

Paul VI
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1965 CHRISTMAS MESSAGE
POPE PAUL VI



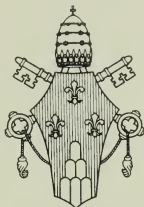
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CHRISTMAS MESSAGE

POPE PAUL VI

December 23, 1965



To all our sons, to the whole of our beloved and holy Church, spread throughout the world and gathered together in the same communion of faith and charity!

To all our Christian brethren, whom we ever look forward to being able to greet in a perfect sharing of the same admirable communion!

To all men on earth!

To you we send our greetings for Christmas.

The most sincere and cordial good wishes to be found in our heart are for you! We raise our voice in greeting in order to be heard by each one of you; may our greeting have the earnestness and value necessary to be pleasing and beneficial to you. There is no room in the Christian celebration for half-hearted sentiments. We allow our heart to be filled with the spirit of Christmas in order to convey to you not only our humble expression of love but also that immense and indescribable gift which is part of the very mystery of Christmas itself, the mystery of divine light and grace.

To be understood right off, we say that we consider Christmas as the encounter, the great encounter, the historical encounter, the decisive encounter between God and mankind. He who has faith knows this truth; let him rejoice. Everyone else should give thought to it and reflect upon it.

We still hear within us the moving words of the sacred Advent liturgy which present Christmas to us precisely as the terminal points of two long and quite different journeys which come together and meet: the mysterious journey of God, who makes the unfathomable descent from His transcendency; finally issues from the ever more luminous cloud of the prophecies; approaches our world, our history, in a new and supernatural way; and at last in the unexpected lowliness of Bethlehem and in the shining purity of Mary reaches our earthly shore; He becomes man; He is Christ. But the other journey, our journey, is tortuous and exhausting. Of itself it is without any precise goal, but then later it is directed toward a vague and consuming hope, a hope superior to our natural strength, the hope of arriving at God, the hope of discovering Him in His humanity, the hope of meeting Him, like the meeting of a wayfaring pilgrim on a pathway, of a known friend, of a blood brother, of a teacher speaking one's own language, of a liberator who can accomplish everything, of a saviour

Listen to the words of the liturgy: "Looking from afar, behold I see the power of God coming, and a cloud covering all the earth. Set out to meet Him and say to Him: tell us if you are He who is to be King . . ." (Responsory of the first lesson of Matins of the first Sunday of Advent). How many are the things we could say about these historical and spiritual journeys, which have been traced for us in the Old Testament! And also how much concerning the various ways in which this marvelous encounter is still realized spiritually! We would first of all have to describe the scenes of the Gospel, and comment without end on their meaning, their value as examples, on the definitive language employed, on their perennial and universal significance.

We all know that that encounter of God with mankind was more than an outward passing contact, it was nothing less than a

union, a living abiding union of the divine with the human nature, a substantial union, hypostatic as the Fathers of our faith termed it; a union whereby the Word of God in His infinite and eternal Person made His own the human nature conceived in the pure womb of the Virgin Mary, becoming in this way the man Jesus Christ, true God and true man. As man He was born, lived, taught, suffered, died and rose, without ceasing to be the God that He was, but becoming the man we know, becoming one of us.

Christmas, then, is the memory of this encounter, and this encounter must not cease. This thought of ours is strengthened by the reflection that something of the encounter in Christ between God and human nature seems to be achieved in the event, recently concluded, that we have celebrated in these last years, the Second Vatican Council. The Council too has been an encounter, a twofold encounter of the Church with herself and with the world.

In the Council the Church's encounter with herself was in fact achieved and without doubt it was great and beneficial. We could dwell on the external aspect of the event: It has been of no little significance that all the pastors of the great Catholic family met, came to know and love one another, and that not merely on a spiritual level but also on the experiential level of seeing and greeting one another, conversing and praying together, feeling a greater love for one another. What could be more Christian than this encounter?

