

Dialogue between Cultures for a Civilization of Love and Peace Message for World Day of Peace

Pope John Paul II, January 1, 2001

1. At the dawn of a new millennium, there is growing hope that relationships between people will be increasingly inspired by the ideal of a truly universal brotherhood. Unless this ideal is shared, there will be no way to ensure a stable peace. There are many signs which suggest that this conviction is becoming more deeply rooted in people's minds. The importance of fraternity is proclaimed in the great "charters" of human rights; it is embodied in great international institutions, particularly the United Nations; and it is called for, as never before, by the process of globalization which is leading to a progressive unification of the economy, culture and society. For their part, the followers of the different religions are ever more conscious of the fact that a relationship with the one God, the common Father of all, cannot fail to bring about a greater sense of human brotherhood and a more fraternal life together. In God's revelation in Christ, this principle finds a radical expression: "He who does not love does not know God; for God is love" ([1 Jn 4:8](#)).

2. At the same time, however, it cannot be denied that thick clouds overshadow these bright hopes. Humanity is beginning this new chapter of its history with still open wounds. In many regions it is beset by bitter and bloody conflicts, and is struggling with increasing difficulty to maintain solidarity between people of different cultures and civilizations living together in the same territory. We all know how hard it is to settle differences between parties when ancient hatreds and serious problems which admit of no easy solution create an atmosphere of anger and exasperation. But no less dangerous for the future of peace would be the inability to confront intelligently the problems posed by a new social configuration resulting in many countries from accelerated migration and the unprecedented situation of people of different cultures and civilizations living side by side.

3. I therefore consider it urgent to invite believers in Christ, together with all men and women of good will, to *reflect on the theme of dialogue between cultures and traditions*. This dialogue is the obligatory path to the building of a reconciled world, a world able to look with serenity to its own future. This is a theme which is crucial to the pursuit of peace. I am pleased that the United Nations Organization has called attention to this urgent need by declaring 2001 the "International Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations".

Naturally, I do not believe that there can be easy or readily applicable solutions to a problem like this. It is difficult enough to undertake an analysis of the situation, which is in constant flux and defies all preconceived models. There is also the difficulty of combining principles and values which, however reconcilable in the abstract, can prove on the practical level to be resistant to any easy synthesis. In addition, at a deeper level, there are always the demands which ethical commitment makes upon individuals, who are not free of self-interest and human limitations.

But for this very reason I see the usefulness of a shared reflection on these issues. With this intention I confine myself here to offering some guidelines, listening to what the Spirit of God is saying to the Churches (cf. [Rev 2:7](#)) and to all of humanity at this decisive hour of its history.

Mankind and its different cultures

4. Reflecting upon the human situation, one is always amazed at the complexity and diversity of human cultures. Each of them is distinct by virtue of its specific historical evolution and the resulting characteristics which make it a structurally unique, original and organic whole. *Culture is the form of man's self-expression in his journey through history*, on the level of both individuals and social groups. For man is driven incessantly by his intellect and will to "cultivate natural goods and values",⁽¹⁾ to incorporate in an ever higher and more systematic cultural synthesis his basic knowledge of all aspects of life, particularly those involving social and political life, security and economic development, and to foster those existential values and perspectives, especially in the religious sphere, which enable individual and community life to develop in a way that is authentically human.⁽²⁾

5. A culture is always marked by stable and enduring elements, as well as by changing and contingent features. At first glance, in examining a culture we are struck above all by those aspects which distinguish it from our own culture; these give each culture a face of its own, as an amalgam of quite distinctive elements. In most cases, a culture develops in a specific place, where geographical, historical and ethnic elements combine in an original and unique way. The "uniqueness" of each culture is reflected more or less clearly in those individuals who are its bearers, in a constant process whereby individuals are influenced by their culture and then, according to their different abilities and genius, contribute to it something of their own. In any event, *a person necessarily lives within a specific culture*. People are marked by the culture whose very air they breathe through the family and the social groups around them, through education and the most varied influences of their environment, through the very relationship which they have with the place in which they live. There is no determinism here, but rather a constant dialectic between the strength of the individual's conditioning and the workings of human freedom.

