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Christmas Message

1959

POPE JOHN XXIII



PEACE



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*Christmas Address Given by His Holiness,
Pope John XXIII, on December 23, 1959*

Venerable brethren, dear children:

Christmas is with Us, the Second Christmas of Our pontificate. Gazing at the scene from afar, united in spirit with Mary and Joseph on the road to Bethlehem, We taste a few days in advance the sweetness which comes to Us from the angelic hymn announcing the heavenly peace which is offered to all men of good will. And thus, from day to day, We reflect that the road to Bethlehem truly marks the path for the right approach to that peace which is on the lips, in the eager desires and in the hearts, of all.

The appeal of the liturgy, in the words of Pope Leo the Great, was already giving a warning to us with the joyous invitation: "Exult in the Lord, dear people; lift up your hearts in spiritual joy, for the day of redemption is being renewed, the day of age-long expectation, of the announcement of the happiness that has no end" (20th sermon on the Lord's Nativity P.L., 54, 193). And along with it—as if in chorus with that solemn and touching voice which comes to us from the fifth century—we hear rising in unison, as it were, the imploring voices of the supreme pontiffs who ruled the Church both before and after the two wars that tore humanity apart in our generation. We hear the very recent words of the nineteen Christmas messages of our Holy Father, Pius XII, of ever dear and happy memory.

We hear an unending invitation, then, to hasten our steps along the roads to Bethlehem, which are the roads of peace for us.

In the world of today, how many roads of peace have been proposed and imposed? And how many roads have been suggested even to Us, who rejoice indeed, with Mary and Joseph, in the sure knowledge of Our path and have no fear of the possibility of going astray?

From World War II right up to the present time, what a variety of utterances, what an abuse of this sacred word: "peace, peace" (Jer. 6, 14).

We pay homage to the good will of the many guides and proclaimers of peace in the world: statesmen, experienced diplomats and influential writers.

But human efforts in the matter of universal peacemaking are still far from the point where heaven and earth meet.

The fact is that true peace cannot come save from God. It has only one name: the peace of Christ. It has one aspect, that impressed on it by Christ who, as if to anticipate the counterfeits of man, emphasized: "Peace I leave you, my peace I give to you" (John 14, 28).

CHRISTIAN PEACE

The appearance of peace is threefold:

Peace of the heart:

Peace is before all else an interior thing, belonging to the spirit, and its fundamental condition is a loving and filial dependence on the will of God. "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless till it rests in Thee" (St. Augustine's Confessions, 1, I, 1, 1, P.L. 32, 661).

All that weakens, that breaks, that destroys this conformity and union of wills is opposed to peace. First of all and before all is wrongdoing, sin. "Who hath resisted him and hath had peace?" (Job 9, 4). Peace is the happy legacy of those who keep the divine law. "Much peace have they who love thy law" (Psalms, 118, 165).

For its part, good will is only the sincere determination to respect the eternal laws of God, to conform oneself to His commandments and to follow His paths—in a word, to abide in the truth. This is the glory which God expects to receive from man. "Peace to men of good will."

Social peace:

This is solidly based on the mutual and reciprocal respect for the personal dignity of man. The Son of God was made man, and His redeeming act concerns not only the collectivity, but also the individual man.

He has "loved me and gave himself up for me." Thus spoke St. Paul to the Galatians (Gal. 2, 30). And if God has loved man to such a

degree, that indicates that man is of interest to Him and that the human person has an absolute right to be respected.

Such is the teaching of the Church which, for the solution of these social questions, has always fixed her gaze on the human person and has taught that things and institutions—goods, the economy, the state—are primarily for man; not man for them.

The disturbances which unsettle the internal peace of nations trace their origins chiefly to this source: that man has been treated almost exclusively as a machine, a piece of merchandise, a worthless cog in some great machine or a mere productive unit.

