

IF YOU WANT PEACE, REACH OUT TO THE POOR

1 January 1993

"If you want peace..."

1. What person of good will does not long for peace? Today, peace is universally recognized as one of the highest values to be sought and defended. And yet, as the spectre of a deadly war between opposing ideological blocs fades away, grave local conflicts continue to engulf various parts of the world. In particular, everyone is aware of the *situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, where hostilities are daily claiming new victims, especially among the defenceless civil population, and causing enormous destruction to property and territory. Nothing seems able to halt the senseless violence of arms: neither the joint efforts to promote an effective truce, nor the humanitarian activity of the International Organizations, nor the chorus of appeals for peace which rise from the lands stained by the blood of battle. Sadly, the aberrant logic of war is prevailing over the repeated and authoritative calls for peace.

Our world also shows increasing evidence of *another grave threat to peace*: many individuals and indeed whole peoples are living today *in conditions of extreme poverty*. The gap between rich and poor has become more marked, even in the most economically developed nations. *This is a problem which the conscience of humanity cannot ignore*, since the conditions in which a great number of people are living are an insult to their innate dignity and as a result are a threat to the authentic and harmonious progress of the world community.

The gravity of this situation is being felt in many countries of the world: in Europe as well as in Africa, Asia and America. In various regions the social and economic challenges which believers and all people of good will have to face are many. Poverty and destitution, social differences and injustices, some of them even legalized, fratricidal conflicts and oppressive regimes — all of these appeal to the conscience of whole peoples in every part of the world.

The recent Conference of Latin American Bishops, held in Santo Domingo in October, carefully examined the situation in Latin America, and while urgently calling on Christians to undertake *the task of the new evangelization* earnestly invited the faithful and all those committed to justice and righteousness *to serve the cause of man*, without failing to take into account any of his deepest needs. The Bishops spoke of the great mission which must draw together the efforts of everyone: defence of the dignity of the person, commitment to a fair distribution of resources, the harmonious and united promotion of a society in which everyone feels welcomed and loved. It is apparent to all that these are *the indispensable premises for building true peace*.

To say "peace" is really to speak of much more than the simple absence of war. It is to postulate a condition of authentic respect for the dignity and rights of every human being, a condition enabling him to achieve complete fulfilment. The exploitation of the weak and the existence of distressing pockets of poverty and social inequality constitute so many delays and obstacles to the establishment of stable conditions for an authentic peace.

Poverty and peace: at the beginning of the New Year, I would like to invite everyone to reflect together on the many different links between these two realities.

In particular, I would like to call attention to the threat to peace posed by poverty, especially when it becomes destitution. There are millions of men, women and children suffering every day from hunger, insecurity and emargination. These situations constitute a grave affront to human dignity and contribute to social instability.

The inhuman choice of war

2. At the present time, there exists yet another situation which is a source of poverty and destitution: the situation caused by war between nations and by conflicts within a given country. In the face of the tragedies which have caused and are still causing bloodshed, especially for ethnic reasons, in various regions of the world, I feel the duty to recall what I said in my Message for the 1981 World Day of Peace, the theme of which was: "To serve peace, respect freedom". At that time, I emphasized that the indispensable premise for building true peace is respect for the freedom and rights of other individuals and groups. Peace is obtained by promoting free peoples in a world of freedom. The appeal I made then is still valid today: "Respect for the freedom of peoples and nations is an integral part of peace. Wars continue to break out and destruction has fallen upon peoples and whole cultures because the sovereignty of a people or a nation was not respected. Every continent has seen and suffered from wars and struggles caused by one nation's attempts to limit another's autonomy" (n. 8).

I went on to say: "Without a willingness to respect the freedom of every people, nation and culture, and without a world-wide consensus on this subject, it will be difficult to create the conditions for peace.... This presupposes a conscious public commitment on the part of each nation and its government to renounce claims and designs injurious to other nations. In other words, it presupposes a refusal to accept any doctrine of national or cultural supremacy" (ibid., n. 9).

The consequences deriving from such a commitment are easy to see, also with regard to economic relations between States. To reject all temptations to secure economic dominance over other nations means to renounce a policy inspired by the prevailing criterion of profit, and to replace it with a policy guided by the criterion of solidarity towards all and especially towards the poorest.

Poverty as a source of conflict

3. The number of people living in conditions of extreme poverty is enormous. I am thinking, for example, of the tragic situations *in certain countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America*. There exist vast groups, often whole sectors of the population, which find themselves on the margins of civil life within their own countries. Among them is a growing number of children who in order to survive can rely on nobody except themselves. Such a situation is not only an affront to human dignity but also represents *a clear threat to peace*. A State, whatever its political organization or economic system, remains fragile and unstable if it does not give constant attention to its weakest members and if it fails to do everything possible to ensure that at least their primary needs are satisfied.

