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1946 Christmas Message of Pope Pius xii

A Plea for a Prompt, Just
and Flexible Peace



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A Plea for a Prompt, Just and Flexible Peace

WAS there ever in the history of the human race, in the history of the Church, a Christmas Feast and the dawn of a new year in which men felt more keenly and showed more clearly than today the yearning to see the contrast disappear, between the message of peace from Bethlehem and the internal and external unrest of a world which so often abandons the straight path of truth and justice?

Humanity has barely come from the horrors of a cruel war, the results of which fill her still with anguish; and she now gazes with amazement on the yawning abyss between the hopes of yesterday and the realizations of today; an abyss which the most persistent efforts can bridge over only with difficulty, because man, who is capable of destruction is not always himself capable of reconstruction.

Behold, for almost two years now the roar of cannon is silenced. Military results in the field of battle have brought about an indisputable victory for one of the belligerent parties and a defeat without precedent for the other. Seldom in the history of the

world has the sword traced such a clear line of division between the conquerors and the conquered.

The joyous and exuberant intoxication of the victory has vanished. The inevitable difficulties have manifested themselves in all their crudity. Indeed, over all human designs and plans, are written the words of the Lord: "By their fruits you will know them" (*Matt. 7, 16*). One thing is beyond all doubting: the fruits and the repercussions of victory have been, up to the present, not only of indescribable bitterness for the defeated, but for the victors, too, they have proved to be a source of untold anxiety and danger.

These dissensions in the past have gradually increased in their consequences to such a degree that no true lover of humanity—and much less the Church of Christ, ever solicitous to fulfill her mission—could close her eyes before such a spectacle.

The Church, which has received from the Divine Savior a mandate for all nations to lead them to their eternal salvation, does not intend to intervene and to take sides in controversies on subjects of mere earthly in-

terest. She is a mother. You do not ask a mother to favor or to take the part of one rather than another of her children.

All ought equally to find and to feel in her that far-seeing and generous love, that intimate and unfailing tenderness which gives her faithful children the strength to walk with firmer step in the royal path of truth and light, and inspires those led astray and the erring with the desire of returning to her maternal guidance.

Never before, perhaps, has the Church of Christ, her ministers and faithful of every rank and class had such need of this enlightened love—a love ready for sacrifice knowing no earthly limit or human prejudice—as they have in the critical situation of today. The sad vicissitudes of the past seem as nothing in comparison.

It is, then, only the spirit of charity, the sacred duty of Our Apostolic Office, that prompts Us to speak today, the eve of the Holy Nativity. This alone induces Us to address the entire world, and to use the waves of the air to carry to the extremity of the earth the expression of Our anxieties and fears, of Our prayers and most ardent hopes, confident that many noble and understanding hearts, even outside the Catholic Communion, will hear Our appeal and will lend Us their efficacious collaboration.

We do not mean to criticize but to stimulate; not to accuse but to help. "Thoughts of peace and not of affliction" (*Jer.* 29, 11), move Our heart, and We would wish to quicken such thoughts in the depths of the souls of those who hear Us.

We well know that Our words and Our intentions run the risk of being misinterpreted or even of being distorted for the scope of political propaganda. But the possibility of such erroneous or malicious comments could not seal Our lips. We would think Ourselves unworthy of Our office, of the cross that the Lord has placed on our weak shoulders; We would believe that We were betraying the souls that look to Us for the light of truth and sure guidance, if, in order to avoid evil interpretations, We hesitated to do Our full part at this critical hour to reawaken dormant consciences and to recall them to the duties of the holy warfare of Christ.

No claim of veto, no matter where it comes from, could hold against the precept of Christ, "go and teach." With unswerving obedience to the Divine Founder of the Church, We devote Ourselves, and will continue to devote Ourselves, to the utmost limit of Our strength, in the fulfillment of Our Office to defend truth, to protect the right, to propound the eternal principles of humanity and of love. In the exercise of this Our duty it may well be that We shall meet with oppositions and misunderstandings. But We find strength in the lot meted out to the Redeemer Himself and to those who followed in His footsteps. The humble but intrepid words of the Apostle Paul come to mind: "With me it is a very small matter to be judged (by men) . . . he who judges me, is the Lord." (I COR. 4, 3-4).

