and if in accordance with this faith we succeed in discovering and putting into practice the relationship between Life and Peace.

For there is an important exception to the above reasoning that places Life before Peace, and makes Peace depend on the inviolability of Life. The exception occurs in the cases where a good higher than Life itself comes into play. It is a question of a Good whose value surpasses that of Life itself, such as truth, justice, civil freedom, love of neighbour, faith ... There then intervenes the word of Christ: "Anyone who loves his life (more than these higher Goods) loses it" (*Jn 12: 25*). This shows us that as Peace must be thought of in relation to Life, and as from the ordered well-being ensured for Life Peace must itself become the harmony that makes human existence ordered and happy, both interiorly and socially, so this human existence, that is to say Life cannot and must not be separated from the higher ends which confer on it its primary *raison d'être*: why does one live? What gives to Life - over and above the ordered tranquillity of Peace - its dignity, its spiritual fullness, its moral greatness, and, we would also say, its religious finality? Will Peace, true Peace, perhaps be lost, if in the area of our Life citizenship is granted to Love, in its highest expression, which is sacrifice? And if sacrifice really forms part of a plan of Redemption and of meritorious title for an existence transcending the temporal form and measure, will it not regain - on a higher and eternal level - Peace, its true, hundredfold Peace of eternal Life (cf. *Mt 19:29*)? Those who are pupils in the school of Christ can understand these transcendent words (cf. *Mt 19:11*). And why can we not be these pupils? He Christ "is our Peace" (*Eph 2:11*).

We wish this Peace to all those who with our blessing receive this our message of Peace and Life!

*From the Vatican, 8 December 1976.*

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