Human development and being part of a culture

6. The need to accept one's own culture as a structuring element of one's personality, especially in the initial stages of life, is a fact of universal experience whose importance can hardly be overestimated. Without a firm rooting in a specific "soil", individuals risk being subjected at a still vulnerable age to an excess of conflicting stimuli which could impair their serene and balanced development. It is on the basis of this essential relationship with one's own "origins" — on the level of the family, but also of territory, society and culture — that people acquire *a sense of their nationality*, and culture tends to take on, to a greater or lesser degree in different places, a "national" configuration. The Son of God himself, by becoming man, acquired, along with a human family, a country. He remains for ever Jesus of Nazareth, the Nazarean (cf. [Mk 10:47](#); [Lk 18:37](#); [Jn 1:45](#); [19:19](#)). This is a natural process, in which sociological and psychological forces interact, with results that are normally positive and constructive. Love for one's country is thus *a value to be fostered*, without narrow-mindedness but with love for the whole human family⁽³⁾ and with an effort to avoid those pathological manifestations which occur when the sense of belonging turns into self-exaltation, the rejection of diversity, and forms of nationalism, racism and xenophobia.

7. Consequently, while it is certainly important to be able to appreciate the values of one's own culture, there is also a need to recognize that every culture, as a typically human and historically conditioned reality, necessarily has its limitations. In order to prevent the sense of belonging to one particular culture from turning into isolation, an effective antidote is a serene and unprejudiced knowledge of other cultures. Moreover, when cultures are carefully and rigorously studied, they very often reveal beneath their outward variations

significant common elements. This can also be seen in the historical sequence of cultures and civilizations. The Church, looking to Christ, who reveals man to himself,(4) and drawing upon her experience of two thousand years of history, is convinced that "beneath all that changes, there is much that is unchanging".(5) This continuity is based upon the essential and universal character of God's plan for humanity.

Cultural diversity should therefore be understood *within the broader horizon of the unity of the human race*. In a real way, this unity constitutes the primordial historical and ontological datum in the light of which the profound meaning of cultural diversity can be grasped. In fact, only an overall vision of both the elements of unity and the elements of diversity makes it possible to understand and interpret the full truth of every human culture.(6)

Cultural differences and mutual respect

8. In the past, cultural differences have often been a source of misunderstanding between peoples and the cause of conflicts and wars. Even now, sad to say, in different parts of the world we are witnessing with growing alarm *the aggressive claims of some cultures against others*. In the long run, this situation can end in disastrous tensions and conflicts. At the very least it can make more difficult the situation of those ethnic and cultural minorities living in a majority cultural context which is different from their own and prone to hostile and racist ways of thinking and acting.

In light of this, people of good will need to examine the basic ethical orientations which mark a particular community's cultural experience. Cultures, like the people who give rise to them, are marked by the "mystery of evil" at work in human history (cf. [1 Th 2:7](#)), and they too are in need of purification and salvation. The authenticity of each human culture, the soundness of its underlying ethos, and hence the validity of its moral bearings, can be measured to an extent by its commitment to *the human cause* and *by its capacity to promote human dignity* at every level and in every circumstance.

9. The radicalization of identity which makes cultures resistant to any beneficial influence from outside is worrying enough; but no less perilous is *the slavish conformity of cultures*, or at least of key aspects of them, to cultural models deriving from the Western world. Detached from their Christian origins, these models are often inspired by an approach to life marked by secularism and practical atheism and by patterns of radical individualism. This is a phenomenon of vast proportions, sustained by powerful media campaigns and designed to propagate lifestyles, social and economic programmes and, in the last analysis, a comprehensive world-view which erodes from within other estimable cultures and civilizations. Western cultural models are enticing and alluring because of their remarkable scientific and technical cast, but regrettably there is growing evidence of their deepening human, spiritual and moral impoverishment. The culture which produces such models is marked by the fatal attempt to secure the good of humanity by eliminating God, the Supreme Good. Yet, as the Second Vatican Council warned, "without the Creator the creature comes to nothing!"(7) A culture which no longer has a point of reference in God loses its soul and loses its way, becoming a culture of death. This was amply demonstrated by the tragic events of the twentieth century and is now apparent in the nihilism present in some prominent circles in the Western world.

Dialogue between cultures

10. Individuals come to maturity through receptive openness to others and through generous self-giving to them; so too do cultures. Created by people and at the service of people, they have to be perfected through dialogue and communion, on the basis of the original and fundamental unity of the human family as it came from the hands of God who "made from one stock every nation of mankind" (*Acts 17:26*).

