



# The Holy See

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**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS  
POPE JOHN PAUL II  
FOR THE CELEBRATION  
OF THE WORLD DAY OF PEACE**

*1 JANUARY 1999*

## **RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS: THE SECRET OF TRUE PEACE**

1. In my first Encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, addressed almost twenty years ago to all men and women of good will, I stressed the importance of respect for human rights. Peace flourishes when these rights are fully respected, but when they are violated what comes is war, which causes other still graver violations.(1)

At the beginning of a new year, the last before the Great Jubilee, I would like to dwell once more on this crucially important theme with all of you, the men and women of every part of the world, with you, the political leaders and religious guides of peoples, with you, who love peace and wish to consolidate it in the world.

Looking towards the World Day of Peace, let me state the conviction which I very much want to share with you: when the promotion of the dignity of the person is the guiding principle, and when the search for the common good is the overriding commitment, then solid and lasting foundations for building peace are laid. But when human rights are ignored or scorned, and when the pursuit of individual interests unjustly prevails over the common good, then the seeds of instability, rebellion and violence are inevitably sown.

### ***Respect for Human Dignity, the Heritage of Humanity***

2. The dignity of the human person is a transcendent value, always recognized as such by those who sincerely search for the truth. Indeed, the whole of human history should be interpreted in the light of this certainty. Every person, created in the image and likeness of God (cf. *Gen 1:26-28*)

and therefore radically oriented towards the Creator, is constantly in relationship with those possessed of the same dignity. To promote the good of the individual is thus to serve the common good, which is that point where rights and duties converge and reinforce one another.

The history of our time has shown in a tragic way the danger which results from forgetting the truth about the human person. Before our eyes we have the results of ideologies such as Marxism, Nazism and Fascism, and also of myths like racial superiority, nationalism and ethnic exclusivism. No less pernicious, though not always as obvious, are the effects of materialistic consumerism, in which the exaltation of the individual and the selfish satisfaction of personal aspirations become the ultimate goal of life. In this outlook, the negative effects on others are considered completely irrelevant. Instead it must be said again that no affront to human dignity can be ignored, whatever its source, whatever actual form it takes and wherever it occurs.

### ***The Universality and Indivisibility of Human Rights***

3. The year 1998 has marked the fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration was intentionally linked to the United Nations Charter, since it shares a common inspiration. As its fundamental premise, it affirms that the recognition of the innate dignity of all members of the human family, as also the equality and inalienability of their rights, is the foundation of liberty, justice and peace in the world.(2) All the subsequent international documents on human rights declare this truth anew, recognizing and affirming that human rights stem from the inherent dignity and worth of the human person.(3)

The Universal Declaration is clear: it acknowledges the rights which it proclaims but does not confer them, since they are inherent in the human person and in human dignity. Consequently, no one can legitimately deprive another person, whoever they may be, of these rights, since this would do violence to their nature. All human beings, without exception, are equal in dignity. For the same reason, these rights apply to every stage of life and to every political, social, economic and cultural situation. Together they form a single whole, directed unambiguously towards the promotion of every aspect of the good of both the person and society.

Human rights are traditionally grouped into two broad categories, including on the one hand civil and political rights and on the other economic, social and cultural rights. Both categories, although to different degrees, are guaranteed by international agreements. All human rights are in fact closely connected, being the expression of different dimensions of a single subject, the human person. The integral promotion of every category of human rights is the true guarantee of full respect for each individual right.

Defence of the universality and indivisibility of human rights is essential for the construction of a peaceful society and for the overall development of individuals, peoples and nations. To affirm the universality and indivisibility of rights is not to exclude legitimate cultural and political differences in

the exercise of individual rights, provided that in every case the levels set for the whole of humanity by the Universal Declaration are respected.

With these fundamental presuppositions clearly in mind, I would now like to identify certain specific rights which appear to be particularly exposed to more or less open violation today.

### ***The Right to Life***

4. The first of these is the basic right to life. Human life is sacred and inviolable from conception to its natural end. "Thou shalt not kill" is the divine commandment which states the limit beyond which it is never licit to go. "The deliberate decision to deprive an innocent human being of life is always morally evil".(4)

The right to life is inviolable. This involves a positive choice, a choice for life. The development of a culture of this kind embraces all the circumstances of life and ensures the promotion of human dignity in every situation. A genuine culture of life, just as it guarantees to the unborn the right to come into the world, in the same way protects the newly born, especially girls, from the crime of infanticide. Equally, it assures the handicapped that they can fully develop their capacities, and ensures adequate care for the sick and the elderly.

Recent developments in the field of genetic engineering present a profoundly disquieting challenge. In order that scientific research in this area may be at the service of the person, it must be accompanied at every stage by careful ethical reflection, which will bring about adequate legal norms safeguarding the integrity of human life. Life can never be downgraded to the level of a thing.

To choose life involves rejecting every form of violence: the violence of poverty and hunger, which afflicts so many human beings; the violence of armed conflict; the violence of criminal trafficking in drugs and arms; the violence of mindless damage to the natural environment.(5) In every circumstance, the right to life must be promoted and safeguarded with appropriate legal and political guarantees, for no offence against the right to life, against the dignity of any single person, is ever unimportant.