The poorest countries' *right to development* imposes upon the developed countries a clear duty to come to their aid. The Second Vatican Council said in this regard: "Everyone has the right to have a part of the earth's goods that is sufficient for each and his or her dependents.... We are obliged to support the poor, and not just from our surplus" (Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, n. 69). The Church's admonition is clear, and it is a faithful echo of the voice of Christ: earthly goods are meant for the whole human family and

cannot be reserved for the exclusive benefit of a few (cf. Encyclical Letter *Centesimus annus*, nn. 31 and 37).

In the interest of the individual — and thus of peace — it is therefore urgently necessary to introduce into the mechanisms of the economy the necessary correctives which will enable those mechanisms to ensure a more just and equitable distribution of goods. By itself the rules of the market are not sufficient to accomplish this; society must accept its own responsibilities (cf. *ibid.*, n. 48). It must do so by increasing its efforts, which are often already considerable, to eliminate the causes of poverty and their tragic consequences. No country by itself can succeed in such an undertaking. For this very reason it is necessary to work together, with that solidarity demanded by a world which has become ever more interdependent. To allow situations of extreme poverty to persist is to create social conditions ever more exposed to the threat of violence and conflict.

All individuals and social groups have a right to live in conditions which enable them to provide for personal and family needs and to share in the life and progress of the local community. When this right is not recognized, it easily happens that the people concerned feel that they are victims of a structure which does not welcome them, and they react strongly. This is especially the case with young people, who, being deprived of adequate education and employment opportunities, are most exposed to the risk of being marginalized and exploited. Everybody is aware of the world-wide problem of unemployment, especially among the young, with the consequent impoverishment of an ever greater number of individuals and whole families. Moreover, unemployment is often the tragic result of the destruction of the economic infrastructure of a country affected by war or internal conflicts.

Here I would like to mention briefly a number of particularly disturbing problems which beset the poor and hence threaten peace.

First of all, there is the problem of *foreign debt*, which for some countries, and within them for the less well-off social strata, continues to be an intolerable burden, despite efforts made to lighten it by the international community, governments and financial institutions. Is it not the poorest groups in these countries which often have to bear the major burden of repayment? Such an unjust situation can open the door to growing resentment, to a sense of frustration and even desperation. In many cases the governments themselves share the widespread discomfort of their people, and this influences relations with other States. Perhaps the time has come to *re-examine the problem of foreign debt and to give it the priority which it deserves*. The conditions for total or partial repayment need to be reviewed, with an effort to find definitive solutions capable of fully absorbing the burdensome social consequences of adjustment programmes. Furthermore it will be necessary to act on the causes of indebtedness, by making the granting of aid conditional upon concrete commitments on the part of governments to reduce excessive or unnecessary expenditures — here one thinks particularly of expenditures on arms — and to guarantee that subsidies do in fact reach the needy.

Another grave problem is *drugs*. Sadly and tragically, everyone knows of their connection with violence and crime. Similarly, everyone knows that in some parts of the world, because of pressure from drug traffickers, it is precisely the very poor who cultivate the plants for drug-production. The lavish profits promised — which in fact represent only a tiny part of the profits deriving from this cultivation — are a temptation difficult to resist by those who gain a markedly insufficient income from the production of traditional crops. The

first thing to be done in order to help growers to overcome this situation is therefore to offer them adequate means to escape from their poverty.

A further problem stems from the situations of grave economic difficulty in some countries. These situations encourage *mass migrations* to more fortunate countries, in which there then arise tensions which disturb the social order. In order to respond to such reactions of xenophobic violence, it is not enough simply to have recourse to provisional emergency measures. Rather, what is needed is to tackle the causes, by promoting through new forms of international solidarity the progress and development of the countries from which the migrant movements originate.

Destitution therefore is a hidden but real threat to peace. By impairing human dignity, it constitutes a serious attack on the value of life and strikes at the heart of the peaceful development of society.