It is only when the dignity of the person comes to be taken as the standard of value for man and his activities that the means will exist to settle civil discord and the often profound divisions between, for example, employers and the employed. Above all, it is only then that the means will exist to secure for the institution of the family those conditions of life, work and assistance which are capable of making it better directed to its function as a cell of society and the first community instituted by God Himself for the development of the human person.

No peace will have solid foundations unless hearts nourish the sentiment of brotherhood which ought to exist among all who have a common origin and are called to the same destiny. The knowledge that they belong to the same family extinguishes lust, greed, pride and the instinct to dominate others, which are the roots of dissensions and wars. It binds all in a single bond of higher and more fruitful solidarity.

International peace:

The basis of international peace is, above all, truth. For in international relations, too, the Christian saying is valid: "The truth shall make you free" (John 8, 32).

It is necessary, then, to overcome certain erroneous ideas: the myths of force, of nationalism or of other things that have prevented the integrated life of nations. And it is necessary to impose a peaceful living-together on moral principles, according to the teaching of right reason and of Christian doctrine.

Along with this, and enlightened by truth, should come justice. This removes the causes of quarrels and wars, solves the disputes, fixes the tasks, defines the duties and gives the answer to the claims of each party.

Justice in its turn ought to be integrated and sustained by Christian charity. That is, love for one's neighbor and one's own people ought not to be concentrated on one's self in an exclusive egotism which is suspicious of another's good. But it ought to expand and reach out

spontaneously toward the community of interests, to embrace all peoples and to interweave common human relations. Thus it will be possible to speak of living together, and not of mere coexistence which, precisely because it is deprived of this inspiration of mutual dependence, raises barriers behind which nestle mutual suspicion, fear and terror.

ERRORS OF MAN IN HIS SEARCH FOR PEACE

Peace is a gift of God beyond compare. Likewise, it is the object of man's highest desire. It is moreover indivisible. None of the lineaments which make up its unmistakable appearance can be ignored or excluded.

In addition, since the men of our time have not completely carried into effect the conditions of peace, the result has been that God's paths toward peace have no meeting point with those of man. Hence there is the abnormal situation of this postwar period which has created, as it were, two blocs with all their uneasy conditions. There is not a state of war, but neither is there peace, the thing which the nations ardently desire.

At all times, because true peace is indivisible in its various aspects, it will not succeed in establishing itself on the social and international planes unless it is also, and in the first place, an interior fact. This requires then before all else—it is necessary to repeat—"men of good will." These are precisely those to whom the angels of Bethlehem announced peace: "Peace among men of good will" (Luke 2, 14). Indeed they alone can give reality to the conditions contained in the definition of peace given by St. Thomas: The ordered harmony of citizens (Contra Gentiles 3, (III), CCC 146) and therefore order and harmony.

But how will true peace be able to put forth the two-fold blossom of order and concord if the persons who hold positions of public responsibility, before selecting the advantages and risks of their decisions, fail to recognize themselves as persons subject to the eternal moral laws?

It will be necessary again and again to remove from the path the obstacles placed by the malice of man. And the presence of these obstacles is noted in the propaganda of immorality, in social injustice, in forced unemployment, in poverty contrasted with the luxury of those who can indulge in dissipation, in the dreadful lack of proportion between the technical and moral progress of nations, and in the unchecked armaments race, where there has yet to be a glimpse of a serious possibility of solving the problem of disarmament.

THE WORK OF THE CHURCH

The most recent events have created an atmosphere of so-called disengagement which has caused hopes to blossom anew in many minds after life has been lived for so long in a state of fictitious peace, in a situation of very great instability that more than once has been threatened with a complete rupture.

All that makes obvious how rooted in the souls of all is the craving for peace.

