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1947 Christmas Message

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Radio message to the world given
December 24, 1947, by His
Holiness, Pope Pius XII

PP - working about God



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THE feast of Christmas and the new year close at hand bring with them certain signs which point a warning finger toward the days to come.

The customary greetings exchanged at this season, which ascend to heaven in a cloud of incense and of prayer, cannot and will not, for all the deep and sincere affection prompting them, allow us to lose sight of the condition which confronts us at the present hour, when Europe and the wide world have reached a turning point of their destiny. The gravity of the crisis is unquestionable, its possibilities for good or evil immeasurable, its issue unpredictable.

When last year on this same occasion We addressed Our Christmas message to the Catholic world, and to all men of good judgment and good will besides, who could have had it in his heart to predict for humanity, tired of war and hungry for peace, what has today become a cruel, undeniable reality?

Christmas bells will still ring in the feast, as from the days of old. But for many closed, embittered and tor-

mented hearts they ring out in the desert, where they wake no living echo any longer.

Now that another post-war year has passed, with its burden of distress and suffering, of disillusionment and privation, those who have eyes to see and ears to hear cannot but be pained and humiliated by this: Europe and the world—even to distant and tormented China—today are farther from real peace, farther from complete and definite safety, farther from a new order based firmly on agreement and justice, than ever they were before.

The champions of negation and disagreement, with the long line of profiteers in their train, are jubilant at the thought—or the illusion—that their hour is near.

Contrariwise, the friends of peace, the promoters of a lasting reconciliation between the peoples of the world, feel the twinge of anguish in their hearts when they compare the moral and social wealth of Bethlehem's "good tidings" with the misery of a world that has wandered far away from Christ.

But genuine Christians, for whom

the whole of life, the source of all its lights and worth, consists in "thinking with the Church," perceive and realize better than anyone else the meaning and value of times like ours; times of dense darkness, but of blinding light as well; where the enemy of Christ reaps a vast, tragic harvest of souls, but many also of the good are leading better lives; where generous hearts can scale victoriously the peak of heroism, while numbers of the tepid and the faint of heart, slaves of human respect and afraid of sacrifice, slip into mediocrity or sink into the vile depths of degradation, like these who "neither rebels proved, nor yet were true to God but for themselves were only." (Dante, *Inferno*.)

In the titanic struggle between the two forces now competing for the mastery of the world, if hatred is all that is needed to marshal under the leadership of the evil one men who would seemingly have every ground to disagree, what could love not accomplish toward uniting in a world-wide league those whose high purpose, noble instincts and community in suffering have drawn them together by ties stronger and more intimate than any difference or divergency which could keep them apart? To the millions who are disposed to become members of this world alliance, the charter of which is the message of Bethlehem and its unseen head the King and Peacemaker who lies before us in the manger, We direct at this juncture our heartfelt appeal.

The brand on the brow of one generation, and the source of its disruption and decadence, is the tendency,

every day more obvious, to "insincerity," a lack of honesty, and this not merely as an occasional expedient, or of obstacles unforeseen. No. Today it amounts practically to a system. It has been raised to the distinction of a strategy, in which the lie, the garbled word or fact, and trickery have come to be an accepted weapon of offense, which some people wield with the skill of professionals, boasting even of their competence.

So clearly, as they view it, has the suppression of all sense of right and wrong come to be part and parcel of modern technique in the art of forming public opinion, of controlling it and making it serve their political ends. For they are bent on winning at any cost the battle of class-interest and theories, of ideologies and power politics.

We do not propose to describe here in detail the havoc wrought by this tournament of "insincerity" in public life. But We are in duty bound to open the eyes of Catholics all over the world—and of all others besides who share our faith in Christ and a transcendent God—to the dangers which this prevalence of falsehood presents for the Church and Christian civilization, for the entire religious and even merely human heritage which has supplied the peoples of the world with the substance of their spiritual life and of their real greatness for the past 2,000 years.

When Herod of old was plotting anxiously to slay the Babe of Bethlehem he hid his plan under a pious mask, and tried his best to make the honest men into unwitting spies. Like-

wise today, his modern imitators move heaven and earth to conceal their real purpose from the masses, and make them the unconscious instruments of their designs.

But once they have won power and feel the reins securely in their hands, little by little they let fall the veil, and pass by successive stages from oppression of the dignity and liberty of man to abolition of all authentic and independent religious life.