But now our thought goes deeper, to the meaning and the effectiveness of the Council. We said that the Church has had an encounter with herself: her own faith, her teaching, her constancy, her mission, her apostolic and missionary vigor, her richness in wisdom and grace, her capacity to draw forth new treasures from her unexhausted store, her anxiety to understand, serve and save the world.

The Church, then, has encountered in this act of reflection, not herself alone but Christ whom she carries with her; she has felt herself once more imbued, inebriated, we might say, and exalted, by her engagement of loyalty to His Word and His will; she has felt the Spirit of God glowing fresh within her, the Gospel message

springing anew to her lips and the need to make new its preaching for her own sake and the world's.

From this the Church has become young again. She has experienced her rebirth. Let us keep before our minds, brothers, this wondrous new encounter that the Council has obtained for her with Christ. And let us remember: The Church can today celebrate again a new Christmas not by indulging the mistaken *aggiornamento* already deplored by our venerated predecessor John XXIII (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 1962, p. 675), not seeking to absorb the spirit of the time or putting her trust in the weak ideologies of the secular world or bearing with some view of historical fatalism, not being satisfied with some practical treatment of a few secondary norms of canon law, but seeking to find Christ afresh in herself, and to encounter Him with greater awareness.

And now the encounter of the Church with the world:

This aspect of the Ecumenical Council was apparent to all. The Church in a sense came out of herself and went to meet the men of our time, living in a world of tremendous and bewildering progress. The Church took into consideration the ever-increasing demands of a great part of the world's population. One of these demands is for more food—physical and spiritual—for a hungry world. Having chosen the approach of an all-embracing pastoral charity, the Council could not have done otherwise.

The dominant mood of the Council was inspired by the Gospel image of the shepherd setting out in pursuit of the lost sheep, allowing himself no peace until he has found it. The awareness that mankind, all of mankind, represented with touching simplicity by the straying sheep, belongs to the Church, was the guiding principle of the Council, for mankind—by a universally valid divine decree—does belong to the Church.

The Church gained a new insight into the tremendous exigencies involved in the term "catholic," which is her real distinguishing mark; that is to say, she realized once more that her mission, her responsibility and her love can know no bounds.

For this reason the Church calls mankind hers. She calls it hers out of a sense of obligation which can permit of no weakening and which quietly and heroically makes light of every difficulty; mankind belongs to her by right of love, since the Church, no matter how distant or uncooperative or hostile mankind may be, can never be excused from loving the human race for which Christ shed His blood. Mankind is hers also by a certain historical kinship: For was it not the Church that was responsible in great measure for the growth of that civilization which men today find to be truly authentic and strive to make their own? Mankind belongs to the Church by reason of a mysterious hope which is nourished by important events and movements apparent in the world today, such as the quest for truth and liberty, progress along the path of unity from which there can be no turning back, the need for brotherliness and peace—all these are goods which only in the light of the Gospel can achieve perfect fulfilment.

The Church of the Council therefore seeks opportunities for contact with the world. She who always jealously guarded what in ancient times was known as the discipline of the secret began to welcome those responsible for the gathering and dissemination of news, inviting them to see and speak for themselves, and even furnishing them with information. And that was not all. The Church of the Council brought about a meeting which had not occurred for centuries and seemed unlikely ever to occur: Humbly and cordially she invited Christian brethren separated from communion with her for a long time to draw near to her in order to repair, at least in its human and most basic lines, the torn garment of unity, and to encourage mutual knowledge, respect and trust and the beginnings of a dialogue. And then there are the peoples of the whole world with whom the Church wishes to establish contact.

At this point we cannot refrain from mentioning our journey to New York in response to an invitation to address the United Nations Assembly, and the extraordinary encounter between our humble person and the representatives of the nations gathered there. It was an encounter that seems to us to have been significant both historically and symbolically. For it certainly gave ex-

pression to one of the principal aims of the Council: the bringing to the peoples of the world the message of friendship and of peace. It was an occasion which we will always remember for its enormous significance, and we would like to take advantage of this festive season to repeat once more to those who invited us there and so kindly received us, the tribute of our sincere appreciation. We would like also to renew to that assembly and to each of its members the desire we expressed for peace. We wish to greet once again the people of the United States whom we then had the honor and the joy of encountering.