In order that this common desire may be promptly fulfilled the Church prays confidently to Him who rules the destinies of nations and can direct the hearts of rulers to good. No daughter of the world, but living and working in the world, the Church, as it has from the dawn of Christianity—as St. Paul wrote to Timothy: offers “prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings . . . for all men, for kings, and for all in high positions, that we may live a quiet and peaceful life in all piety and worthy behavior” (I Tim. 2, 1-2). So also today the Church accompanies with prayer the peaceful solution of controversies, the establishment of relations between nations and their mutual collaboration, just as it helps peaceful discussions in international relations.

Besides prayer, the Church makes available its maternal offices, points to the incomparable treasure of its doctrine and urges its children to lend their active cooperation for peace by recalling St. Augustine’s famous invitation: “It is more glorious to slay war with words than men with steel; and it is true glory to secure peace by peaceful means” (St. Augustine, Epistle 129, II).

It is a function and office proper to the Church that it should devote itself to peace. And the Church is aware of having omitted nothing that was within its capacities to obtain peace for nations and individuals. The Church looks with favor on every initiative which can help to spare humanity new conflicts, new massacres and incalculable new destruction.

Unfortunately, the causes which have disturbed, and now disturb, international order have not yet been removed. It is therefore necessary to dry up the sources of evil. Otherwise the dangers to peace will remain a constant threat.

The causes of international sickness were clearly proclaimed by Our predecessor, Pius XII of immortal memory, especially in his Christmas messages of 1942 and 1943. It is well to repeat them.

These causes are: the violation of the rights and dignity of the human person and the overruling of the rights of the family and of labor; the overthrow of the juridical order and of the healthy idea of the state in

keeping with the Christian spirit; impairment of the liberty, integrity and security of other nations to whatever extent; the systematic oppression of the cultural and language characteristics of national minorities; the egotistical calculations of all who strive to seize control of the economic sources of the materials of common use to the detriment of other peoples; and, in particular, the persecution of religion and of the Church.

It needs still to be noted that the peace which the Church prays for cannot possibly be achieved if it is mistaken for a yielding or a relaxation of its firmness in the face of ideologies and systems of life which are in open and irreconcilable opposition to Catholic teaching. Nor does peace denote indifference to the laments which come to Us even now from the unhappy lands where the rights of man are ignored and falsehood is adopted as a system.

Still less can one forget the sorrowful calvary of the Church of Silence; where the confessors of the Faith, rivaling the early Christian martyrs, are endlessly exposed to suffering and torments for the cause of Christ. These established facts put one on guard against excessive optimism. But they render all the more earnest Our prayers for a truly universal return to respect for human and Christian liberty.

Oh, may all men of good will return to Christ and listen to His divine teaching which is the teaching of His Vicar on Earth and of the lawful pastors, the bishops! They shall find the truth which frees from error, falsehood and deceit, and which will hasten the attainment of the peace of Bethlehem, that peace which was announced by the angels to men of good will.

EXHORTATION AND PATERNAL WISHES

With such a wish and with such a prayer, behold we have arrived, all of us, like Mary and Joseph, like the humble shepherds from the hills around Bethlehem and like the Wise Men from the East, before the crib of our Newborn Saviour. O Jesus, how tenderly we approach the simple crib! How sweet and devout are our hearts and feelings! How eager is our desire to unite all our labors in the great work of universal peace in Thy presence, Divine Author and Prince of Peace!

At Bethlehem all men must find their place. In the first rank should be Catholics. Today especially the Church wishes to see them pledged to an effort to make His message of peace a part of themselves. And

the message is an invitation to check the direction of every act by the dictates of divine law, which demands the unflinching adherence of all, even to the point of sacrifice. Along with such a deepened understanding must go action. It is utterly intolerable for Catholics to restrict themselves to the position of mere observers. They should feel clothed, as it were, with a mandate from on high.

The effort, no doubt, is long and arduous. But Christmas means to all the certainty that nothing of men's good will is lost in whatever they perform in good will, perhaps without being entirely aware of it, for the coming of God's kingdom on earth and in order that the city of man may be modeled after the city of God. Ah, the city—the "city of God"—which St. Augustine hailed as resplendent with the truth that saves, with the charity that gives life and with the eternity that reassures! (Cf. Epistle 138, 3; P. L. 33, 533).