Here, then, is the question We put to all honest men: How is humanity to recover, how can any "New Order" worthy of the name emerge from the mistakes and agitation of this present hour of confusion, if the lines which mark off friend from foe, yes from no, and faith from lack of faith are to be erased and moved about?

The Church, though her heart is ever full of love and sympathy for these erring souls, cannot fail to denounce error, in loyalty to her Divine Founder's declaration: "He who is not with me, is against me" (*Matt.* 12, 30). She cannot but tear the mask from the "forgers of lies" (*Job* 13, 4) who come forward as wolves in sheep's clothing (cf. *Matt.* 7, 15), as founders and pioneers of a new golden age. She cannot but warn the faithful not to let themselves be lured from the path of rectitude, or be deluded by fallacious promises.

Our position between the two opposing camps is exempt from every prejudice, from any preference for this or that people, for this or that bloc of nations, as it is foreign to any sort of temporal consideration. To be

with Christ or against Christ: that is the whole question.

Each of the opposing sides believes itself constrained to this mistrust, as by a duty of elementary precaution. Obviously, this very fact leads to the building of an immense wall which renders hopeless every attempt to bring to the bewildered human family the blessings of true peace.

Have we not had occasion, even during the past few weeks, to experience the tangible results of this mistrust? Have we not seen a most important conference of the great powers adjourn without having taken those essential and decisive steps along the road to peace for which the world in its anguish was waiting?

There can be but one way out of the straits to which the cult of "insincerity" has brought the world: the return to the spirit and practice of straightforward honesty.

No one today—to whatever social or political movement or party he may belong—who wants to bring the weight of his convictions and his public acts to bear upon the present or the future destiny of nations, has any right to wear a mask, to appear to be what he is not, to avail himself of the strategy of the lie, of tension and of threats, in order to restrict the honest citizens of every land in the exercise of their just liberty and civil rights.

You will readily understand, then, how pained We are to see hostile propaganda distorting what We think and say, embittering men's hearts, hindering the peaceful exchange of ideas, and deepening the chasm which separates from Us so many souls redeemed

by the Blood of the same divine and loving Saviour. At the bottom of it lies, unfailingly, the same identical duplicity, deliberately adopted and ruthlessly employed as the most incisive weapon with which to combat justice and truth, and hinder mutual understanding, reconciliation and peace.

The inevitable outcome of such a situation is the splitting of humanity into powerful and rival groups, whose highest law of life and conduct is a basic and invincible mistrust. Here is at once the tragic paradox and the curse of our time.

That is why We would remind you, dear sons and daughters, that we celebrate tomorrow the birth of Him from Whose lips one day escaped the cry: "Veritas liberabit vos" (*John* 8, 32); the truth (which is His teaching) shall make you free. Never, perhaps, has this cry re-echoed so loudly as it does today in a world hungry for peace but forced to groan beneath the oppressive yoke of falsehood.

Let all Christendom, too, make answer—to Him who was made flesh that He might be for all "way, truth and life"—in a prayerful plea that the truth may find its way back to the hearts of the rulers of nations, whose yes or no may determine the fate of the world. And with the truth may there shine out upon the earth no deceptive mirage, but Bethlehem's bright star of peace divine.

II

Those who were absolutely determined to win the war were ready for any sacrifice, even unto death. Those

who sincerely wish to win the peace must be ready for sacrifices just as generous, since nothing is more difficult for convulsed and embittered human nature than to forego reprisals and lay aside its unforgiving rancor.

The injustice and cruelty committed by those who unleashed the second world war aroused waves of righteous indignation, but served, alas, at the same time, to develop the seeds of a natural inclination for revenge.

The saner portion of mankind—even among nations chiefly involved in the conflict—unanimously denounced the excesses and atrocities which a political system, falling into moral nihilism, not only practiced during the war which it provoked, but even dared to justify in theory. Facts and documents recently come to light have only served to confirm that those who sponsored and worked out this system are mainly responsible for the world's misery today.

Men of the post-war period could have easily confronted this degeneracy with their own moral superiority; unfortunately, in not a few instances they have let slip a golden opportunity. It must be admitted that the history of the world during the days and weeks and months immediately following the war was very far from being one of unmixed glory.

The punishment justly meted out to the chief culprits could have inspired Dante's pen with scenes for the *Inferno*, but the great poet would have shrunk from depicting the reprisals wrought upon the innocent.