In this perspective, *dialogue between cultures* — the theme of this World Day of Peace Message — *emerges as an intrinsic demand of human nature itself, as well as of culture*. It is dialogue which protects the distinctiveness of cultures as historical and creative expressions of the underlying unity of the human family, and which sustains understanding and communion between them. The notion of communion, which has its source in Christian revelation and finds its sublime prototype in the Triune God (cf. *Jn 17:11, 21*), never implies a dull uniformity or enforced homogenization or assimilation; rather it expresses the convergence of a multiform variety, and is therefore a sign of richness and a promise of growth.

Dialogue leads to a recognition of diversity and opens the mind to the mutual acceptance and genuine collaboration demanded by the human family's basic vocation to unity. As such, dialogue is a privileged means for building *the civilization of love and peace* that my revered predecessor Pope Paul VI indicated as the ideal to inspire cultural, social, political and economic life in our time. At the beginning of the Third Millennium, it is urgent that *the path of dialogue* be proposed once again to a world marked by excessive conflict and violence, a world at times discouraged and incapable of seeing signs of hope and peace.

Possibilities and risks of global communication

11. Dialogue between cultures is especially needed today because of *the impact of new communications technology* on the lives of individuals and peoples. Ours is an era of global communication, which is shaping society along the lines of new cultural models which more or less break with past models. At least in principle, accurate and up-to-date information is available to anyone in any part of the world.

The free flow of images and speech on a global scale is transforming not only political and economic relations between peoples, but even our understanding of the world. It opens up a range of hitherto unthinkable possibilities, but it also has certain negative and dangerous aspects. The fact that a few countries have a monopoly on these cultural "industries" and distribute their products to an ever growing public in every corner of the earth can be a powerful factor in undermining cultural distinctness. These products include and transmit implicit value-systems and can therefore lead to a kind of dispossession and loss of cultural identity in those who receive them.

The challenge of migration

12. A style and culture of dialogue are especially important when it comes to *the complex question of migration*, which is an important social phenomenon of our time. The movement of large numbers of people from one part of the planet to another is often a terrible odyssey for those involved, and it brings with it the intermingling of traditions and customs, with notable repercussions both on the countries from which people come and on those in which they settle. How migrants are welcomed by receiving countries and how well they become integrated in their new environment are also an indication of how much effective dialogue there is between the various cultures.

The question of cultural integration is much debated these days, and it is not easy to specify in detail how best to guarantee, in a balanced and equitable way, the rights and duties of those who welcome and those who are welcomed. Historically, migrations have occurred in all sorts of ways and with very different results. In the case of many civilizations, immigration has brought new growth and enrichment. In other cases, the local people and immigrants have remained culturally separate but have shown that they are able to live together, respecting each other and accepting or tolerating the diversity of customs. Regrettably, situations still exist in which the difficulties involved in the encounter of different cultures have never been resolved, and the consequent tensions have become the cause of periodic outbreaks of conflict.

13. In such a complex issue there are no "magic" formulas; but still we must identify some basic ethical principles to serve as points of reference. First of all, it is important to remember the principle that *immigrants must always be treated with the respect due to the dignity of every human person*. In the matter of controlling the influx of immigrants, the consideration which should rightly be given to the common good should not ignore this principle. The challenge is to combine the welcome due to every human being, especially when in need, with a reckoning of what is necessary for both the local inhabitants and the new arrivals to live a dignified and peaceful life. The cultural practices which immigrants bring with them should be respected and accepted, as long as they do not contravene either the universal ethical values inherent in the natural law or fundamental human rights.

Respect for cultures and the "cultural profile" of different regions

14. It is a much more difficult thing to determine the extent to which immigrants are entitled to public legal recognition of the particular customs of their culture, which may not be readily compatible with the customs of the majority of citizens. The solution to this question, within a climate of genuine openness, *calls for a realistic evaluation of the common good* at any given time in history and in any given place and social context. Much depends upon whether people embrace a spirit of openness that, without yielding to indifferentism about values, can combine the concern for identity with the willingness to engage in dialogue.

On the other hand, as I noted above, one cannot underestimate the capacity of the characteristic culture of a region to produce a balanced growth, especially in the delicate early stages of life, in those who belong to that culture from birth. From this point of view, a reasonable way forward would be to ensure a certain "cultural equilibrium" in each region, by reference to the culture which has prevalently marked its development. This equilibrium, even while welcoming minorities and respecting their basic rights, would allow the continued existence and development of a particular "cultural profile", by which I mean that basic heritage of language, traditions and values which are inextricably part of a nation's history and its national identity.