Venerable brethren and dear children, scattered throughout the whole world, the final sentiments expressed in this second message recall to Us the first message which We addressed to the world on December 23, 1958. A year ago the new successor of St. Peter, still trembling under the first emotions of the lofty mission conferred on him as pastor of the Universal Church, somewhat shy about the name of John which he had chosen for himself in token of a good will that was at once anxious yet firm with regard to the program for preparing the ways of the Lord, suddenly thought of the valleys to be filled and the mountains to be brought low, and he began to advance on his way. And then, day by day, he was to recognize in great humility of spirit that truly the hand of the Most High was with him. The spectacle of religious and devout throngs, who from every part of the world gathered here in Rome or at Castelgandolfo to greet him, to hear him and to beg his blessing, was constant and touching, often giving cause for surprise and wonder.

We have also been offered gifts which We treasure with lively feelings of gratitude. Among the most pleasing and significant of these gifts is a genuine old Venetian painting, the subject of which is a sacred conversation: Mary and Joseph with Jesus and an attractive little St. John offering a ripe fruit to Jesus who, in the act of accepting the fruit with a tender smile, diffuses a celestial sweetness over the whole painting. The picture now occupies a place of honor and has become familiar to Us during Our daily prayer in Our private oratory.

Allow Us, venerable brethren and dear children, to draw from this painting a most happy inspiration for Our Christmas greeting which, with sincere and friendly regard, We are pleased to extend to all members of the Holy Church and to the whole world.

Thoughts concerning the peace of Bethlehem hold a foremost place among Our anxieties. But that sacred conversation widens its scope before Our eyes until it gathers around itself all those who, with Us and with you, in the spirit of the universal ministry entrusted to Our humble person, are particularly dear to us in the intimate love of Christ.

We mean those who suffer from the anxieties and miseries of life and to whom Christmas brings a sweet ray of comfort and hope; the sick and infirm, who are the object of assiduous and watchful attention and very special affection; those who are suffering in spirit or in their hearts because of the uncertainties of the future, of economic hardships or of the humiliation imposed upon them because of some fault committed or presumed; the little children, especially dear to Jesus, who through their very weakness and fragility exact a more inviolable respect and require more delicate attention; and the aged, often tempted by moments of melancholy or by the thought that they are useless.

Confronted by this picture, the Church pledges her prayer and her attention, as well as the solicitude of her apostolate, to all those who are particularly dear to her. She pledges these things not to them alone, but also to all whose state of life is undistinguished, to the poor, to workers, to employers, and to those who are vested with public and civil power.

And how could We omit remembrance on this day before Christmas Eve of Our venerable bishops, both of the Latin and Oriental Rites, the sweetness of whose fervor for personal sanctification and dedication to souls We have frequently tasted in our fraternal meetings? How could We omit the generous and heroic bands of missionary men and women and of catechists, the compact and noble army of the diocesan and religious clergy, the religious women belonging to innumerable and praiseworthy institutes, and the Catholic laity, all on fire with zeal for works of Christian piety, of manifold types of assistance, of charity and education? Nor do we wish to forget Our separated brethren for whom Our prayers rise unceasingly to Heaven so that the promise of Christ may be fulfilled: one Shepherd and one flock.

The Pope's task is to prepare for God a perfect people (Luke 1, 17) which is exactly like the task of (John) the Baptist, who is his patron and from whom he takes his name. And it is not possible to imagine a higher and more precious perfection than that of Christian peace, which is the peace of hearts, peace in the social order, in life, in prosperity, in mutual respect and in the brotherhood of all nations.

Venerable brethren, dear children, for this peace of Christ, the abundant and enlightening peace of Christmas, it is Our delight once more to express Our wishes and to impart Our blessing.

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