

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE BENEDICT XVI
FOR THE CELEBRATION OF THE
WORLD DAY OF PEACE

1 JANUARY 2007

THE HUMAN PERSON, THE HEART OF PEACE

1. At the beginning of the new year, I wish to extend prayerful good wishes for peace to Governments, leaders of nations and all men and women of good will. In a special way, I invoke peace upon all those experiencing pain and suffering, those living under the threat of violence and armed aggression, and those who await their human and social emancipation, having had their dignity trampled upon. I invoke peace upon children, who by their innocence enrich humanity with goodness and hope, and by their sufferings compel us all to work for justice and peace. Out of concern for children, especially those whose future is compromised by exploitation and the malice of unscrupulous adults, I wish on this World Day of Peace to encourage everyone to reflect on the theme: *The Human Person, the Heart of Peace*. I am convinced that respect for the person promotes peace and that, in building peace, the foundations are laid for an authentic integral humanism. In this way a serene future is prepared for coming generations.

The human person and peace: gift and task

2. Sacred Scripture affirms that “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). *As one created in the image of God, each individual human being has the dignity of a person*; he or she is not just something, but someone, capable of self-knowledge, self-possession, free self-giving and entering into communion with others. At the same time, each person is called, by grace, to a covenant with the Creator, called to offer him a response of faith and love that no other creature can give in his place(1). From this supernatural perspective, one can understand the task entrusted to human beings to mature in the ability to love and to contribute to the progress of the world, renewing it in justice and in peace. In a striking synthesis, Saint Augustine teaches that “God created us without our aid; but he did not choose to save us without our aid(2).” Consequently all human beings have the duty to cultivate *an awareness of this twofold aspect of gift and task*.

3. Likewise, *peace is both gift and task*. If it is true that peace between individuals and peoples-the ability to live together and to build relationships of justice and solidarity-calls for unflinching commitment on our part, it is also true, and indeed more so, that *peace is a gift from God*. Peace is an aspect of God's activity, made manifest both in the creation of an orderly and harmonious universe and also in the redemption of humanity that needs to be rescued from the disorder of sin. Creation and Redemption thus provide a key that helps us begin to understand the meaning of our life on earth. My venerable predecessor Pope John Paul II, addressing the General Assembly of the United Nations on 5 October 1995, stated that “we do not live in an irrational or meaningless world... there is a moral logic which is built into human life and which

makes possible dialogue between individuals and peoples(3).” The transcendent “grammar”, that is to say the body of rules for individual action and the reciprocal relationships of persons in accordance with justice and solidarity, is inscribed on human consciences, in which the wise plan of God is reflected. As I recently had occasion to reaffirm: “we believe that at the beginning of everything is the Eternal Word, Reason and not Unreason(4).” Peace is thus also a task demanding of everyone a personal response consistent with God's plan. The criterion inspiring this response can only be *respect for the “grammar” written on human hearts by the divine Creator.*

From this standpoint, the norms of the natural law should not be viewed as externally imposed decrees, as restraints upon human freedom. Rather, they should be welcomed as a call to carry out faithfully the universal divine plan inscribed in the nature of human beings. Guided by these norms, all peoples-within their respective cultures-can draw near to the greatest mystery, which is the mystery of God. Today too, recognition and respect for natural law represents the foundation for a dialogue between the followers of the different religions and between believers and non-believers. As a great *point of convergence*, this is also a fundamental presupposition for authentic peace.

The right to life and to religious freedom

4. The duty to respect the dignity of each human being, in whose nature the image of the Creator is reflected, means in consequence that *the person can not be disposed of at will*. Those with greater political, technical, or economic power may not use that power to violate the rights of others who are less fortunate. Peace is based on respect for the rights of all. Conscious of this, the Church champions the fundamental rights of each person. In particular she promotes and defends respect for the *life* and the *religious freedom* of everyone. Respect for the right to life at every stage firmly establishes a principle of decisive importance: *life is a gift which is not completely at the disposal of the subject*. Similarly, the affirmation of the right to religious freedom places the human being *in a relationship with a transcendent principle which withdraws him from human caprice*. The right to life and to the free expression of personal faith in God is not subject to the power of man. Peace requires the establishment of *a clear boundary between what is at man's disposal and what is not*: in this way unacceptable intrusions into the patrimony of specifically human values will be avoided.

