

**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS  
POPE JOHN PAUL II  
FOR THE CELEBRATION OF THE XXX WORLD DAY OF PEACE  
OFFER FORGIVENESS AND RECEIVE PEACE**

1 January 1997

1. Only three years separate us from the dawn of a new millennium. This time of expectation is a time for reflection, inviting us to make an assessment, as it were, of mankind's journey in the sight of God, the Lord of history. If we look back on the last millennium, and on this century in particular, it must be acknowledged that mankind's path has been greatly illuminated by progress in the socio-cultural, economic, scientific and technological spheres. Unfortunately, this new light coexists with persistent dark shadows, especially in the areas of morality and solidarity. Then there is the real scandal of violence, which in old and new ways still strikes many human lives, and tears apart families and communities.

The time has come for a resolute decision to set out together on a true *pilgrimage of peace*, starting from the concrete situation in which we find ourselves. At times the difficulties can be daunting: ethnic origin, language, culture and religious beliefs are often obstacles to such a pilgrimage. To go forward together, when we have behind us traumatic experiences or even age-old divisions, is not an easy thing to do. This, then, is the question: which path must we follow, what direction should we take?

Certainly there are many factors which can help restore peace, while safeguarding the demands of justice and human dignity. But no process of peace can ever begin unless an attitude of sincere forgiveness takes root in human hearts. When such forgiveness is lacking, wounds continue to fester, fuelling in the younger generation endless resentment, producing a desire for revenge and causing fresh destruction. Offering and accepting forgiveness is the essential condition for making the journey towards authentic and lasting peace.

With deep conviction therefore I wish to appeal to everyone to *seek peace along the paths of forgiveness*. I am fully aware that forgiveness can seem contrary to human logic, which often yields to the dynamics of conflict and revenge. But forgiveness is inspired by the logic of love, that love which God has for every man and woman, for every people and nation, and for the whole human family. If the Church dares to proclaim what, from a human standpoint, might appear to be sheer folly, it is precisely because of her unshakable confidence in the infinite love of God. As Scripture bears witness, God is rich in mercy and full of forgiveness for those who come back to him (cf. *Ez 18:23; Ps 32:5; Ps 103:8-14; Eph 2:4-5; 2 Cor 1:3*). God's forgiveness becomes in our hearts an inexhaustible source of forgiveness in our relationships with one another, helping us to live together in true brotherhood.

***A wounded world yearns for healing***

2. As I have said, the modern world, despite its many successes, continues to be marked by contradictions. Progress in industry and agriculture has brought a higher standard of living to millions of people and offers great hope for many others. Technology has shrunk distances, while information has become instantaneous and has made possible new advances in human knowledge. Respect for the environment is growing and becoming a

way of life. A great army of volunteers, whose generosity often remains hidden, is working tirelessly in every part of the world for the good of humanity, sparing no effort especially in meeting the needs of the poor and the suffering.

How can we fail to acknowledge with joy these positive aspects of our times? Unfortunately, however, the present world scene also presents *more than a few negative signs*. These include materialism and a growing contempt for human life, which have now assumed disturbing proportions. Many people live their lives with no other allegiance than to the laws of profit, prestige and power.

As a result, many feel imprisoned in a deep inner loneliness. Others continue to be deliberately discriminated against on grounds of race, nationality or sex. Poverty is driving masses of people to the margins of society, or even worse, to extinction. For too many people war has become a harsh everyday reality. A society interested only in material and ephemeral goods is tending to marginalize those who are not useful to its purposes. Faced with situations like these, involving real human tragedies, some prefer simply to close their eyes, taking refuge in indifference. Theirs is the attitude of Cain: "Am I my brother's keeper?" (*Gen 4:9*). But the Church has the duty to remind everyone of God's severe admonishment: "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground!" (*Gen 4:10*).

When so many of our brothers and sisters are suffering, we cannot remain indifferent! *Their distress appeals to our conscience*, the inner sanctuary where we come face to face with ourselves and with God. How can we fail to see that, to different degrees, we are all involved in this revision of life to which God is calling us? We all need forgiveness from God and from our neighbour. Therefore we must all be ready to forgive and to ask for forgiveness.

