

Pius, XII, Pope 1876-1958
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1949 Christmas...


1949 Christmas Message

of Pope Pius XII



National Catholic Welfare Conference

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Radio Message to the World Given December 23, 1949, by His Holiness, Pope Pius XII

NEVER BEFORE perhaps as on this vigil, which opens the happy event of the new Jubilee Year, has Our heart of Father and Pastor felt you so close and united to Us beloved sons and daughters of the universe. We seem to see millions upon millions of the faithful and hear the thrill of their voices—and Our heart does not deceive Us—in union with Ours forming an immense chorus of fervent thanksgiving, eager longing and humble petition to the Father, Giver of every good gift, to the Son, Expiator of every wrong, to the Holy Ghost, Dispenser of every grace.

Impelled by a profound desire to freedom of the spirit, drawn by the charm of heavenly goods, forgetful for a brief hour of the tribulations of earth, you turn to Us and all but repeat, in a good sense and with the right intention, the plea made long ago to the Redeemer (Mark 8, 11-12; Luke 11,16): "Give us a sign from Heaven."

Well, then, "Today you will know that the Lord will come, and at dawn you shall see His glory." The sign you are waiting for shall be announced to you today; the sign, or

rather the means of remission and sanctification, shall be given to you precisely tomorrow, at the moment when by Our hands the Mystic Door is to be removed once again, thus opening the entrance to the greatest temple of Christendom—symbol of the Redeemer Jesus, given to us through Mary in order that, incorporated in Him, we all may find salvation: "I am the door. By Me, if any man enter in, he shall be saved" (John 10,9).

From the entire Church of Christ, which has spread its members to every region of our planet, eyes are fixed these days on Rome, on this Apostolic See, the perennial fountain of truth, salvation and benediction.

We know what great hopes you have placed in this Holy Year. Staunch in Our heart is the trust the Divine Providence may design to work in it and through it the marvels of His mercy for the human family. And We are supported by the hope that the Angel of the Lord may not encounter any obstacles on his journey, but rather find the ways made straight and hearts opened by that good will which draws Heaven towards earth.

We Ourselves, to whom Divine

Providence has reserved the privilege of proclaiming and granting it to the whole world, already foresee its importance for the coming half-century.

It seems to Us that the Holy Year of 1950 must be decisive, especially for the longed-for religious renewal of the modern world, and that it must solve that spiritual crisis which oppresses the souls of our age. The rightful harmony between heavenly values and those of earth, between the Divine and the human, which is the office and duty of our generation, will be realized or at least hastened, if the faithful of Christ remain firm in their resolves, continue steadfast in the work they have undertaken, and refuse to allow themselves to be seduced by vain utopias or led astray by party interests and selfishness.

It should be decisive as well for the future of the Church, engaged in an effort to render more pure and widespread the sanctity of its members, while exteriorly she strives to infuse and spread her spirit of justice and love even in civil institutions.

Animated by these sentiments and hopes, deeply affected by the dignity of a tradition which goes back to the times of Our predecessor Boniface VIII, in opening the Holy Door with three strokes of a hammer, We shall be conscious of performing no mere traditional act, but a symbolic rite of high import not only for Christians but for the whole human race. We like to hope that this triple stroke may re-echo deep down in the souls of all those who have ears to hear (Matt. 11, 15).

Holy Year, Year of God, of God Whose majesty and grandeur con-

demns sin; of God Whose goodness and mercy offers pardon and grace to anyone disposed to receive it; of God Who in this Holy Year wishes to come still closer to man and to remain nearer to him than ever before.

How many people look on sin as a mere "weakness," and even make of this weakness a virtue! "Indeed," wrote the pagan Sallust long ago, (Catil. 52) "We have lost the true meaning of words, for the giving of another man's goods is called liberality, and audacity in doing evil passes for courage" (Equidem nos vera vocabula rerum amisimus, quia bona aliena largiri liberalitas, malarum rerum audacia fortitudo vocatur). By artfully changing the meaning of words in the most important questions of public and private life, these people hide what conscience does not wish to make clear; they approve what in their heart of hearts they condemn; they deny what they ought loyally to admit.

How many set up their idols in the place of God, or, while affirming their belief in God and their desire to serve Him, make for themselves an idea of Him which is the product of their own desires, of their own inclinations, of their own weaknesses! God in His immense grandeur, in His immaculate sanctity; God, Whose goodness comprehends so well the hearts that He Himself has fashioned (Psalm 32,15) and Whose kindness is ever ready to come to their aid, is not rightly understood by many. This explains why there are so many Christians merely through habit, so many who are listless and careless, and, on the other hand, so many souls that are tormented and

without hope, as though Christianity were not itself the "Good Tidings."