It was indeed to be feared, considering the ruinous and confused condi-

tion in which the cruel conflict left the world, that the path from the end of the war to the conclusion of the peace would be long and painful. But at present we are witnessing its continuation without being able to foresee—despite some notable progress at last made—how or when it will be terminated; and this indefinite prolonging of an abnormal state of instability and uncertainty is the clear symptom of an evil which constitutes the sad characteristic of our age.

Men were witnesses of prodigious activity in all the fields of military power, formidable in its precision and extent of preparation and organization, lightning-like in the speed and improvisation with which it was continuously adapting itself to circumstances and needs; now they see the elaboration and the drawing up of peace taking place with great slowness and amid divergencies not yet overcome in determining aims and methods.

When for the first time the Atlantic Charter was announced, the whole world listened; at last one could breathe freely. But what remains of that message and its provisions?

Even in some of those States which, either through free choice or under the aegis of other greater powers, love to appear to the world of today as the standard bearers of new and true progress, the "Four Freedoms" recently hailed with enthusiasm by many, now seem only a shadow or a counterfeit of what was in the mind and intentions of the most loyal of their promulgators.

We most willingly recognize the

untiring efforts of outstanding statesmen who for a year or so, in a series of almost uninterrupted and toilsome conferences, have labored to bring about what honest men the world over ardently long for and desire.

But, alas, differences of opinion, mutual distrust and suspicion, the doubtful value, in fact and in justice, of not a few decisions already taken or still to be taken, have made uncertain and fragile the strength and vitality of compromises and solutions based on force or political prestige, which leave deep down in many hearts delusion and discontent.

Instead of advancing toward a real peace, people in vast territories of the globe and in large sections especially of Europe are in a state of constant unrest from which there could arise sooner or later the flames of new conflicts.

When one sees and ponders all this, one is profoundly impressed with the gravity of the present hour and feels the need of calling on the rulers of the nations, in whose hands lie the destiny of the world and on whose deliberations depend the success and progress or the failure of the peace, and asking them to consider three points:

(1) The first condition in order to fulfill the expectations of the nations, to lessen and gradually to remove the internal disturbances from which they suffer, to remove the dangerous international tensions is that all your energies and all your good will be directed to putting an end to the present intolerable state of incertitude and to hasten, as soon as pos-

sible, the coming of a definite peace among all States—and that notwithstanding difficulties which no calm consideration can fail to recognize.

During the long years of the war and post-war period, human nature, a prey to innumerable and indescribable sufferings, has given proof of incredible powers of resistance. But this power is limited!

For millions of human beings that limit has already been reached; the spring is already stretched too far; the slightest thing would cause it to snap, and its breaking could have irreparable consequences. Humanity wants to be able to hope again.

A speedy and complete conclusion of peace is of real and lively interest to all those who know that only a prompt return to normal economic, juridical and spiritual relations among nations can save the world from incalculable shocks and disorders which would only help the dark forces to evil.

Therefore, let the year that is now coming to an end be the last year of vain and fruitless expectancy; let the new year see the peace a reality.

(2) The year of fulfilment. This thought leads to the second appeal that every right-minded person makes to the rulers of the nations.

You rightly long to see—and how could it be otherwise?—your names written in letters of gold on the scroll of the benefactors of the human race. The mere thought that one day—even without fault on your part—they may be opprobriously listed among the authors of its ruin, fills you with

horror. Apply, then, all the forces of your mind and will to give to your work of peace the seal of the true justice, of far-seeing wisdom, of a sincere service to the common interests of the entire human family.

The utter depth of misery into which the horrible war has thrown humanity calls for help and imperiously demands to be healed by means of a peace that is morally noble and irreproachable: such a peace that may teach future generations to outlaw every trace of brutal force and to restore to the idea of right the priority of place from which it was wickedly dislodged.

We justly appreciate the arduous but noble work of those statesmen who, disregarding the insidious voices of revenge and hate, have been toiling and are still toiling without respite for the fulfilment of such a high ideal. But notwithstanding their generous efforts, who could ever say that the discussions and debates of the year that is ending have resulted in a clear plan, drawn up logically in its main outlines, and calculated to reawaken in all nations confidence in a future of tranquillity and justice.

No doubt, such a disastrous war, unleashed by an unjust aggression and continued beyond lawful limits when it was clear that it was irreparably lost, could not be terminated simply in a peace which did not include guarantees that similar acts of violence would not be repeated. Nevertheless, all the measures of repression and prevention should keep their character of means and hence remain subordinate to the lofty and ultimate pur-

poses of a true peace which, while providing the necessary guarantees, contemplates the gradual cooperation of conquerors and conquered in the work of reconstruction to the advantage of the entire family of nations and as well of each of its members.