### **The burden of history**

3. The difficulty of forgiving does not only arise from the circumstances of the present. History carries with it a heavy burden of violence and conflict which cannot easily be shed. Abuses of power, oppression and wars have brought suffering to countless human beings and, even if the causes of these sad events are lost in the distant past, their destructive effects live on, fuelling fear, suspicion, hatred and division among families, ethnic groups and whole peoples. These are facts which sorely try the good will of those who are seeking to overcome their past conditioning. The truth is that *one cannot remain a prisoner of the past*, for individuals and peoples need a sort of "healing of memories", so that past evils will not come back again. This does not mean forgetting past events; it means re-examining them with a new attitude and learning precisely from the experience of suffering that only love can build up, whereas hatred produces devastation and ruin. The deadly cycle of revenge must be replaced by the new-found liberty of forgiveness.

For this to happen, we must learn to read the history of other peoples without facile and partisan bias, making an effort to understand their point of view. This is a real challenge also on the level of education and culture. This is a challenge for civilization! If we agree to set out on this journey, we shall come to see that mistakes are not all on one side. We shall see how history has sometimes been presented in a distorted and even manipulated way, with tragic results.

A correct reading of history will make it easier to accept and appreciate the social, cultural and religious differences between individuals, groups and peoples. This is the first step

towards reconciliation, since respect for differences is an inherently necessary condition for genuine relationships between individuals and between groups. The suppression of differences can result in apparent peace, but it creates a volatile situation which is in fact the prelude to fresh outbreaks of violence.

### ***Practical mechanisms for reconciliation***

4. Wars, even when they "solve" the problems which cause them, do so only by leaving a wake of victims and destruction which weighs heavily upon ensuing peace negotiations. Awareness of this should encourage peoples, nations and States once and for all to rise above the "culture of war", not only in its most detestable form, namely, the power to wage war used as an instrument of supremacy, but also in the less odious but no less destructive form of recourse to arms as an expeditious way to solve a problem. Precisely in a time such as ours, which is familiar with the most sophisticated technologies of destruction, it is urgently necessary to develop a consistent "culture of peace", which will forestall and counter the seemingly inevitable outbreaks of armed violence, including taking steps to stop the growth of the arms industry and of arms trafficking.

But even before this, the sincere desire for peace has to be translated into a firm decision to remove every obstacle to achieving peace. Here, *the various religions* can make an important contribution, as they have often done in the past, by speaking out against war and bravely facing the consequent risks. But are not all of us called to do still more, by drawing upon the genuine patrimony of our religious traditions?

At the same time, the duty of *governments* and the *international community* remains essential in these matters. It is for them to contribute to the building of peace through the establishment of solid structures capable of withstanding the uncertainties of politics, thus guaranteeing to everyone freedom and security in every circumstance. The *United Nations Organization*, for example, in fidelity to its founding inspiration, has recently taken on ever more extensive responsibility for maintaining or restoring peace. In this regard, fifty years after its establishment, it seems fitting to hope that the means at its disposal will be appropriately reviewed in order to enable that Organization to face effectively the new challenges of our time.

Other *organizations at the continental and regional level* also have great importance as instruments for promoting peace: it is reassuring to see them committed to developing practical mechanisms for reconciliation, working actively to help peoples divided by war to rediscover the reasons for peaceful and harmonious coexistence. These are forms of mediation which offer hope to peoples in apparently helpless situations. Nor should we underestimate the activity of *local organizations*: present as they are in places where the seeds of conflict are sown, they can reach individuals directly, mediating between opposing factions and promoting mutual trust.

Lasting peace however is not just a matter of structures and mechanisms. It rests above all on the adoption of a style of human coexistence marked by mutual acceptance and a capacity to forgive from the heart. We all need to be forgiven by others, so we must all be ready to forgive. *Asking and granting forgiveness* is something profoundly worthy of man; sometimes it is the only way out of situations marked by age-old and violent hatred.

Certainly, forgiveness does not come spontaneously or naturally to people. Forgiving from the heart can sometimes be actually heroic. The pain of losing a child, a brother or sister, one's parents or whole family as a result of war, terrorism or criminal acts can lead to the

total closing of oneself to others. People who have been left with nothing because they have been deprived of their land and home, refugees and those who have endured the humiliation of violence, cannot fail to feel the temptation to hatred and revenge. Only the warmth of human relationships marked by respect, understanding and acceptance can help them to overcome such feelings. The liberating encounter with forgiveness, though fraught with difficulties, can be experienced even by a wounded heart, thanks to the healing power of love, which has its first source in God who is Love.

