

**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
FOR THE CELEBRATION OF THE
WORLD DAY OF PEACE**

1 JANUARY 1988

**RELIGIOUS FREEDOM:
CONDITION FOR PEACE**

On the first day of the year, I am happy to fulfil a task, now twenty years old, of addressing the Leaders of the Nations and the Heads of the International Organizations, as well as all my brothers and sisters throughout the world who have at heart the cause of peace. For I am deeply convinced that to reflect together on the priceless treasure of peace is in a way to begin to build it.

The above mentioned theme which I would like to submit this year for everybody's consideration arises from three considerations.

In the first place, religious freedom, an essential requirement of the dignity of every person, is a cornerstone of the structure of human rights, and for this reason an irreplaceable factor in the good of individuals and of the whole of society, as well as of the personal fulfilment of each individual. It follows that the freedom of individuals and of communities to profess and practise their religion is an essential element for peaceful human coexistence. Peace, which is built up and consolidated at all levels of human association, puts down its roots in the freedom and openness of consciences to truth.

Moreover, every violation of religious freedom, whether open or hidden, does fundamental damage to the cause of peace, like violations of the other fundamental rights of the human person. Forty years after the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, to be commemorated next December, we have to admit that millions of people in various parts of the world are still suffering for their religious convictions: they are victims of repressive and oppressive legislation, victims sometimes of open persecution, but more often of subtle forms of discrimination aimed at believers and communities. This state of affairs, in itself intolerable, is also a bad omen for peace.

Furthermore, I wish to recall and hold up as a treasured memory the experience of the Day of Prayer held in Assisi on 27 October 1986. That great gathering of brothers and sisters, brought together in prayer for peace, was a sign for the world. Without any confusion or syncretism, representatives of the major religious communities throughout the world sought to express together their conviction that *peace is a gift from on high*; they sought to evince an active commitment to pray for peace, to welcome it and make it fruitful through practical choices of respect, solidarity and fraternity.

I. The Dignity and Freedom of the Human Person

Peace is not only the absence of conflict and war but " the fruit of an order written into human society by its Divine Founder " (*Gaudium et Spes*, 78). It is a work of justice, and for that reason it demands respect for the rights of every person and the fulfilment of corresponding duties. There is an intrinsic connection between the demands of justice, truth and peace (cf. *Pacem in Terris*, I and III).

In accordance with this order, which is willed by the Creator, society is called upon to organize itself and to carry out its task at the service of man and the common good. The essential lines of this order can be examined by reason and recognized in historical experience. The modern development of the social sciences has enriched humanity's awareness of this order, despite all the ideological distortions and the conflicts which sometimes seem to obscure that awareness.

For this reason, the Catholic Church - while seeking to fulfil faithfully her mission of proclaiming the salvation that comes from Christ alone (cf. *Acts* 4: 12) - turns to all people without distinction and invites them to recognize the laws of the natural order that govern human association and determine the conditions for peace.

The foundation and goal of the social order is the human person, as a subject of inalienable rights which are not conferred from outside but which arise from the person's very nature. Nothing and nobody can destroy them, and no external constraint can annihilate them, for they are rooted in what is most profoundly human. Likewise, the person is not merely the subject of social, cultural and historical conditioning, for it is proper to man, who has a spiritual soul, to tend towards a goal that transcends the changing conditions of his existence. No human power may obstruct the realization of man as a person.

From this first and fundamental principle of the social order, namely that society exists for the person, it follows that every society must be organized in such a way as to enable and indeed to help man to realize his vocation in full freedom.

Freedom is man's most noble prerogative. Beginning with the most private options, all individuals must be able to express themselves in an act of conscious choice, each following his or her own conscience. Without freedom, human acts are empty and valueless.

The freedom with which man has been endowed by the Creator is the capacity always given to him to seek what is true by using his intelligence and to embrace without reserve the good to which he naturally aspires, without being subjected to undue pressures, constraints or violence of any kind. It belongs to the dignity of the person to be able to respond to the moral imperative of one's own conscience in the search for truth. And the truth as the Second Vatican Council emphasized "is to be sought after in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature" (*Dignitatis Humanae*, 3) and "cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth" (*ibid.*, 1).