15. Clearly, though, the need to ensure an equilibrium in a region's cultural profile cannot be met by legislative measures alone, since these would prove ineffectual unless they were grounded in the ethos of the population. They would also be inevitably destined to change should a culture lose its ability to inspire a people and a region, becoming no more than a legacy preserved in museums or in artistic and literary monuments.

In effect, as long as a culture is truly alive, it need have no fear of being displaced. And no law could keep it alive if it were already dead in people's hearts. In the dialogue between

cultures, no side can be prevented from proposing to the other the values in which it believes, as long as this is done in way that is respectful of people's freedom and conscience. "Truth can be imposed only with the force of truth itself, which penetrates the mind both gently and powerfully".(8)

The recognition of shared values

16. Dialogue between cultures, a privileged means for building the civilization of love, is based upon the recognition that *there are values which are common to all cultures* because they are rooted in the nature of the person. These values express humanity's most authentic and distinctive features. Leaving aside ideological prejudices and selfish interests, it is necessary to foster people's awareness of these shared values, in order to nurture that intrinsically universal cultural "soil" which makes for fruitful and constructive dialogue. The different religions too can and ought to contribute decisively to this process. My many encounters with representatives of other religions — I recall especially the meeting in Assisi in 1986 and in Saint Peter's Square in 1999 — have made me more confident that mutual openness between the followers of the various religions can greatly serve the cause of peace and the common good of the human family.

The value of solidarity

17. Faced with growing inequalities in the world, *the prime value* which must be ever more widely inculcated is certainly that of *solidarity*. A society depends on the basic relations that people cultivate with one another in ever widening circles — from the family to other intermediary social groups, to civil society as a whole and to the national community. States in turn have no choice but to enter into relations with one another. The present reality of global interdependence makes it easier to appreciate the common destiny of the entire human family, and makes all thoughtful people increasingly appreciate the virtue of solidarity.

At the same time it is necessary to point out that this growing interdependence has brought to light many inequalities, such as the gap between rich and poor nations; the social imbalance within each nation between those living in opulence and those offended in their dignity since they lack even the necessities of life; the human and environmental degradation provoked and accelerated by the irresponsible use of natural resources. These social inequalities and imbalances have grown worse in certain places, and some of the poorest nations have reached a point of irreversible decline.

Consequently, *the promotion of justice* is at the heart of a true culture of solidarity. It is not just a question of giving one's surplus to those in need, but of "helping entire peoples presently excluded or marginalized to enter into the sphere of economic and human development. For this to happen, it is not enough to draw on the surplus goods which in fact our world abundantly produces; it requires above all a change of lifestyles, of models of production and consumption, and of the established structures of power which today govern societies".(9)

The value of peace

18. The culture of solidarity is closely connected with *the value of peace*, the primary objective of every society and of national and international life. However, on the path to better understanding among peoples there remain many challenges which the world must face: these set before everyone choices which cannot be postponed. The alarming

increase of arms, together with the halting progress of commitment to nuclear non-proliferation, runs the risk of feeding and expanding a culture of competition and conflict, a culture involving not only States but also non-institutional entities, such as paramilitary groups and terrorist organizations.

Even today the world is dealing with the consequences of wars past and present, as well as the tragic effects of anti-personnel mines and the use of frightful chemical and biological weapons. And what can be said about the permanent risk of conflicts between nations, of civil wars within some States and of widespread violence, before which international organizations and national governments appear almost impotent? Faced with such threats, everyone must feel the moral duty to take concrete and timely steps to promote the cause of peace and understanding among peoples.

The value of life

19. An authentic dialogue between cultures cannot fail to nourish, in addition to sentiments of mutual respect, a lively sense of *the value of life itself*. Human life cannot be seen as an object to do with as we please, but as the most sacred and inviolable earthly reality. There can be no peace when this most basic good is not protected. *It is not possible to invoke peace and despise life*. Our own times have seen shining examples of generosity and dedication in the service of life, but also the sad sight of hundreds of millions of men and women whom cruelty and indifference have consigned to a painful and harsh destiny. I am speaking of a tragic spiral of death which includes murder, suicide, abortion, euthanasia, as well as practices of mutilation, physical and psychological torture, forms of unjust coercion, arbitrary imprisonment, unnecessary recourse to the death penalty, deportations, slavery, prostitution, trafficking in women and children. To this list we must add irresponsible practices of genetic engineering, such as the cloning and use of human embryos for research, which are justified by an illegitimate appeal to freedom, to cultural progress, to the advancement of mankind. When the weakest and most vulnerable members of society are subjected to such atrocities, the very idea of the human family, built on the value of the person, on trust, respect and mutual support, is dangerously eroded. A civilization based on love and peace must oppose these experiments, which are unworthy of man.