### ***Truth and justice: prerequisites for forgiveness***

5. Forgiveness, in its truest and highest form, is a free act of love. But precisely because it is an act of love, it has its own intrinsic demands: the first of which is *respect for the truth*. God alone is absolute truth. But he made the human heart open to the desire for truth, which he then fully revealed in his Incarnate Son. *Hence we are all called to live the truth*. Where lies and falsehood are sown, there suspicion and division flourish. Corruption too, and political or ideological manipulation, are essentially contrary to the truth: they attack the very foundations of social harmony and undermine the possibility of peaceful social relationships.

*Forgiveness, far from precluding the search for truth, actually requires it.* The evil which has been done must be acknowledged and as far as possible corrected. It is precisely this requirement which has led to the establishment in various parts of the world of appropriate procedures for ascertaining the truth regarding crimes between ethnic groups or nations, as a first step towards reconciliation. There is no need to insist on the great prudence which all parties must observe in this necessary process, in order not to accentuate contrasts, which would then make reconciliation even more difficult. Not uncommon are cases of countries whose leaders, looking to the fundamental good of consolidating peace, have agreed to grant an amnesty to those who have publicly admitted crimes committed during a period of turmoil. Such an initiative can be regarded favourably as an effort to promote good relations between groups previously opposed to one another.

Another essential requisite for forgiveness and reconciliation is *justice*, which finds its ultimate foundation in the law of God and in his plan of love and mercy for humanity.<sup>1</sup> Understood in this way, justice is not limited to establishing what is right between the parties in conflict but looks above all to re-establishing authentic relationships with God, with oneself and with others. Thus there is no contradiction between forgiveness and justice. *Forgiveness neither eliminates nor lessens the need for the reparation* which justice requires, but seeks to reintegrate individuals and groups into society, and States into the community of Nations. No punishment can suppress the inalienable dignity of those who have committed evil. The door to repentance and rehabilitation must always remain open.

### ***Jesus Christ our reconciliation***

6. How many situations today call for reconciliation! In the face of this challenge, on which peace to a great extent depends, I appeal to all believers, and in a special way to the members of the Catholic Church, to devote themselves in an active and practical way to the work of reconciliation.

Believers know that *reconciliation comes from God*, who is always ready to forgive those who turn to him and turn their back on their sins (cf. *Is 38:17*). God's immense love goes far beyond human understanding, as Sacred Scripture says: "Can a woman forget her

suckling child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you" (*Is* 49:15).

Divine love is the foundation of the reconciliation to which all of us are called. "It is he who forgives all your guilt, who heals every one of your ills; who redeems your life from the grave, who crowns you with love and compassion. ... He does not treat us according to our sins nor repay us according to our faults" (*Ps* 102:3-4,10).

In his loving readiness to forgive, God went even to the point of giving himself to the world in the Person of his Son, who came to bring redemption to every individual and all humanity. In the face of human offences, which culminated in his condemnation to death on the Cross, Jesus prayed: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (*Lk* 23:34).

God's forgiveness is the expression of his loving kindness as our Father. In the Gospel parable of the prodigal son (cf. *Lk* 15:11-32), the father runs to meet his son as soon as he sees him coming home.

He does not even let the son apologize: everything is forgiven (cf. *Lk* 15:20-22). The intense joy of forgiveness, offered and received, heals seemingly incurable wounds, restores relationships and firmly roots them in God's inexhaustible love.

Throughout his life Jesus proclaimed God's forgiveness, but he also taught *the need for mutual forgiveness* as the condition for obtaining it. In the Lord's Prayer he makes us pray: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us" (*Mt* 6:12). With that "as", he places in our hands the measure with which we shall be judged by God. The parable of the unforgiving servant, punished for his hardness of heart towards his fellow servant (cf. *Mt* 18:23-35), teaches us that those who are unwilling to forgive exclude themselves by this very fact from divine forgiveness: "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart" (*Mt* 18:35).

Our prayer itself cannot be pleasing to the Lord unless it is preceded, and in a certain sense "guaranteed" in its authenticity, by a sincere effort on our part to be reconciled with our brother who has "something against us": only then will it be possible for us to present an offering pleasing to God (cf. *Mt* 5:23-24).

### ***In the service of reconciliation***

7. Jesus not only taught his disciples the duty to forgive, but he also intended his Church to be the sign and instrument of his plan of reconciliation, making her the sacrament "of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all humanity".<sup>2</sup> In the light of this responsibility, Saint Paul described the apostolic ministry as the "ministry of reconciliation" (cf. *2 Cor* 5:18-20). But in a certain sense every baptized person must consider himself a "minister of reconciliation" since, having been reconciled with God and the brethren, he is called to build peace with the power of truth and justice.