Any balanced observer will be willing to recognize that these indisputable principles have made real progress during the past year in not a few minds and that, too, as a result of the painful repercussion felt by the vital interests of the victorious States themselves. One finds some satisfaction also in noting that competent and authoritative voices in ever-increasing numbers are raised against an unlimited prolongation of the present conditions on the life and economic recovery of the defeated. Immediate contact with the indescribable misery of the post-war period in some zones has awakened in many hearts the consciousness of a common responsibility to lessen effectively, and eventually to overcome, such a great evil; this sentiment is as honorable for one as it is encouraging for the other.

Recently a new factor has arisen to stimulate the desire for peace and the determination to promote it more effectively; the might of new instruments of destruction which modern technique has developed and continues to develop to such an extent that they appear to the terrified eyes of humanity infernal creations. This factor has brought the problem of disarmament into the center of international discussions under completely new aspects, and it provides an incentive that was never felt before; thence

springs hope of solving what past generations have longed for in vain.

Notwithstanding these well-founded motives of hope, in which no one can rejoice more than the Church, it seems that, in the present state of affairs, one must expect with great probability that the future peace treaties will only be an "opus imperfectum." Many of those who write them will recognize in them the result of compromises between the policies and claims of differing political powers rather than the expression of their own personal ideas based on the true and just concepts of right and equity, of human feeling and prudence.

(3) This leads naturally to the third appeal addressed to the rulers of the nations:

If you wish to give more than a superficial stability and duration to your labors for the new order and a peace that will not fail; if you wish to prevent its being violated sooner or later due to its own harshness, to the practical difficulties of putting it into effect, to its inherent defects and shortcomings, to the omissions and insufficiencies perhaps inevitable today, to its real or imagined effects in the future which cannot be calculated at the moment; then take care to leave open the way for amendments—according to a clearly determined procedure—as soon as the majority of peoples, the voice of reason and of equity show that these amendments are opportune and desirable or even called for.

In design, a machine can appear to be of indisputable perfection for its

rigorous mathematical precision, but may show itself seriously defective in a real trial when it is faced with a number of unforeseen technical difficulties. In a moral, social and political order, how much more easily can a project appear excellent on paper, the fruit of laborious discussion, but then fail in the test of time and experience, where psychological factors play an important role! Certainly everything cannot be foreseen. But it is wise to leave the door open for future revisions and eventual adjustments.

In doing this, you will show yourself faithful to the words spoken in memorable circumstances by authoritative interpreters of public opinion; you will be sure of not causing any prejudice to your best interests; and you will give to the entire human family a luminous example by showing that there is no safer way toward the desired peace than that which comes from the re-education of mankind in the spirit of fraternal solidarity.

When one knows one is advancing along a safe path—how beautiful a thing it is to walk in the light! The light: look at it, all of you who are united by the same Faith in the Saviour of the world! To illumine the path, it comes down from the Star that shines over Bethlehem.

If one wishes to return to the great principles of justice that lead to peace, one must go to Bethlehem. One must recall the example and the doctrine of Him Who from the cradle to the cross knew no higher mission than that of fulfilling the will of the Heavenly Father, rescuing the world

from the darkness of error and mire of sin where it lay pitiably. It must be brought to acknowledge its subjection to the majesty of the Divine Law as its norm of right thinking and its measure of wholesome and conscientious conduct.

The great return to the axioms of the message of Bethlehem was never more necessary for the world than today. Indeed, rarely has the contrast between the precepts of that Divine message and the reality as we see it been made, alas, so clear to men.

Frightened by this contrast, would you wish, beloved sons and daughters, to lose courage? Would you wish to increase the number of those who, alarmed at the instability of the times, begin themselves to waver in such a way that more or less knowingly they play the part of the adversaries of Christ? No Christian has the right to show himself tired of the fight against the anti-religious surge of today. It matters little under what forms, with what methods, weapons, words — enticing or menacing — and in what disguises the enemy hides himself. No one can be excused for remaining in his presence with folded arms, bowed head and trembling knees.

The same tactics are always used against the Church: "Strike the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered" (*Zac.* 13, 7).

