

In Truth, Peace

*Message of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI
for the Celebration of World Day of Peace*

1 January 2006

1. In this traditional Message for the World Day of Peace at the beginning of the New Year, I offer cordial greetings and good wishes to men and women everywhere, especially those who are suffering as a result of violence and armed conflicts. My greeting is one filled with hope for a more serene world, a world in which more and more individuals and communities are committed to the paths of justice and peace.

2. Before all else, I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to my Predecessors, the great Popes Paul VI and John Paul II, who were astute promoters of peace. Guided by the spirit of the Beatitudes, they discerned in the many historical events which marked their respective Pontificates the providential intervention of God, who never ceases to be concerned for the future of the human race. As tireless heralds of the Gospel, they constantly invited everyone to make God the starting-point of their efforts on behalf of concord and peace throughout the world. This, my first Message for the World Day of Peace, is meant to follow in the path of their noble teaching; with

it, I wish to reiterate the steadfast resolve of the Holy See to continue serving the cause of peace. The very name Benedict, which I chose on the day of my election to the Chair of Peter, is a sign of my personal commitment to peace. In taking this name, I wanted to evoke both the Patron Saint of Europe, who inspired a civilization of peace on the whole continent, and Pope Benedict XV, who condemned the First World War as a “useless slaughter”¹ and worked for a universal acknowledgment of the lofty demands of peace.

3. The theme chosen for this year’s reflection—“In truth, peace”—expresses the conviction that wherever and whenever men and women are enlightened by the splendor of truth, they naturally set out on the path of peace. The Pastoral Constitution “*Gaudium et Spes*,” promulgated forty years ago at the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, stated that mankind will not succeed in “building a truly more human world for everyone, everywhere on earth, unless all people

¹ “Appeal to the Heads of the Warring Peoples,” (1 August 1917): AAS 9 (1917), 423.

are renewed in spirit and converted to the truth of peace.”² But what do those words, “the truth of peace,” really mean? To respond adequately to this question, we must realize that peace cannot be reduced to the simple absence of armed conflict, but needs to be understood as “the fruit of an order which has been planted in human society by its divine Founder,” an order “which must be brought about by humanity in its thirst for ever more perfect justice.”³ As the result of an order planned and willed by the love of God, peace has an intrinsic and invincible truth of its own, and corresponds “to an irrepressible yearning and hope dwelling within us.”⁴

4. Seen in this way, peace appears as a heavenly gift and a divine grace which demands at every level the exercise of the highest responsibility: that of conforming human history—in truth, justice, freedom and love—to the divine order. Whenever there is a loss of fidelity to the transcendent order, and a loss of respect for that “grammar” of dialogue which is the universal moral law written on human hearts,⁵ whenever the integral development of the person and the protection of his fundamental rights are hindered or denied, whenever countless

people are forced to endure intolerable injustices and inequalities, how can we hope that the good of peace will be realized? The essential elements which make up the truth of that good are missing. Saint Augustine described peace as “*tranquillitas ordinis*,”⁶ the tranquility of order. By this, he meant a situation which ultimately enables the truth about man to be fully respected and realized.

5. Who and what, then, can prevent the coming of peace? Sacred Scripture, in its very first book, Genesis, points to the lie told at the very beginning of history by the animal with a forked tongue, whom the Evangelist John calls “the father of lies” (John 8:44). Lying is also one of the sins spoken of in the final chapter of the last book of the Bible, Revelation, which bars liars from the heavenly Jerusalem: “outside are ... all who love falsehood” (22:15). Lying is linked to the tragedy of sin and its perverse consequences, which have had, and continue to have, devastating effects on the lives of individuals and nations. We need but think of the events of the past century, when aberrant ideological and political systems willfully twisted the truth and brought about the exploitation and murder of an appalling number of men and women, wiping out entire families and communities. After experiences like these, how can we fail to be seriously concerned about lies in our

² No. 77.

³ Ibid., 78.

⁴ John Paul II, “Message for the 2004 World Day of Peace,” 9.

⁵ Cf. John Paul II, “Address to the Fiftieth General Assembly of the United Nations,” (5 October 1995), No. 3.

⁶ “*De Civitate Dei*,” XIX, 13.

own time, lies which are the framework for menacing scenarios of death in many parts of the world. Any authentic search for peace must begin with the realization that the problem of truth and untruth is the concern of every man and woman; it is decisive for the peaceful future of our planet.