As I had occasion to state in my Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, Christians, as they get ready to cross the threshold of a new millennium, are invited to renew their repentance for "all those times in history when they departed from the spirit of Christ and his Gospel and, instead of offering to the world the witness of a life inspired by the values of faith, indulged in ways of thinking and acting which were truly *forms of counter-witness and scandal*".<sup>3</sup>

Among these, *the divisions which harm the unity of Christians* are of singular importance. As we prepare to celebrate the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, we must together seek Christ's forgiveness, beseeching the Holy Spirit to grant the grace of full unity. "Unity, after all, is a gift of the Holy Spirit. We are asked to respond to this gift responsibly, without compromise to our witness to the truth".<sup>4</sup> Fixing our gaze on *Jesus Christ, our reconciliation*, in this first year of preparation for the Jubilee, let us do everything we can, through prayer, witness and action, in order to advance towards greater unity. This cannot fail to exercise a positive influence on the peacemaking processes going on in different parts of the world.

In June 1997, the Churches of Europe will hold in Graz their second European Ecumenical Assembly on the theme "*Reconciliation, gift of God and source of new life*". In preparation for this meeting, the Presidents of the Conference of European Churches and of the Council of European Episcopal Conferences have issued a joint message calling for a fresh commitment to reconciliation, the "gift of God for us and for the whole of creation." They have listed some of the many tasks which await the Ecclesial Communities: the search for a more visible unity, and commitment to the reconciliation of peoples. May the prayer of all Christians sustain the preparations in the local Churches for this meeting and foster practical gestures of reconciliation throughout Europe, opening the way to similar efforts on other continents.

In the above-mentioned Apostolic Letter, I expressed the lively hope that along the way to the Year 2000 Christians will take the texts of Sacred Scripture as their constant inspiration and reference. An extremely relevant theme to guide this pilgrimage could be that of forgiveness and reconciliation, to be meditated upon and lived in the concrete circumstances of every person and community.

### ***An appeal to all people of good will***

8. I wish to conclude this Message, which I am sending to believers and all people of good will for the coming World Day of Peace, with an appeal to every individual to become an instrument of peace and reconciliation.

In the first place I address myself to you, my Brother *Bishops and priests*: be mirrors of the merciful love of God not only in the ecclesial community, but also in civil society, especially where nationalistic and ethnic conflicts are raging. In spite of the sufferings you may have to endure, do not let hatred enter your hearts, but joyfully proclaim Christ's Gospel and dispense God's forgiveness through the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

To you *parents*, the first educators of your children in the faith, I ask you to help your children to look upon all people as their brothers and sisters, to reach out to others without prejudice, with an attitude of trust and acceptance. Be for your children a reflection of God's love and forgiveness; make every effort to create a united and harmonious family.

And you *educators*, called to teach young people the true values of life by introducing them to the complexity of history and human culture, help them to live in every situation the virtues of tolerance, understanding and respect; hold up to them as models those who have been artisans of peace and reconciliation.

You *young people*, who cherish great hopes in your hearts, learn to live with one another in peace, without building barriers which stop you from sharing the treasures of other

cultures and traditions. Respond to violence with works of peace, in order to build a world which is reconciled and fully human.

You *men and women in public life*, called to serve the common good, exclude no one from your concerns; take special care of the weakest sectors of society. Do not put your personal advantage above all else; do not give in to the lure of corruption and, above all, face even the most difficult situations with the weapons of peace and reconciliation.

To you who *work in the mass media*, I ask you to consider the great responsibilities which your profession involves, and never to be promoters of messages marked by hatred, violence or falsehood. Always keep in mind the truth of the human person, whose welfare the powerful means of communication are meant to serve.

Finally, to all of you who *believe in Christ*, I address an invitation to walk faithfully on the path of forgiveness and reconciliation, uniting yourselves to his prayer to the Father that all may be one (cf. *Jn 17:21*). And I exhort you to accompany this unceasing prayer for peace with deeds of brotherhood and mutual acceptance.

To every person of good will, eager to work tirelessly in the building of a new civilization of love, I say once more:

Offer forgiveness and receive peace!

*From the Vatican, 8 December 1996.*

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(1) Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Dives in Misericordia* (30 November 1980), 14: AAS 72 (1980), 1223.

(2) Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

(3) No. 33: AAS 87 (1995), 25.

(4) *Ibid.*, No. 34: *loc. cit.*, 26.