5. As far as *the right to life* is concerned, we must denounce its widespread violation in our society: alongside the victims of armed conflicts, terrorism and the different forms of violence, there are the silent deaths caused by hunger, abortion, experimentation on human embryos and euthanasia. How can we fail to see in all this an attack on peace? Abortion and embryonic experimentation constitute a direct denial of that attitude of acceptance of others which is indispensable for establishing lasting relationships of peace. As far as *the free expression of personal faith* is concerned, another disturbing symptom of lack of peace in the world is represented by the difficulties that both Christians and the followers of other religions frequently encounter in publicly and freely professing their religious convictions. Speaking of Christians in particular, I must point out with pain that not only are they at times prevented from doing so; in some States they are actually persecuted, and even recently tragic cases of ferocious

violence have been recorded. There are regimes that impose a single religion upon everyone, while secular regimes often lead not so much to violent persecution as to systematic cultural denigration of religious beliefs. In both instances, a fundamental human right is not being respected, with serious repercussions for peaceful coexistence. This can only promote *a mentality and culture that is not conducive to peace*.

The natural equality of all persons

6. At the origin of many tensions that threaten peace are surely *the many unjust inequalities* still tragically present in our world. Particularly insidious among these are, on the one hand, *inequality in access to essential goods* like food, water, shelter, health; on the other hand, there are *persistent inequalities between men and women in the exercise of basic human rights*.

A fundamental element of building peace is the recognition of the *essential equality of human persons* springing from their common transcendental dignity. Equality on this level is a good belonging to all, inscribed in that natural “grammar” which is deducible from the divine plan of creation; it is a good that cannot be ignored or scorned without causing serious repercussions which put peace at risk. The extremely grave deprivation afflicting many peoples, especially in Africa, lies at the root of violent reactions and thus inflicts a terrible wound on peace.

7. Similarly, inadequate consideration for the *condition of women* helps to create instability in the fabric of society. I think of the exploitation of women who are treated as objects, and of the many ways that a lack of respect is shown for their dignity; I also think -in a different context -of the mindset persisting in some cultures, where women are still firmly subordinated to the arbitrary decisions of men, with grave consequences for their personal dignity and for the exercise of their fundamental freedoms. There can be no illusion of a secure peace until these forms of discrimination are also overcome, since they injure the personal dignity impressed by the Creator upon every human being(5).

The “ecology of peace”

8. In his Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, Pope John Paul II wrote: “Not only has God given the earth to man, who must use it with respect for the original good purpose for which it was given to him, but man too is God's gift to man. He must therefore respect the natural and moral structure with which he has been endowed(6).” By responding to this charge, entrusted to them by the Creator, men and women can join in bringing about a world of peace. Alongside the ecology of nature, there exists what can be called a “human” ecology, which in turn demands a “social” ecology. All this means that humanity, if it truly desires peace, must be increasingly conscious of the links between natural ecology, or respect for nature, and human ecology. Experience shows that *disregard for the environment always harms human coexistence*, and vice versa. It becomes more and more evident that there is an inseparable link between peace with creation and peace among men. Both of these presuppose peace with God.

The poem-prayer of Saint Francis, known as “the Canticle of Brother Sun”, is a wonderful and ever timely example of this multifaceted ecology of peace.