The freedom of the individual in seeking the truth and in the corresponding profession of his or her religious convictions must be specifically guaranteed within the juridical structure of society; that is, it must be recognized and confirmed by civil law as a personal and inalienable right in order to be safeguarded from any kind of coercion by individuals, social groups or any human power (cf. *ibid.*, 2).

It is quite clear that freedom of conscience and of religion does not mean a relativization of the objective truth which every human being is morally obliged to seek. In an organized society, such freedom is only a translation, in institutional form, of that order within which God has ordained that his creatures should be able to know and accept his eternal offer of a covenant, and be able to correspond to it as free and responsible persons.

The civil and social right to religious freedom, inasmuch as it touches the most intimate sphere of the spirit, is a point of reference of the other fundamental rights and in some way becomes a measure of them. For it is a matter of respecting the individual's most jealously guarded autonomy, thus making it possible to act according to the dictates of conscience both in private choices and in social life. The State cannot claim authority, direct or indirect, over a person's religious convictions. It cannot arrogate to itself the right to impose or to impede the profession or public practice of religion by a person or a community. In this matter, it is the duty of civil authorities to ensure that the rights of individuals and communities are equally respected, and at the same time it is their duty to safeguard proper public order.

Even in cases where the State grants a special juridical position to a particular religion, there is a duty to ensure that the right to freedom of conscience is legally recognized and effectively respected for all citizens, and also for foreigners living in the country even temporarily for reasons of employment and the like.

In no case may the civil organization set itself up as the substitute for the conscience of the citizens, nor may it remove or take the place of the freedom of action of religious associations. A right social order requires that all - as individuals and in groups - should be able to profess their religious convictions with full respect for others .

On 1 September 1980, when I addressed the Heads of State who signed the *Helsinki Final Act*, I intended to emphasize, among other things, that authentic religious freedom requires that the rights deriving from the social and public dimension of the profession of faith and of belonging to an organized religious community must also be guaranteed.

In this regard, speaking to the General Assembly of the United Nations, I expressed my conviction that "respect for the dignity of the human person would seem to demand that, when the exact tenor of the exercise of religious freedom is being discussed or determined with a view to national laws or international conventions, the institutions that are by their nature at the service of religion should also be brought in" (AAS [1979], p. 1158).

2. *A common Patrimony*

It must be acknowledged that the principles of which we have spoken are the common patrimony of most civil societies today, as also of the organization of international society, which has drawn up appropriate norms. These form part of the culture of our time, as is demonstrated by the ever more accurate and detailed discussion which, especially in recent years, has taken place in meetings and congresses of scholars and experts on every practical aspect of religious freedom. Nonetheless, it frequently happens that the right to religious freedom is incorrectly understood and insufficiently respected.

In the first place there are spontaneous outbreaks of intolerance, more or less haphazard, sometimes the result of ignorance or mistaken ideas, which attack individuals or communities and cause disputes, bad feelings and hostility, to the detriment of peace and a united commitment to the common good.

In various countries, laws and administrative practices limit or in fact annul the rights formally recognized by the Constitution for individual believers and religious groups.

Furthermore, there still exist today laws and regulations which do not recognize the fundamental right to religious freedom, or which envisage completely unjustified

limitations, not to mention cases of provisions which are actually discriminatory in nature and which sometimes amount to open persecution.

Various organizations, public and private, national and international, have been established, especially in recent years, for the defence of those who in many parts of the world are - by reason of their religious convictions - victims of situations which are illegal and detrimental to the whole human family. Before public opinion these bodies rightly express the complaints and protests of those brothers and sisters who often have no voice of their own.

The Catholic Church, for her part, constantly shows her solidarity with all those suffering from discrimination and persecution because of their faith. She works with steady resolve and patient persistence for the remedying of such situations. For this purpose the Holy See seeks to make its own specific contribution in international assemblies which discuss the safeguarding of human rights and of peace. In the same sense is to be understood the action, necessarily more discreet but no less solicitous, of the Apostolic See and its Representatives in contacts with the political authorities of the whole world.