Poverty as a result of conflict

4. In recent years we have witnessed on almost every continent local wars and internal conflicts of savage intensity. Ethnic, tribal and racial violence has destroyed human lives, divided communities that previously lived together in peace and left in its wake anguish and feelings of hatred. Recourse to violence, in fact, aggravates existing tensions and creates new ones. *Nothing is resolved by war; on the contrary, everything is placed in jeopardy by war.* The results of this scourge are the suffering and death of innumerable individuals, the disintegration of human relations and the irreparable loss of an immense artistic and environmental patrimony. War worsens the sufferings of the poor; indeed, it creates new poor by destroying means of subsistence, homes and property, and by eating away at the very fabric of the social environment. Young people see their hopes for the future shattered and too often, as victims, they become irresponsible agents of conflict. Women, children, the elderly, the sick and the wounded are forced to flee and become refugees who have no possessions beyond what they can carry with them. Helpless and defenceless, they seek refuge in other countries or regions often as poor and turbulent as their own.

While acknowledging that the international and humanitarian organizations are doing much to alleviate the tragic fate of the victims of violence, I feel it is my duty *to urge all people of good will to intensify their efforts.* In some instances, in fact, the future of refugees depends entirely on the generosity of people who take them in - people who are as poor, if not poorer, than they are. It is only through the concern and cooperation of the international community that satisfactory solutions will be found.

After so many unnecessary massacres, it is in the final analysis of fundamental importance to recognize, once and for all, that *war never helps the human community*, that violence destroys and never builds up, that the wounds it causes remain long unhealed, and that as a result of conflicts the already grim condition of the poor deteriorates still further, and new forms of poverty appear. The disturbing spectacle of tragedies caused by war is before the eyes of world public opinion. May the distressing pictures quite recently transmitted by the media at least serve as an effective warning to all — individuals, societies and States — and remind everyone that money ought not to be used for war, nor for destroying and killing, but for defending the dignity of man, for improving his life and for building a truly open, free and harmonious society.

A spirit of poverty as a source of peace

5. In today's industrialized countries people are dominated by the frenzied race for possessing material goods. The consumer society makes the gap separating rich from poor even more obvious, and the uncontrolled search for a comfortable life risks blinding people to the needs of others. In order to promote the social, cultural, spiritual and also economic welfare of all members of society, it is therefore absolutely essential to stem the unrestrained consumption of earthly goods and to control the creation of artificial needs. *Moderation and simplicity ought to become the criteria of our daily lives.* The quantity of goods consumed by a tiny fraction of the world population produces a demand greater than available resources. A reduction of this demand constitutes a first step in alleviating poverty, provided that it is accompanied by effective measures to guarantee a fair distribution of the world's wealth.

In this regard, the Gospel invites believers not to accumulate the goods of this passing world: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Mt 6:19-20). This is a duty intrinsic to the Christian vocation, no less than the duty of working to overcome poverty; and it is also a very effective means for succeeding in this task.

Evangelical poverty is very different from socio-economic poverty. While the latter has harsh and often tragic characteristics, since it is experienced as a form of coercion, evangelical poverty is chosen freely by the person who intends in this way to respond to Christ's admonition: "Whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14:33).

Such evangelical poverty is the source of peace, since through it the individual can establish a proper relationship with God, *with others and with creation.* The life of the person who puts himself in this situation thus witnesses to humanity's absolute dependence on God who loves all creatures, and material goods come to be recognized for what they are: *a gift of God for the good of all.*

Evangelical poverty is something that transforms those who accept it. They cannot remain indifferent when faced with the suffering of the poor; indeed, they feel impelled to share actively with God his preferential love for them (cf. Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n. 42). Those who are poor in the Gospel sense are ready to sacrifice their resources and their own selves so that others may live. Their one desire is to live in peace with everyone, offering to others the gift of Jesus' peace (cf. Jn 14:27).

The divine Master has taught us by his life and words the demanding features of this poverty which leads us to true freedom. He "who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant" (Phil 2:6-7). He was born in poverty; as a child he was forced to go into exile with his family in order to escape the cruelty of Herod; he lived as one who had "nowhere to lay his head" (Mt 8:20). He was denigrated as a "glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Mt 11:19) and suffered the death reserved for criminals. He called the poor blessed and assured them that the kingdom of God belonged to them (cf. Lk 6:20). He reminded the rich that the snare of wealth stifles God's word (cf. Mt 13:22), and that it is difficult for them to enter the kingdom of God (cf. Mk 10:25).

Christ's example, no less than his words, is normative for Christians. We know that, at the Last Judgment, we shall all be judged, without distinction, on our practical love of our brothers and sisters. Indeed, it will be in the practical love they have shown that, on that

day, many will discover that they have in fact met Christ, although without having known him before in an explicit way (cf. Mt 25:35-37).

"If you want peace, reach out to the poor!" May rich and poor recognize that they are brothers and sisters; may they share what they have with one another as children of the one God who loves everyone, who wills the good of everyone, and who offers to everyone the gift of peace!

From the Vatican, 8 December 1992