Forced migrations and compulsory hard labor followed later, defying the

most elementary laws of humanity as well as the letter and the spirit of the rights of nations. Who, then, could be surprised that the sense of justice which had been rightly shocked at the sight of such deeds perpetrated by one side should also react similarly when it sees others commit them?

Who can measure what further moral domestic and social distress, what harm to the cultural and economic stability of Europe—and not alone of Europe—will be caused by the compulsory and indiscriminate displacement of peoples, what sorrow at present, what anguish for the future? Only a broader vision, a wiser and more judicious policy on the part of those who hold the fate of the world in their hands, can provide a tolerable solution for an otherwise insoluble problem.

All honor, then, to those of every nation who shirk no privation or shun no labor to hasten the fulfilment of such a noble enterprise. Let them not be troubled at the contradictions and opposition they will have to meet and which precisely in these days seem to have grown more intense, in stimulating another war of nerves, provoking discord, reducing to naught the efforts of the champions of unity and peace. Let them be confident that the hour is at hand—as we trust and ask in our prayers—when the King of peace will grant victory to those who do battle for His cause with a right intention and with the weapons of peace.

III

The human race, then, will be powerless to emerge from the present

crisis and desolation and to go forward to a more harmonious future unless it restrain and control the forces of division and discord by means of a sincere spirit of brotherhood uniting all classes, all races and all nations with the one bond of love.

We launch such an appeal to the entire world, today, the Eve of Christmas, because we see this spirit of brotherhood in danger of being stifled and crushed: because we see selfish appetites getting the better of sound reason, and the cruel tactics of oppression and violence prevailing over loyal understanding and mutual respect, and the utter disregard for any consequent evils to the detriment of the zealous maintenance of public welfare.

The Church, whose maternal heart embraces all nations with equal affection, is following with great anxiety this new development in national and international conflicts.

When faith in God, the Father of all men, begins to grow dim, the spirit of brotherly union also loses its moral foundation and cohesive force; and when the consciousness of a society embracing all men, as wished by God, and which includes reciprocal rights and duties, determined by fixed norms, begins to die out, there arise in its place a morbid hyper-sensitivity to what divides, a ready propensity to overstate one's rights true or imagined, and a neglect—at times thoughtless, but not for that reason less ruinous—for the essential needs of others.

At this point, the way is open for the struggle of all against all; a battle which knows no other right except that of the strongest.

Our age, alas, has provided some sad examples of fratricidal war, resulting with relentless logic from the weakening of the spirit of brotherhood.

Even the land which heard the hymn of the Angels announcing peace to men, which saw the Star of the Saviour shine forth, and where the Divine Redeemer died crucified for our salvation—even that Holy Land with all its memories and shrines most dear to every Christian heart, is now divided and has become the scene of blood and strife. And Europe, herself, the center of the whole great Catholic family—is she not perchance today, a warning and an example of the plight to which the loss of the spirit of brotherhood can reduce a part of the world once so beautiful and flourishing? The wounds she suffered during the late war are still unhealed, and already the sinister light of a new conflict flashes on the horizon.

Oh, if all honest men were to unite together, how quickly would the victory of the brotherhood of men be realized and along with it the rehabilitation of the world! Such people already constitute a substantial element of public opinion, and show that they possess real human instincts, with political wisdom as well.

But there are others just as numerous, whose mere word has considerable weight in hastening or impeding the peace of Europe—the necessary initial step toward world peace—and who follow a course directly opposite. Are they afraid, perhaps, that if Europe were to recover, regain her strength, and become conscious once more of her Christian mission, she would wish

to rid herself of the deadly germ of atheism and revolution and live a life of her own, free from unhealthy foreign influence?

It is obvious that a Europe shivering and feverish from economic difficulties and social chaos yields more readily to the seductions and illusions of a fatuous ideal state than a healthy Europe with her vision clear.

Meanwhile, the propagators of such deceptive schemes spare no effort to make converts to their cause among the fanatics and the simple, whose aim, in turn, it will be to drag their people along the path of ruin that others have traveled before them, not from choice but because their civil and religious liberty had been systematically repressed.

Have we not had occasion to see here, on the sacred soil of the city where God has established the Chair of Peter, the emissaries of a concept of life and human society based on atheism and violence sowing cockles in the good earth of Rome, and doing their utmost to convince her sons that they have discovered and set up a new culture more worthy of man than the ancient and eternally youthful Christian civilization?