6. Peace is an irrepressible yearning present in the heart of each person, regardless of his or her particular cultural identity. Consequently, everyone should feel committed to service of this great good, and should strive to prevent any form of untruth from poisoning relationships. All people are members of one and the same family. An extreme exaltation of differences clashes with this fundamental truth. We need to regain an awareness that we share a common destiny which is ultimately transcendent, so as to maximize our historical and cultural differences, not in opposition to, but in cooperation with, people belonging to other cultures. These simple truths are what make peace possible; they are easily understood whenever we listen to our own hearts with pure intentions. Peace thus comes to be seen in a new light: not as the mere absence of war, but as a harmonious coexistence of individual citizens within a society governed by justice, one in which the good is also achieved, to the extent possible, for each of them. The truth of peace calls upon everyone to cultivate productive and sincere relationships; it encourages

them to seek out and to follow the paths of forgiveness and reconciliation, to be transparent in their dealings with others, and to be faithful to their word. In a particular way, the followers of Christ, recognizing the insidious presence of evil and the need for that liberation brought by the divine Master, look to him with confidence, in the knowledge that “he committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips” (1 Peter 2:22; cf. Isaiah 53:9). Jesus defined himself as the Truth in person, and, in addressing the seer of the Book of Revelation, he states his complete aversion to “every one who loves and practices falsehood” (Revelation 22:15). He has disclosed the full truth about humanity and about human history. The power of his grace makes it possible to live “in” and “by” truth, since he alone is completely true and faithful. Jesus is the truth which gives us peace.

7. The truth of peace must also let its beneficial light shine even amid the tragedy of war. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, in the Pastoral Constitution “*Gaudium et Spes*,” pointed out that “not everything automatically becomes permissible between hostile parties once war has regrettably commenced.”⁷ As a means of limiting the devastating consequences of war as much as possible, especially for civilians, the international community has created an

⁷ No. 79.

international humanitarian law. In a variety of situations and in different settings, the Holy See has expressed its support for this humanitarian law, and has called for it to be respected and promptly implemented, out of the conviction that the truth of peace exists even in the midst of war. International humanitarian law ought to be considered as one of the finest and most effective expressions of the intrinsic demands of the truth of peace. Precisely for this reason, respect for that law must be considered binding on all peoples. Its value must be appreciated and its correct application ensured; it must also be brought up to date by precise norms applicable to the changing scenarios of today's armed conflicts and the use of ever newer and more sophisticated weapons.

8. Here I wish to express gratitude to the international organizations and to all those who are daily engaged in the application of international humanitarian law. Nor can I fail to mention the many soldiers engaged in the delicate work of resolving conflicts and restoring the necessary conditions for peace. I wish to remind them of the words of the Second Vatican Council: "All those who enter the military in service to their country should look upon themselves as guardians of the security and freedom of their fellow-countrymen, and, in carrying out this duty properly, they too contribute to

the establishment of peace."⁸ On this demanding front the Catholic Church's military ordinariates carry out their pastoral activity: I encourage both the military Ordinaries and military chaplains to be, in every situation and context, faithful heralds of the truth of peace.

9. Nowadays, the truth of peace continues to be dramatically compromised and rejected by terrorism, whose criminal threats and attacks leave the world in a state of fear and insecurity. My predecessors Paul VI and John Paul II frequently pointed out the awful responsibility borne by terrorists, while at the same time condemning their senseless and deadly strategies. These are often the fruit of a tragic and disturbing nihilism which Pope John Paul II described in these words: "Those who kill by acts of terrorism actually despair of humanity, of life, of the future. In their view, everything is to be hated and destroyed."⁹ Not only nihilism, but also religious fanaticism, today often labeled fundamentalism, can inspire and encourage terrorist thinking and activity. From the beginning, John Paul II was aware of the explosive danger represented by fanatical fundamentalism, and he condemned it unsparingly, while warning against attempts to impose, rather than to propose for others freely to accept,

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Message for the 2002 World Day of Peace, 6.

one's own convictions about the truth. As he wrote: "To try to impose on others by violent means what we consider to be the truth is an offense against the dignity of the human being, and ultimately an offense against God in whose image he is made."¹⁰

10. Looked at closely, nihilism and the fundamentalism of which we are speaking share an erroneous relationship to truth: the nihilist denies the very existence of truth, while the fundamentalist claims to be able to impose it by force. Despite their different origins and cultural backgrounds, both show a dangerous contempt for human beings and human life, and ultimately for God himself. Indeed, this shared tragic outcome results from a distortion of the full truth about God: nihilism denies God's existence and his provident presence in history, while fanatical fundamentalism disfigures his loving and merciful countenance, replacing him with idols made in its own image. In analyzing the causes of the contemporary phenomenon of terrorism, consideration should be given, not only to its political and social causes, but also to its deeper cultural, religious and ideological motivations.