The value of education

20. In order to build the civilization of love, dialogue between cultures must work to overcome all ethnocentric selfishness and make it possible to combine regard for one's own identity with understanding of others and respect for diversity. Fundamental in this respect is the *responsibility of education*. Education must make students aware of their own roots and provide points of reference which allow them to define their own personal place in the world. At the same time, it must be committed to teaching respect for other cultures. There is a need to look beyond one's immediate personal experience and accept differences, discovering the richness to be found in other people's history and in their values.

Knowledge of other cultures, acquired with an appropriate critical sense and within a solid ethical framework, leads to a deeper awareness of the values and limitations within one's own culture, and at the same time it reveals the existence of a patrimony that is common to the whole of humanity. Thanks precisely to this broadening of horizons, *education has a particular role to play in building a more united and peaceful world*. It can help to affirm that integral humanism, open to life's ethical and religious dimension, which appreciates the

importance of understanding and showing esteem for other cultures and the spiritual values present in them.

Forgiveness and reconciliation

21. During the Great Jubilee, two thousand years after the birth of Jesus, the Church has had a powerful experience of *the challenging call to reconciliation*. This call is significant also in the context of the complex issue of dialogue between cultures. Dialogue in fact is often difficult because it is weighed down by the tragic heritage of war, conflict, violence and hatred, which lives on in people's memory. For the barriers caused by noncommunication to be bridged, the path to take is the path of forgiveness and reconciliation. Many people, in the name of a disillusioned realism, maintain that this is a utopian and naive path. From the Christian point of view it is the only path which leads to the goal of peace.

The eyes of believers contemplate the image of the Crucified One. Shortly before dying, Jesus exclaims: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (*Lk 23:34*). The evil-doer crucified on his right, hearing these last words of the dying Redeemer, opens his heart to the grace of conversion, welcomes the Gospel of forgiveness and receives the promise of eternal happiness. The example of Christ makes us certain that the many impediments to communication and dialogue between people can indeed be torn down. Gazing upon the Crucified One we are filled with confidence that forgiveness and reconciliation can become the normal practice of everyday life and of every culture, and thus a real opportunity for building humanity's peace and future.

Mindful of the significant Jubilee experience of the purification of memory, I wish to make a specific appeal to Christians to become witnesses to and missionaries of forgiveness and reconciliation. In this way, through their active invocation of the God of peace, they will hasten the fulfilment of Isaiah's splendid prophecy, which can be applied to all the peoples of the earth: "In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage'" (*Is 19:23-25*).

An appeal to young people

22. I wish to conclude this Message of peace with a special appeal to you, *young people of the whole world*, who are humanity's future and living stones in the building of the civilization of love. I treasure in my heart the memory of the emotional and hope-filled meetings which we had during the recent World Youth Day in Rome. Your participation was joyous, sincere and reassuring. In your energy and vitality, and in your love of Christ, I was able to glimpse a more peaceful and human future for the world.

Feeling your closeness to me, I sensed a profound gratitude to the Lord who gave me the grace of contemplating — through the multicoloured mosaic of your different languages, cultures, customs and ways of thinking — *the miracle of the universality of the Church*, of her catholicity, of her unity. Through you I was able to admire *the marvellous coming together of diversity in the unity* of the same faith, the same hope, the same love. Here was an eloquent expression of the wondrous reality of the Church, sign and instrument of Christ for the salvation of the world and for the unity of mankind.(10) The Gospel calls you

to rebuild the original unity of the human family, which has its source in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Dear young people of every language and culture, *a high and exhilarating task* awaits you: that of becoming men and women capable of solidarity, peace and love of life, with respect for everyone. Become craftsmen of a new humanity, where brothers and sisters — members all of the same family — are able at last to live in peace.

From the Vatican, 8 December 2000.

(1) Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 53.

(2) Cf. John Paul II, Address to the United Nations (15 October 1995).

(3) Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 75.

(4) Cf. *ibid.*, 22.

(5) *Ibid.*, 10.

(6) John Paul II, Address to UNESCO (2 June 1980), No. 6.

(7) Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 36.

(8) Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis Humanae*, 1.

(9) John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, 58.

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