9. The close connection between these two ecologies can be understood from the increasingly serious problem of *energy supplies*. In recent years, new nations have entered enthusiastically into industrial production, thereby increasing their energy needs. This has led to an unprecedented race for available resources. Meanwhile, some parts of the planet remain backward and development is effectively blocked, partly because of the rise in energy prices. What will happen to those peoples? What kind of development or non-development will be imposed on them by the scarcity of energy supplies? What injustices and conflicts will be provoked by the race for energy sources? And what will be the reaction of those who are excluded from this race? These are questions that show how respect for nature is closely linked to the need to establish, between individuals and between nations, relationships that are attentive to the dignity of the person and capable of satisfying his or her authentic needs. The destruction of the environment, its improper or selfish use, and the violent hoarding of the earth's resources cause grievances, conflicts and wars, precisely because they are the consequences of an inhumane concept of development. Indeed, if development were limited to the technical-economic aspect, obscuring the moral-religious dimension, it would not be an integral human development, but a one-sided distortion which would end up by unleashing man's destructive capacities.

Reductive visions of man

10. Thus there is an urgent need, even within the framework of current international difficulties and tensions, for a commitment to *a human ecology that can favour the growth of the “tree of peace”*. For this to happen, we must be guided by a vision of the person untainted by ideological and cultural prejudices or by political and economic interests which can instil hatred and violence. It is understandable that visions of man will vary from culture to culture. Yet what cannot be admitted is the cultivation of *anthropological conceptions* that contain the seeds of hostility and violence. Equally unacceptable are *conceptions of God* that would encourage intolerance and recourse to violence against others. This is a point which must be clearly reaffirmed: war *in God's name* is never acceptable! When a certain notion of God is at the origin of criminal acts, it is a sign that that notion has already become an ideology.

11. Today, however, peace is not only threatened by the conflict between reductive visions of man, in other words, between ideologies. It is also threatened by *indifference as to what constitutes man's true nature*. Many of our contemporaries actually deny the existence of a specific human nature and thus open the door to the most extravagant interpretations of what essentially constitutes a human being. Here too clarity is necessary: a “weak” vision of the person, which would leave room for every conception, even the most bizarre, only apparently favours peace. In reality, it hinders authentic dialogue and opens the way to authoritarian impositions, ultimately leaving the person defenceless and, as a result, easy prey to oppression and violence.

Human rights and international organizations

12. A true and stable peace presupposes respect for human rights. Yet if these rights are grounded on a weak conception of the person, how can they fail to be themselves weakened? Here we can see how profoundly insufficient is *a relativistic conception of the person* when it comes to justifying and defending his rights. The difficulty in this case is clear: rights are proposed as absolute, yet the foundation on which they are supposed to rest is merely relative. Can we wonder that, faced with the “inconvenient” demands posed by one right or another, someone will come along to question it or determine that it should be set aside? Only if they are grounded in the objective requirements of the nature bestowed on man by the Creator, can the rights attributed to him be affirmed without fear of contradiction. It goes without saying, moreover, that human rights imply corresponding duties. In this regard, Mahatma Gandhi said wisely: “The Ganges of rights flows from the Himalaya of duties.” Clarity over these basic presuppositions is needed if human rights, nowadays constantly under attack, are to be adequately defended. Without such clarity, the expression “human rights” will end up being predicated of quite different subjects: in some cases, the human person marked by permanent dignity and rights that are valid always, everywhere and for everyone, in other cases a person with changing dignity and constantly negotiable rights, with regard to content, time and place.

13. The protection of human rights is constantly referred to by international bodies and, in particular, the United Nations Organization, which set itself the fundamental task of promoting the human rights indicated in the 1948 Universal Declaration. That Declaration is regarded as a sort of *moral commitment assumed by all mankind*. There is a profound truth to this, especially if the rights described in the Declaration are held to be based not simply on the decisions of the assembly that approved them, but on man's very nature and his inalienable dignity as a person created by God. Consequently it is important for international agencies not to lose sight of the natural foundation of human rights. This would enable them to avoid the risk, unfortunately ever-present, of sliding towards a merely positivistic interpretation of those rights. Were that to happen, the international bodies would end up lacking the necessary authority to carry out their role as defenders of the fundamental rights of the person and of peoples, the chief justification for their very existence and activity.