False ideas of God, vain creations of minds all too human, which the Holy Year must dissipate and banish from the hearts of men!

The spontaneous welcome with which the world greeted its announcement confirms the trust that We had placed in the Holy Year. It will not be a noisy festival, nor a pretext for pious distractions, nor yet a conceited display of Catholic strength in the sense understood by the world, which makes success consist in the momentary plaudits of vast masses. The Holy Year must do its work more seriously and deeply in the minds of men; it must encourage and promote more widely the practice of virtue in public and private; it must be and appear more intimate and more sincerely Christian.

It must needs conform to the secret design of God; it must needs characterize itself as the year of the great return, year of great pardon in the measure at least that our present age even very recently has been an epoch of apostasy and guilt.

Beginning today, We direct to the whole world, then, Our plea that all men and each one in particular, from every land and every shore, may accomplish the desired great return with all the urgency demanded by these extraordinary times. Our invitation is meant to be above all that of a Father who lives, toils, suffers, prays and hopes for the good and happiness of his children. And all men on earth are Our children, at least by right and divine purpose (*saltem iure et destinatione*), even those who have aban-

doned Us, who have injured Us, who have made and still make Us suffer.

To you do We appeal, children, who are far away, lost, deluded or embittered, and especially to you for whom treacherous words and perhaps a short-sighted view of reality have stifled in your hearts the affection you once had for Holy Church; do not spurn the offer of reconciliation which God Himself offers you through Us during a truly acceptable time. From this moment on, be assured that sweet are the ways that lead back to the house of the Father, and full of joy is the welcome that awaits you.

May this Holy Year mark the return to God of those souls who, for many and varied reasons, have had their minds and hearts blinded to the image and memory of their Creator, from Whom there has come their very life as well as that of all other beings, and in Whom their highest happiness rests.

Whether they are far away because of a careless and agnostic attitude towards the most important problem of life; or whether they say they are satisfied with a fictitious notion of the universe in which the necessary place is denied to the primary spiritual principle of what exists or can exist; or whether, intolerant of His indestructible presence and foolishly jealous of His supreme dominion, they declare ridiculous war against Him and attempt to suppress the witness that all creatures and even their own hearts give Him; all these people are enduring the pang of exile, supreme loneliness, the emptiness of a desert, to which they have condemned themselves by accepting atheism. For them there is only one remedy—return;

a return to the deep and calm consideration of the reason of things, and by rising step by step along the scale of beings from effect to cause until the inquiring mind rests in tranquil repose; a return finally to the humility and docility befitting a creature. Then there will appear to their eyes and they will almost be able to feel in the unchallengable testimony of His works, the God of the Living, Who is our Father, and that love which torments until it is possessed.

Our heart tells Us that this Holy Year will see many of these returns, as it will see multiple conversions to the Christian Faith of pagans in mission lands. It will be a comfort to you to know that since the Jubilee of 1925 the number of Catholics in those far off countries has more than doubled.

And in some districts of Africa the Visible Church has become the foundation of social life, thanks to the deep Christian influence exerted both in private and public life. But with the greatest grief of soul We cannot help thinking of the grave dangers threatening or already afflicting religion and its institutions in other countries of Europe and Asia, like limitless China, where revolutionary upheavals in conditions that were already unstable have converted fields flourishing with life into cemeteries of death.

May the Holy Year mark the return to the Redeemer Jesus Christ for souls allured by sinful attractions and living far from the Father's house. There are believers and Catholics whose spirit is weak, also, as the flesh makes them traitors to their rightful duties and forgetful of the real treasures, and who

live in a continual sequence of desertion and lapses. They are wrong if they think they possess the Christian life and are pleasing to God unless sanctifying grace dwells habitually in their souls.

Owing to easy compromises between earth and Heaven, time and eternity, matter and spirit, they are drawn into the danger of dying of misery and hunger, far away from Jesus Who does not admit among His followers those who want to serve two masters. For these wounded in spirit, lepers, paralytics, broken branches without the life-giving sap, may the Holy Year be a period of healing and amendment. The angel of the pool of probation desires to renew for all of them the miracle of the healing waters: who will not wish to be bathed in them?

The venerable father of the Gospel story is waiting anxiously on the threshold of the Holy Door for the contrite return of the prodigal son; who will wish to remain obstinate in the desert of this guilt?