Ever the same tactics, powerless to find something new, always inglorious as it is vain. It repeats itself in the most diverse places and even tries its strength against the very See of Peter. The Church, even though her heart bleeds, does not fear for herself—she has the

Divine promise—but she fears the loss of so many souls. Her annals are there to recall how many times the most impetuous assaults have been dashed to pieces against the strong and calm Rock on which she is built, sure of her immortality.

Today as yesterday, and tomorrow as today, all the efforts to conquer and tear her asunder must yield and come to nought before the vital force of the *Vinculum Caritatis*, which unites pastor and flock.

If in the arduous but resolute performance of Our office anything gives Us peace and encouragement, it is, after Our confidence in Him Who chooses the weak things to confound the arrogance of the strong, the solid conviction of being able to count on the prayer, fidelity and watchfulness of an “*acies ordinata*” (*Can. 6, 3*) (an army set in array) whose fitness and experience have overcome the greatest trials.

Recently, We had the pleasure of raising to the honors of the altars a heroic band of Martyrs, who in sealing with their blood the profession of their Faith have embellished the dawn of our century. Since those days other bands of priests and faithful soldiers of Christ yet unknown, have rendered and still render the same testimony. We do not doubt that a day will see them brought from obscurity to glory, when history will finally lift the heavy curtain that covers and darkens our time. May the example of their courage and their fidelity, spurning death, inflame the hearts of Our beloved sons and daughters and fill them with the same

sentiments of strength and confidence which ensure for the Standard of Christ its peaceful victory for the greater good of all humanity.

We cannot end this, our Christmas message, without recalling the suffering and the needs arising from the serious food situation and health conditions of the nations tried by the war.

Already on April 5 of this year We uttered a cry of help to the rulers and to the peoples of those countries who could come to the help of the starving populations with their reserves. And, in truth, much has been done. Moved by the tragic plight especially of the weak, the aged and the children, the civilized world did not remain insensible or slothful; and praise is due to the humane and Christian spirit of those men and nations who organized multiple relief works. Following on the sanguinary paths of the armies, they brought to the victims of the war all kind of help. They have saved the honor of mankind which was so shamefully outraged by violence and hate.

Would to Heaven that these funds of energy and provision charitably lavished in relieving the most needy and bringing them from utter ruin—would that they had been sufficient for the task! Alas, it is not so; therefore, We feel compelled to renew Our appeal of last spring. There looms over vast territories of Europe starvation.

Bread—in the literal sense of the word—is needed by entire populations, who because of its lack are becoming weak, worn out, enervated, the prey of diseases and pains, and

dangerously aroused by the dull goad of hopeless rancor and deep-seated social rebellion.

Such is the tremendous danger that darkens the dawn of the new year, a danger so much more serious because from some symptoms which reveal uncertainty and weariness, the magnanimous work of human solidarity seems on the verge of deteriorating even before a remedy can be applied to the ills which it was designed to relieve.

It is but human that they upon whom fortune is smiling should be inclined to keep aloof and forget the wretchedness of others. Closing their eyes and their hearts to the misfortunes of a neighbor who is unknown and far away, they think they can justify in their own consciences the isolationism and disinterestedness in the necessities of others; their personal needs consume funds that the practice of charity would have laid aside; and their means of relief fail to provide that assistance for which charity to the neighbor would have destined them.

Therefore, We say once more to all who can lend a helping hand: let not your zeal grow cold; let your help be ever more available and generous! Away with all greedy selfishness, all mean doubts, all bitterness, all indifference, all rancor.

Let your eye see only the misery

and, above all, the suffering of millions of children and young people who are perishing with hunger. In this way you, at one and the same time, give and receive the ineffable Christmas Gift: "Peace on earth to men of good will!"

Nothing is so well suited to create the indispensable spiritual requirements of peace as help liberally given by state to state, by a people to a people, without regard to national boundaries, so that nations, laying aside feelings of rivalry and of vengeance, restraining their craving for power and banishing the thought of privileged isolation, may learn from their own fortunes to understand, to tolerate, and to help one another, and thus—upon the ruins of a civilization forgetful of the teachings of the Gospel—the Christian Commonwealth may rise again, in which the law of love is supreme.

With this prayer on Our lips, we extend to all who are listening to Us this Christmas Eve a fervent wish that "the peace of God which surpasses all understanding" (*Phil.* 4, 7), may be theirs, and from the depth of Our heart We impart to all Our beloved sons and daughters throughout the world as a pledge of the choicest graces of the Word of God made man, Our Paternal Apostolic Blessing.