3. *Religious Freedom and Peace*

Everybody is aware that the religious dimension, rooted in the human conscience, has a specific impact on the subject of peace, and that every attempt to impede or to coerce its free expression inevitably has grave negative effects upon the possibility of a peaceful society.

An obvious consideration presents itself. As I wrote in the already mentioned Letter to the Heads of State who signed the *Helsinki Final Act*, religious freedom, in so far as it touches the most intimate sphere of the spirit, sustains and is as it were the *raison d'être* of other freedoms. And the profession of a religion, although it consists primarily in interior acts of the spirit, involves the entire experience of human life, and thus all its manifestations.

Religious freedom also contributes decisively to producing citizens who are genuinely free: for by making possible the quest for and acceptance of the truth about man and the world it helps all individuals to gain a full understanding of their own dignity. It also helps them to take up their duties with greater responsibility. An honest relationship with the truth is an essential condition for authentic freedom (cf. *Redemptor Hominis*, 12).

In this sense it can be said that religious freedom is a very important means of strengthening a people's moral integrity. Civil society can count on believers who, because of their deep convictions, will not only not succumb readily to dominating ideologies or trends but will endeavour to act in accordance with their aspirations to all that is true and right, an essential condition for securing peace (cf. *Dignitatis Humanae*, 8).

But there is more. By leading people to a new understanding of their human condition, religious faith brings people, through a sincere gift of themselves, to a complete fellowship with other human beings (cf. *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 59). Faith brings people together and unites them, makes them see others as their brothers and sisters; it makes them more attentive, more responsible, more generous in their commitment to the common good. It is not just a matter of feeling better disposed to collaborating with others by reason of the fact that one's own rights are ensured and protected; it is rather a matter of drawing from the deepest resources of a right conscience higher incentives for the task of building a more just and more human society.

Within each State - or rather within each people - this need for a shared sense of common responsibility is more keenly felt today. But, as my predecessor Pope Paul VI had occasion to ask, how can a State call for total trust and collaboration when, in a kind of "negative confessionalism", it proclaims itself atheistic and when, within a certain framework, it declares its respect for the beliefs of individuals but in fact takes up an attitude opposed to the faith of a part of its citizens? (cf. *Speech to the Diplomatic Corps*, 14 January 1978). On the contrary, an effort should be made to ensure that the opposition between the religious view of the world and the agnostic or even atheistic view, which is one of the "signs of the times" of our age, should be kept within human limits of fairness and respect, without doing harm to the fundamental rights of conscience of any man or woman living on this planet (cf. John Paul II, *Speech to the United Nations*, 2 October 1979, No. 20).

Above and beyond persisting situations of war and injustice, we are witnessing today a movement towards an increasing union of peoples and nations, on the various levels of politics, economics, culture, etc. This tendency, which appears to be unstoppable but which meets with continuous and serious obstacles, receives a profound and not insignificant impulse from religious conviction. For the latter, by excluding recourse to violent methods for resolving conflicts and by educating to fraternal solidarity and love, fosters understanding and reconciliation, and can provide fresh moral resources for the solution of questions in the face of which humanity today seems weak and powerless.

4. *The Responsibility of Religious People*

The State's duties regarding the exercise of the right of religious freedom are matched by the precise and grave responsibilities of men and women for both their individual religious profession and the organization and life of the communities to which they belong.

In the first place, the leaders of religious bodies are obliged to present their teaching without allowing themselves to be conditioned by personal, political or social interests, and in ways that conform to the requirements of peaceful coexistence and respect for the freedom of each individual.

Similarly, the followers of the various religions should, individually and collectively, express their convictions and organize their worship and all other specific activities with respect for the rights of those who do not belong to that religion or do not profess any creed.

And it is precisely with regard to peace, mankind's supreme aspiration, that every religious community and every individual believer can test the genuineness of their commitment to solidarity with their brothers and sisters. Today as perhaps never before, the world looks expectantly to the various religions, precisely in matters concerning peace.