Since things have reached such a pass, the time has surely come for everyone who cherishes the human and spiritual heritage of his forefathers to rouse himself from sleep, take up the arms of faith and courage, and preserve the city, civilization's mother, from religious, moral and social deterioration such as might render very difficult to Our keen regret, that solemn

celebration of the coming Holy Year desired by Catholics the world over.

If, however, the frank words We utter during today's celebration know no boundaries, they refer only to doctrines denying faith in God and Christ, and certainly not to the nations or groups of nations who are the victims of these doctrines. For these latter the Church ever cherishes the same constant love. Nay, the more they suffer the greater is her love for them. It is in the days of trial, rather than in untroubled hours, that men of all nations should realize that they are brothers. The real meaning, the lofty mission and the power to reconcile of this brotherhood has never been, nor shall ever be extolled with such force as it was by "the first-born among many brethren" (*Rom. 8, 29*), Who from Bethlehem to Golgotha preached by His example more than by His words that great and universal brotherhood of men.

Over this Christmas a dark cloud is gathering. As the people's anxious yearning for peace grows ever more intense, the inability of their leaders to satisfy it by merely human means is just as apparent. Do not the honest efforts of some to arrive at an equitable peace and the systematic planning of others to prevent its fulfilment bring perchance to mind the picture of a dangerous game of chance of which the stakes are fortune or ruin?

Into the meeting places of men the spirit of evil creeps unnoticed, "the angel of the Abyss" (*Apo. 9, 11*); the enemy of truth, the fomenter of hatred, the denier and destroyer of all sense of brotherhood, believing that his

hour is nigh, uses everything at hand to hasten it. Nevertheless, We desire to end Our Christmas message with an irrepressible appeal for hope and confidence.

Although faith in the Divine Redeemer prompts Christians to ponder everything in the light of the truth—ever ancient, ever new—of aged Simeon's declaration concerning the Child Jesus at the presentation in the temple: "Behold this child is destined for the fall and for the rise of many, . . . and for a sign that shall be contradicted" (*Luke 2, 34*), still We know that the number of those who do not separate themselves from Christ by unbelief, who cling to Him, who are ready to give their lives for Him and who place in Him and in the resurrection their unwavering hope—We know that the number of these is great, that it is increasing and growing strong. We see them radiating energy and influence for good in every sphere of life. We see that other men of good will are joining them.

To you all, therefore, beloved sons and daughters, We say: Your hour is come.

At the assemblies of statesmen another unseen spirit presided as Sovereign Lord, the Omnipotent God to Whom nothing is secret and Who holds in His hands the thoughts and hearts of men, to bend them as He wills and when He chooses; God, all of Whose inscrutable designs are governed by His paternal love. But to fulfill these designs He wishes to make use of your cooperation. In the day of battle your place is in the vanguard, fighting at the front. The timid and

those afraid to come out in the open are very close to becoming deserters and traitors. He is a deserter and a traitor who would give his material support, his services, his talents, aid or vote to parties and to forces which deny God, which put might in place of right, and threats and terror in place of liberty, which make of lying, opposition and incitement of the masses to revolt so many weapons of their policy, thus rendering national and international peace impossible.

Let us bring ourselves back 300 years, to a Europe—torn by the horrors of the Thirty Years' War. The year 1648 brought at last the message of peace, the dawn of restoration.

Pray and work to obtain from God the grace that the year 1948 may be for wounded Europe and for the nations torn by discord, a year of rebirth and of peace. So pray and work that after the rout of the spirit of darkness, the angel of the bottomless pit, the sun of justice may rise over the world: Jesus Christ our Lord, to

Whom be honor and glory in time and in eternity.

And now, let Our Apostolic Blessing, a pledge of Divine grace and aid, go out to all Our beloved sons and daughters, those of this episcopal city of Ours as of the whole world. But let it extend especially to those groaning under a heavier weight of distress and pain; the sick, the poor, the unemployed; the homeless and all who are hungry and cold; for those bereft of freedom, family, country through the tragic happenings of a dreadful war, through other men's injustices or through their own past mistakes and faults and who feel the pang of discouragement and anguish all the more keenly at this holy season; to the prisoners of war not yet restored to their dear ones; to the refugees and the displaced; in a special way to those, particularly priests, suffering persecution, prison, exile, threats of torture and of death, simply because of their fidelity to God, to Christ, to the Church and to their duty.