Oh that this Holy Year could welcome also the great return to the one true Church, awaited over the centuries, of so many who, though believing in Jesus Christ, are for various reasons separated from her! With unspeakable groanings, the spirit, that is in the hearts of good people, today cries out imploringly the same prayer of Our Lord: that they may be one (*ut unum sint*) (Jn. 17, 11). With good reason men are anxious about the effrontery with which the united front of militant atheism advances; and the old question is now voiced aloud: Why are there still separations? Why are

there still schisms? When will all the forces of the spirit and of love be harmoniously united?

If on other occasions an invitation to unity has been sent forth from this Apostolic See, on this occasion We repeat it more warmly and paternally; We feel that We are urged by the pleadings and prayers of numerous believers scattered over the whole earth, who, after suffering tragic and painful events, turn their eyes towards this Apostolic See as toward an anchor of salvation for the whole world.

For all those who adore Christ—not excluding those who sincerely but vainly await His coming and adore Him as the One promised by the prophets and still to come—do We open the Holy Door, and at the same time We extend a welcome from the heart of a father whose fatherhood in the inscrutable design of God has come to Us from Jesus the Redeemer.

Finally may this Jubilee be the year of the great return of all mankind to the Divine Plan.

Just as the modern world has tried to shake off the sweet yoke of God, so it has rejected along with it the order He established, and with the self-same pride that moved the rebel angel at the beginning of creation, has pretended to set up another of his own choice.

After about two centuries of sorry experience and deviation, those who are still sincere and honest admit that plans and impositions of this sort, which bear the name but lack the substance of order, have not produced their promised results and fail to satisfy the natural aspirations of man.

This failure is evident at two levels: that of social and of international relations.

In the social field the counterfeiting of God's plan has gone to its very roots by deforming the Divine image of man. Instead of His real created nature with origin and destiny in God, there has been substituted the false notion of a man whose conscience is a law unto himself, who is his own legislator brooking no control, who has no responsibility towards his fellows and society, with no destiny beyond the earth and no other purpose than the enjoyment of finite goods, with no rule of life except that of the *fait accompli* and the unbridled satisfaction of his desires.

As an outgrowth of this, which came to wield increasing power over a long period of years because of its most varied applications in public and private life, was that narrowly individualistic order which today is in serious crisis almost everywhere. But the more recent innovators have provided no better results. Starting from the same mistaken premises and taking the downward path in another direction, they have led to no less disastrous consequences, including the complete overthrow of the Divine order, contempt for the dignity of the human person, the denial of the most sacred and fundamental freedoms, the domination of a single class over the others, the enslavement of all persons and property in a totalitarian state and the legalization of violence and to militant atheism.

To those who support one or other of these social systems, both of which are foreign and opposed to the Divine

plan, may there be a persuasive ring in the invitation to return to natural and Christian principles on which is based effective justice with respect for legitimate freedoms; may the recognition of the fact that all men are equal as regards the inviolability of personal rights put an end to the futile struggle which provokes hatred of brother for brother.

But besides these desires, which go to make up the constant solicitude of Our Apostolic Office, We address words of fatherly exhortation to those who place all their hope in the premises of a doctrine and of leaders who explicitly profess materialism and atheism.

To the lowly and oppressed We say: no matter how sad your lot in life may be, even though you have a perfect right to claim justice for yourselves, and others have the duty of according you that right, remember that you possess an immortal soul and a destiny beyond all this world can give.

Do not allow yourselves to exchange heavenly and everlasting goods for those that are perishable and fleeting, especially in this age when upright and beneficent institutions are lending a more sympathetic ear to your cry, and, understanding your plight, are resolved to guide you along the ways of justice.

You often place your faith and trust in men who are as positive in promising to solve all your problems as they are incapable of effecting the facile solutions which they hold out so dazzlingly before your eyes—indeed, some of these problems do not admit of any easy solution owing to the very

limitations of human nature. Reserve, then, this faith and trust in the first place for the promises of God, Who does not deceive.

You are rightly solicitous for your daily bread and a suitable home which are indispensable for your maintenance and that of your families: see that this solicitude is not in conflict with your heavenly destiny. Let it not make you forgetful or neglectful of your soul and of the imperishable treasures which God has entrusted to you in the souls of your children.