At the same time there is reason to rejoice that both the leaders of the religious bodies and the ordinary faithful are showing an ever keener interest and a livelier desire to work for peace. These intentions deserve to be encouraged and appropriately coordinated in order to increase their effectiveness. For this purpose, it is necessary to go to the roots.

That is what happened last year at Assisi. In response to my fraternal invitation, the leaders of the world's main religions gathered in order to affirm together - while remaining faithful to each one's religious conviction - their common commitment to building peace.

In the spirit of Assisi there is here a question of a binding and demanding gift, a gift to be cultivated and brought to maturity: in mutual acceptance and respect, renouncing ideological intimidation and violence, promoting institutions and methods of joint action and cooperation between peoples and nations, but especially in education for peace, considered at a level well above the necessary and hoped for reform of structures - peace that presupposes the conversion of hearts.

5. *The Commitment of the Followers of Christ*

We recognize with joy that among the *Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communion*s this process is already happily begun. I would like to express the hope that it will continue to receive a fresh impulse and that it will spread and bring about a broader involvement of all the adherents of the world's religions, in the great challenge of peace.

As the Pastor of the universal Church I would be failing in my duty if I did not speak out in favour of respect for the inalienable right of the Gospel to be proclaimed "to the whole creation" (*Mk 16: 15*), and if I did not repeat that God has ordered civil society to the service of the human person, to whom belongs the freedom to seek and embrace the truth. The commitment to truth, freedom, justice and peace is a mark of the followers of Christ the Lord. For we bear in our hearts the revealed certainty that God the Father, through his crucified Son, who "is our peace" (*Eph 2: 14*), has made of us a new People, which has as a condition the freedom of the children of God and as a statute the precept of fraternal love.

As the People of the New Covenant, we know that our freedom finds its highest expression in total acceptance of the divine call to salvation, and with the Apostle John we profess: "we know and believe the love God has for us" (*1 Jn 4:16*), the love manifested in his Word made flesh. From this free and liberating act of faith there flows a new vision of the world, a new approach to our brethren, a new way of existing as a leaven in society. It is the "new commandment" (*Jn 13:34*) which the Lord has given us; it is "his peace" (cf. *Jn 14:27*) - not the peace of the world that is always imperfect - which he has left us.

We have to live completely and responsibly the freedom which comes to us from being children of God and which opens our eyes to transcendent prospects. We have to commit ourselves with all our strength to living the new commandment, allowing ourselves to be enlightened by the peace which has been given to us and radiating it to those around us. "By this", the Lord admonishes us, "all men will know that you are my disciples" (*Jn 13:35*).

I am well aware that this formidable commitment is beyond our poor powers. How many divisions and misunderstandings we Christians bear a certain responsibility for, and how much more remains for us to build, in our own spirits, in our families and communities, beneath the banner of reconciliation and fraternal charity! And, as we have to admit, the conditions of the world make the task no easier. The temptation to violence is always there. Selfishness, materialism and pride make man ever less free and society ever less open to the demands of brotherhood. Be this as it may, we must not become discouraged: Jesus, our Master and Lord, is with us always, to the close of the age (cf. *Mt 28:20*).

My thoughts turn with particular affection to those brothers and sisters who are deprived of the freedom to profess their Christian faith, to all who are suffering persecution for the name of Christ, to those who for his sake must suffer rejection and humiliation. I want these brothers and sisters of ours to feel our spiritual closeness, our solidarity, and the

comfort of our prayer. We know that their sacrifice, to the extent that it is joined to Christ's, bears fruits of true peace.

Brothers and sisters in the faith: the commitment to peace is one of the testimonies which today makes us credible in the eyes of the world, and especially in the eyes of the younger generation. The great challenge facing modern man, the challenge to his true freedom, is found in the Gospel Beatitude: "Blessed are the peacemakers" (*Mt 5: 9*).

The world needs peace, the world ardently desires peace. Let us pray that all men and women, enjoying religious freedom, may be able to live in peace.

From the Vatican, 8 December 1987.

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