International humanitarian law and the internal law of States

14. The recognition that there exist inalienable human rights connected to our common human nature has led to the establishment of a body of *international humanitarian law* which States are committed to respect, even in the case of war. Unfortunately, to say nothing of past cases, this has not been consistently implemented in certain recent situations of war. Such, for example, was the case in the conflict that occurred a few months ago in southern Lebanon, where the duty “to protect and help innocent victims” and to avoid involving the civilian population was largely ignored. The heart-rending situation in Lebanon and the new shape of conflicts, especially since the terrorist threat unleashed *completely new forms of violence*, demand that the international community reaffirm international humanitarian law, and apply it to all present-day situations of armed conflict, including those not currently provided for by

international law. Moreover, the scourge of terrorism demands a profound reflection on the ethical limits restricting the use of modern methods of guaranteeing internal security. Increasingly, wars are not declared, especially when they are initiated by terrorist groups determined to attain their ends by any means available. In the face of the disturbing events of recent years, States cannot fail to recognize the need to establish clearer rules to counter effectively the dramatic decline that we are witnessing. War always represents a failure for the international community and a grave loss for humanity. When, despite every effort, war does break out, at least the essential principles of humanity and the basic values of all civil coexistence must be safeguarded; norms of conduct must be established that limit the damage as far as possible and help to alleviate the suffering of civilians and of all the victims of conflicts(7).

15. Another disturbing issue is the desire recently shown by some States to *acquire nuclear weapons*. This has heightened even more the widespread climate of uncertainty and fear of a possible atomic catastrophe. We are brought back in time to the profound anxieties of the “cold war” period. When it came to an end, there was hope that the atomic peril had been definitively overcome and that mankind could finally breathe a lasting sigh of relief. How timely, in this regard, is the warning of the Second Vatican Council that “every act of war directed to the indiscriminate destruction of whole cities or vast areas with their inhabitants is a crime against God and humanity, which merits firm and unequivocal condemnation(8).” Unfortunately, threatening clouds continue to gather on humanity's horizon. The way to ensure a future of peace for everyone is found not only in international accords for *the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons*, but also in the determined commitment to seek their reduction and definitive dismantling. May every attempt be made to arrive through negotiation at the attainment of these objectives! The fate of the whole human family is at stake!

The Church as safeguard of the transcendence of the human person

16. Finally, I wish to make an urgent appeal to the People of God: let every Christian be committed to tireless peace-making and strenuous defence of the dignity of the human person and his inalienable rights.

With gratitude to the Lord for having called him to belong to his Church, which is “the sign and safeguard of the transcendental dimension of the human person”(9) in the world, the Christian will tirelessly implore from God the fundamental good of peace, which is of such primary importance in the life of each person. Moreover, he will be proud to serve the cause of peace with generous devotion, offering help to his brothers and sisters, especially those who, in addition to suffering poverty and need, are also deprived of this precious good. Jesus has revealed to us that “*God is love*” (1 Jn 4:8) and that the highest vocation of every person is love. In Christ we can find the ultimate reason for becoming staunch champions of human dignity and courageous builders of peace.

17. Let every believer, then, unflinching contribute to the advancement of a true integral humanism in accordance with the teachings of the Encyclical Letters

Populorum Progressio and *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, whose respective fortieth and twentieth anniversaries we prepare to celebrate this year. To the Queen of Peace, the Mother of Jesus Christ “our peace” (*Eph 2:14*), I entrust my urgent prayer for all humanity at the beginning of the year 2007, to which we look with hearts full of hope, notwithstanding the dangers and difficulties that surround us. May Mary show us, in her Son, the Way of peace, and enlighten our vision, so that we can recognize Christ's face in the face of every human person, the heart of peace!

From the Vatican, 8 December 2006.

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- (1) Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 357.
- (2) Sermo 169, 11, 13: PL 38, 923.
- (3) No. 3.
- (4) *Homily at Islinger Feld*, Regensburg, 12 September 2006.
- (5) Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the collaboration of men and women in the Church and in the world* (31 May 2004), 15-16.
- (6) No. 38.
- (7) In this regard, the Catechism of the Catholic Church indicates strict and precise criteria: cf. 2307-2317.
- (8) Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 80.
- (9) *Ibid.*, 76.

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