Let it not obscure the vision or hinder the gaining of those eternal goods which will constitute your everlasting happiness and which become a reality in the supreme good for which we are created: our happiness in God. Only a society illuminated by the dictates of faith, respectful of the rights of God, certain of the account which responsible leaders will have to render to the Supreme Judge in the depths of their conscience and in the presence of the living and the dead—only such a society will be able to interpret correctly your needs and just aspirations to defend and fight for your rights, to guide you with wisdom in the fulfilment of your duties in accordance with the hierarchy of values and the harmony of domestic and civil life that nature has established.

Do not forget that without God material prosperity is for those who do not possess it a tormenting wound, while for those who do, it proves a death trap. Without God intellectual and aesthetic culture is as a river cut off from its source and its outlet; it becomes a quagmire filled with sand and mud.

We expect from the Holy Year, finally, the return of international society to the plan mapped out by God. According to this plan all peoples—in peace and not in war, in collaboration and not in isolation, in justice and not in national selfishness—are meant to make up a great human family bent on the advancement of common interest, through mutual aid and a fair distribution of this world's goods which are a treasure entrusted to men by God.

Beloved sons, if ever there was an occasion which seemed propitious for exhorting the rulers of people to thoughts of peace, that of the Holy Year seems to Us the most propitious of all. It is, and is intended to be, an urgent appeal and at the same time a contribution to the brotherhood of nations.

Here in Rome, the Mother of Peoples, there will meet together innumerable groups of pilgrims of different races, nations, languages, customs and character. And within these very walls they will live together, they will meet on the same streets, lodge in the same hotels, take part in the same rites, quench their thirst at the same spiritual fountains, enjoy the same consolations. There will be among them those who were commanded to deal out death and those who suffered its terrible effects, the invader and the conquered; the keeper of the barbed-wire prison-camp and the prisoner who endured its cruel confinement.

Have we not then, reason to believe that these thousands and thousands of our devoted sons and daughters will become the faithful vanguard in the

crusade for peace, and that with Our blessing they will bring home with them the meaning and the power of the peace of Christ, to win new recruits for so holy a cause?

God forbid that the "Truce of God," the augury and the inspiration of peaceful counsels, should be disturbed or violated by reckless schemes, not only on the part of nations, but of different groups within the same country. Such a sacrilegious hand could call down upon itself the just anger of God and would incur the most certain condemnation of all mankind.

We expect, then, a great homecoming during this year of extraordinary grace; great because of the number of children for whom We reserve a most affectionate welcome; great because of the distance some of them will have to come, great because of the immensely beneficial results that will derive from it without fail. May all Our sons and all men of good will lovingly undertake not to disappoint the hopes of the Common Father, who holds up His hand to heaven in prayer that the new outpouring of Divine mercy upon the world may surpass all expectation.

Because of this meeting of compassionate and gentle love which will spread its flame from Rome all over the world, every return to God, to Jesus Christ, to the Church and to the Divine Plan, will be sealed by the loving embrace of the Father of Mercies, Who pardons the every fault and remits the every punishment of him who loves. Jesus has revealed to us the real countenance of God, portraying It in the father who welcomes, embraces, forgives the prodigal

son who returns heartbroken but with confidence to the home he had foolishly left.

If the Jubilee is a time of extraordinary return for men, it will be for God an occasion for more generous and loving pardon.

And who does not stand in need of God's forgiveness? Although the Lord is ready to pardon, He does not dispense the sinner from the necessity of sincere repentance and due expiation.

Let the Holy Year, then, be chiefly a year of repentance and expiation. Interior and voluntary repentance together with expiation are the indispensable perquisites of every human renovation. They signify a halt in the downward course; they express an acknowledgment of one's own sins, they manifest the sincerity of one's goodwill.

The value of voluntary expiation is enhanced when it is collective, and offered in union with the Chief Expiator of the sin of men, Jesus Christ Our Redeemer.

During this Holy Year which recalls the expiation of Calvary, expiate, beloved sons, your own sins and those of others; bury all the past in sincere repentance, persuaded that if the present generation has been so grievously stricken by chastisements fashioned by its own hands, it is because it has sinned with great deliberation and wantonness.

There passes before Our eyes, as in mournful procession, the sad countenance of orphans, of widows, of mothers who await the homecoming of one who perhaps will never come back to them, of those who are being per-

secuted for justice and religion, of the prisoners, of the refugees, of those who are enduring forced exile, of those in jail, of the unemployed, the oppressed, the physical and mental sufferers, of the victims of every form of injustice. So many tears bedew the face of the earth, so much blood em-purple it. These are indeed an expiation in themselves, and often for faults of others, still they call in their turn for further expiation, so that guilt may be wiped out and Christian joy restored.