Here lies the first task involved in the presence of the Church which goes in search of men—her role as messenger of peace. This, too, springs from the very nature of things. Is not peace the first greeting that is given in the name of Christ—as He Himself gave it after His resurrection: “Peace to you”? And is not the first contribution which the Church can offer, from her position in the midst of the world, to give, promote and teach peace? Peace is, in fact, the first and chief good of any society. It is based on justice, freedom and order; it opens the way to every other value in human life.

And so now, at this very moment, we are making a new plea for peace—and this, not simply because peace is a good thing in itself, but also because it is a good which is in such danger today.

Fresh schemes, which the tragic experiences of the last war had given rise to, are now joined by old and deep-rooted nationalistic tendencies, along with newer ideologies of subversion and domination. Arms, ever more powerful and dreadful, become, as it were, the only guarantee of a treacherous and precarious peace, to the detriment of a sense of justice and human brotherhood among peoples.

Brothers, do heed the message of peace which Christmas brings to men who even now are the object of God’s love. Check the way things are going. It is possible that you are on the wrong track. Stop and think. True wisdom is to be found in peace; and true peace is to be found in the alliance of love.

No one ought to restrict love to peace within the limits of self-interest or one's own ambition. No one ought to set about disturbing the peace of others by means of underhanded schemes and contrived disorder. No one ought to force his neighbor—and today we are all neighbors—to resort to armed defense. And no one ought to shirk just and sincere negotiation to restore order and friendship.

Peace needs to be built on a courageous revision of the inadequate ideology of egoism, strife and national superiority. We need to know how to forgive and begin again, so that the relationships between men will not be determined by power and force, nor simply by economic gain or the state of civic development; but by a higher concept of equality and solidarity, which, in the long run, only the fatherliness of God, manifested in Christ, reveals as logical, easy and worthwhile.

We propose these weighty thoughts single-mindedly and humbly—because, brothers, this is another facet of the meeting which the Church of the Council offers to the world. She knows how to carry a treasure of infinite value—a treasure of truth and salvation; and this inspires her to meet with you.

But keep one thing in mind: She does not come to you out of pride, or to win any special privilege for herself. She is not pushing herself into the limelight. She willingly recognizes, encourages and blesses the great values of your culture and your progress. She has no ambition either for power or for wealth. The only thing she asks is freedom for her inner faith, and freedom to give witness outwardly. But she does not impose herself on anybody, preferring that the ultimate responsibility and the decisive choice of the conscience—even in the case of religious truth—should be respected and safeguarded.

The meeting of the Church with the world of today has been described in the wonderful pages of the final constitution that came from the Council. Every intelligent person, every serious-minded man, should be familiar with those pages. Indeed those pages manifest the Church in the midst of contemporary life, but not in order to reduce society to submission, nor to upset the inde-

pendent and upright development of its activities, but rather to lend it enlightenment, support, and consolation.

In our opinion these pages mark the point of encounter between Christ and modern man: For the contemporary world they form the Christmas message for this year of grace. We recall them here to document the substance of our greeting, which is not a matter of words and sentiments, but rather the Christian offering of positive, disinterested service for the peace and prosperity of humanity and for its hope in the transcendent destiny of salvation and of happiness, a destiny which has been opened to men by the very Christ whose humble and glorious birth we celebrate.

Brothers, sons, and all men of good will, in the name of Christ our Lord we offer you our best wishes for a merry Christmas, and with them our apostolic blessing.

(Translation provided by NCWC News Service)

(Cover: The Adoration of the Magi by Botticelli. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.)

National Catholic Welfare Conference