11. In view of the risks which humanity is facing in our time, all Catholics in every part of the world have a duty to proclaim and embody ever more fully

the "Gospel of Peace," and to show that acknowledgment of the full truth of God is the first, indispensable condition for consolidating the truth of peace. God is Love which saves, a loving Father who wants to see his children look upon one another as brothers and sisters, working responsibly to place their various talents at the service of the common good of the human family. God is the unfailing source of the hope which gives meaning to personal and community life. God, and God alone, brings to fulfillment every work of good and of peace. History has amply demonstrated that declaring war on God in order to eradicate him from human hearts only leads a fearful and impoverished humanity toward decisions which are ultimately futile. This realization must impel believers in Christ to become convincing witnesses of the God who is inseparably truth and love, placing themselves at the service of peace in broad cooperation with other Christians, the followers of other religions and with all men and women of good will.

12. Looking at the present world situation, we can note with satisfaction certain signs of hope in the work of building peace. I think, for example, of the decrease in the number of armed conflicts. Here we are speaking of a few, very tentative steps forward along the path of peace, yet ones which even now are able to hold out a future of greater serenity, particularly for the

¹⁰ Ibid.

suffering people of Palestine, the land of Jesus, and for those living in some areas of Africa and Asia, who have waited for years for the positive conclusion of the ongoing processes of pacification and reconciliation. These are reassuring signs which need to be confirmed and consolidated by tireless cooperation and activity, above all on the part of the international community and its agencies charged with preventing conflicts and providing a peaceful solution to those in course.

13. All this must not, however, lead to a naive optimism. It must not be forgotten that, tragically, violent fratricidal conflicts and devastating wars still continue to sow tears and death in vast parts of the world. Situations exist where conflict, hidden like flame beneath ashes, can flare up anew and cause immense destruction. Those authorities who, rather than making every effort to promote peace, incite their citizens to hostility towards other nations, bear a heavy burden of responsibility: in regions particularly at risk, they jeopardize the delicate balance achieved at the cost of patient negotiations and thus help make the future of humanity more uncertain and ominous. What can be said, too, about those governments which count on nuclear arms as a means of ensuring the security of their countries? Along with countless persons of good will, one can state that this point of view is not only baneful but also completely fallacious. In a nuclear war there would be no

victors, only victims. The truth of peace requires that all—whether those governments which openly or secretly possess nuclear arms, or those planning to acquire them—agree to change their course by clear and firm decisions, and strive for a progressive and concerted nuclear disarmament. The resources which would be saved could then be employed in projects of development capable of benefiting all their people, especially the poor.

14. In this regard, one can only note with dismay the evidence of a continuing growth in military expenditure and the flourishing arms trade, while the political and juridic process established by the international community for promoting disarmament is bogged down in general indifference. How can there ever be a future of peace when investments are still made in the production of arms and in research aimed at developing new ones? It can only be hoped that the international community will find the wisdom and courage to take up once more, jointly and with renewed conviction, the process of disarmament, and thus concretely ensure the right to peace enjoyed by every individual and every people. By their commitment to safeguarding the good of peace, the various agencies of the international community will regain the authority needed to make their initiatives credible and effective.

15. The first to benefit from a decisive choice for disarmament will be the poor countries, which rightly demand, after having heard so many promises, the concrete implementation of their right to development. That right was solemnly reaffirmed in the recent General Assembly of the United Nations Organization, which this year celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of its foundation. The Catholic Church, while confirming her confidence in this international body, calls for the institutional and operative renewal which would enable it to respond to the changed needs of the present time, characterized by the vast phenomenon of globalization. The United Nations Organization must become a more efficient instrument for promoting the values of justice, solidarity and peace in the world. For her part, the Church, in fidelity to the mission she has received from her Founder, is committed to proclaiming everywhere “the Gospel of peace.” In the firm conviction that she offers an indispensable service to all those who strive to promote peace, she reminds everyone that, if peace is to be authentic and lasting, it must be built on the bedrock of the truth about God and the truth about man. This truth alone can create a sensitivity to justice and openness to love and solidarity, while encouraging everyone to work for a truly free and harmonious human family. The foundations of authentic peace rest on the truth about God and man.

16. At the conclusion of this Message, I would like to address a particular word to all believers in Christ, inviting them once again to be attentive and generous disciples of the Lord. When we hear the Gospel, dear brothers and sisters, we learn to build peace on the truth of a daily life inspired by the commandment of love. Every community should undertake an extensive process of education and witness aimed at making everyone more aware of the need for a fuller appreciation of the truth of peace. At the same time I ask for an increase of prayers, since peace is above all a gift of God, a gift to be implored incessantly. By God’s help, our proclamation and witness to the truth of peace will be all the more convincing and illuminating. With confidence and filial abandonment let us lift up our eyes to Mary, Mother of the Prince of Peace. At the beginning of this New Year, let us ask her to help all God’s People, wherever they may be, to work for peace and to be guided by the light of the truth that sets man free (cf. John 8:32). Through Mary’s intercession, may all mankind grow in esteem for this fundamental good and strive to make it ever more present in our world, and, in this way, to offer a safer and more serene future to generations yet to come.

From the Vatican, 8 December 2005.

BENEDICTUS PP. XVI

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