Who will want to separate himself from this world of expiation, which has for its head the Divine Crucified in person and embraces the entire Church Militant?

With such generous promises on the part of God, never perhaps was a Holy Year better suited to counsel gentleness, indulgence and pardon between man and man.

When, in recent times, taking their rise from an unfortunate war or political upheavals, waves of reprisals were unleashed, unequalled in history at least for the number of their victims, Our heart was pierced with bitter grief, not only because of the misfortune that bred other misfortunes and hurled into the fray thousands of families who were often innocent, but because with utter sadness We saw here the tragic evidence of apostasy from the spirit of Christ.

Whoever would be a sincere Christian must know how to forgive. "Thou wicked servant"—is the rebuke of the Gospel parable (Matt. 18, 32)—"was it not thy duty to have mercy on thy fellow-servant, as I had on thee?"

When reasonable motives are pres-

ent, charity and mercy do not run counter to one's duty to administer justice aright. But imprudent intolerance and the spirit of reprisal most certainly do, especially when vengeance is taken by public authority against one who has erred rather than sinned, or when a punishment deservedly inflicted is prolonged beyond all reasonable limits.

May the Lord inspire all who are in positions of public responsibility with thoughts of reconciliation and concord, and without prejudice to common good, let an end be put to the last remnant of those extraordinary laws which have nothing to do with common crimes deserving just punishment, and which, long years after the cessation of hostilities, cause in so many families and individuals a feeling of exasperation against the society in which they are made to suffer.

Hence, in the name of Jesus Christ Who has given to men an example by offering Himself in sacrifice even for His executioners, We implore governments, especially Christian governments, to exercise generously their right of pardon, and put into effect, on an occasion so solemn and propiti-ous as the Holy Year, that mitigation of punitive justice provided for in the laws of all countries.

The religion and piety which (as We hope) will inspire such acts of clemency, so far from weakening the force of law or lessening respect for it in the minds of the citizens, will be a strong motive for its beneficiaries when they resume their coveted liberty or have their term of sentence shortened to improve their lives and repair,

if necessary, the past by a sincere and lasting conversion as mark of their good faith.

We, and along with Us the hearts of so many afflicted relatives, ask this consolation; for the happiness of his sons is the joy of the father. Here We express publicly Our sincere gratitude to those governments which have in various degrees given favorable consideration to Our wish or have left Us with some hope of obtaining its fulfillment.

Securus iam carpe viam—Set out upon your journey without fear.

Beloved sons, We have revealed to you the sentiments of Our heart on the vigil of the opening of the Holy Door; you can read there Our purposes, Our hopes, and Our prayers.

Accept Our invitation to your Father's house. From far and near, from every continent and region, from every country and by every route, crossing the oceans or flying through the air, come here on your journey without fear, whoever you may be that comes a pilgrim from the western shores to venerate the heights of Peter.

You, who long years ago left your hearth and home and grew accustomed to the hardships of long journeys with the armies at war or with the throngs of refugees, emigrants, or displaced persons, take to the road again, but this time in joy like a peaceful legion praying and doing penance on your way to the common fatherland of Christians.

Roma mihi patria—Rome my fatherland.

For without privilege of race or class, Rome is the fatherland of all;

every Christian can and should say; "Rome is my fatherland."

Here God's supernatural Providence over souls is more particularly in evidence; here the Saints acquired the norm and inspiration of their heroism; this land of benediction knew the triumphs of the martyrs and was the training ground of dauntless confessors. Here is the immovable Rock to which your hopes are anchored; it is the site and ancient *Tropeaeum* of the glorious tomb of the Prince of the Apostles on which rests the chair of a perennial authority of the Vicar of Christ.

In the magnificence of the basilicas, in the beauty of the solemn liturgy, in the twilight of the ancient Christian cemeteries close by the major relics of the Saints, you will breathe in the air of sanctity, of peace and universality

which will serve to give to your life a profound Christian renewal.

And you, beloved sons of Rome, nearest to Us and more immediately united to Us by the bonds of Our pastoral ministry, who frequently during the past ten years have given Us no uncertain proofs of your filial attachment, you will be second to none in bringing your lives and conduct into harmony with the lofty aims of the Holy Year. It is for you to show a special charity in welcoming your brethren from distant lands, to give an example of courtesy and sincere practice of your religious duties.

May the almighty and merciful God grant these Our wishes and in token of the generous mercies of Heaven may there descend upon you who are listening, upon all men of good will, upon those whose return We wait, Our Apostolic Benediction.