### ***Religious Freedom, the Heart of Human Rights***

5. Religion expresses the deepest aspirations of the human person, shapes people's vision of the world and affects their relationships with others: basically it offers the answer to the question of the true meaning of life, both personal and communal. Religious freedom therefore constitutes the very heart of human rights. Its inviolability is such that individuals must be recognized as having the right even to change their religion, if their conscience so demands. People are obliged to follow their conscience in all circumstances and cannot be forced to act against it.(6) Precisely for this

reason, no one can be compelled to accept a particular religion, whatever the circumstances or motives.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes that the right to religious freedom includes the right to manifest personal beliefs, whether individually or with others, in public or in private.(7) In spite of this, there still exist today places where the right to gather for worship is either not recognized or is limited to the members of one religion alone. This grave violation of one of the fundamental rights of the person is a source of enormous suffering for believers. When a State grants special status to one religion, this must not be to the detriment of the others. Yet it is common knowledge that there are nations in which individuals, families and entire groups are still being discriminated against and marginalized because of their religious beliefs.

Nor should we pass over in silence another problem indirectly linked to religious freedom. It sometimes happens that increasing tensions develop between communities or peoples of different religious convictions and cultures, which, because of the strong passions involved, turn into violent conflict. Recourse to violence in the name of religious belief is a perversion of the very teachings of the major religions. I reaffirm here what many religious figures have repeated so often: the use of violence can never claim a religious justification, nor can it foster the growth of true religious feeling.

### ***The Right to Participate***

6. All citizens have the right to participate in the life of their community: this is a conviction which is generally shared today. But this right means nothing when the democratic process breaks down because of corruption and favouritism, which not only obstruct legitimate sharing in the exercise of power but also prevent people from benefitting equally from community assets and services, to which everyone has a right. Even elections can be manipulated in order to ensure the victory of certain parties or persons. This is an affront to democracy and has serious consequences, because citizens have not only the right but also the responsibility to participate: when they are prevented from exercising this responsibility, they lose hope of playing any effective role and succumb to an attitude of passive indifference. The development of a sound democratic system then becomes practically impossible.

In recent times various measures have been adopted to ensure legitimate elections in States which are struggling to move from a totalitarian form of government to a democratic one. However useful and effective these may be in emergencies, such initiatives cannot dispense from the effort to create in the citizens a basis of shared convictions, thanks to which manipulation of the democratic process would be rejected once and for all.

In the context of the international community, nations and peoples have the right to share in the decisions which often profoundly modify their way of life. The technical details of certain economic

problems give rise to the tendency to restrict the discussions about them to limited circles, with the consequent danger that political and financial power is concentrated in a small number of governments and special interest groups. The pursuit of the national and international common good requires the effective exercise, even in the economic sphere, of the right of all people to share in the decisions which affect them.

### ***A Particularly Serious Form of Discrimination***

7. One of the most tragic forms of discrimination is the denial to ethnic groups and national minorities of the fundamental right to exist as such. This is done by suppressing them or brutally forcing them to move, or by attempting to weaken their ethnic identity to such an extent that they are no longer distinguishable. Can we remain silent in the face of such grave crimes against humanity? No effort must be judged too great when it is a question of putting an end to such abuses, which are violations of human dignity.

A positive sign of the growing willingness of States to recognize their responsibility to protect victims of such crimes and to commit themselves to preventing them is the recent initiative of a United Nations Diplomatic Conference: it specifically approved the Statute of an International Criminal Court, the task of which it will be to identify guilt and to punish those responsible for crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity and crimes of war and aggression. This new institution, if built upon a sound legal foundation, could gradually contribute to ensuring on a world scale the effective protection of human rights.

### ***The Right to Self-Fulfilment***

8. Every human being has innate abilities waiting to be developed. At stake here is the full actualization of one's own person and the appropriate insertion into one's social environment. In order that this may take place, it is necessary above all to provide adequate education to those who are just beginning their lives: their future success depends on this.

From this perspective, how can we not be concerned when we see that in some of the poorest regions of the world educational opportunities are actually decreasing, especially in the area of primary education? This is sometimes due to the economic situation of the particular country, which prevents teachers from receiving a proper salary. In other cases, money seems to be available for prestigious projects and for secondary education, but not for primary schools. When educational opportunities are limited, particularly for young girls, there will surely arise discriminatory structures which adversely affect the overall development of society. The world could find itself divided according to a new criterion: on the one side, States and individuals endowed with advanced technologies; on the other, countries and people with extremely limited knowledge and abilities. As one can easily guess, this would simply reinforce the already acute economic inequalities existing not only between States but also within them. In developing

countries, education and professional training must be a primary concern, just as they are in the urban and rural renewal programmes of more economically advanced peoples.

Another fundamental right, upon which depends the attainment of a decent level of living, is the right to work. Otherwise how can people obtain food, clothing, a home, health care and the many other necessities of life? The lack of work, however, is a serious problem today: countless people in many parts of the world find themselves caught up in the devastating reality of unemployment. It is urgently necessary on the part of everyone, and particularly on the part of those who exercise political or economic power, that everything possible be done to resolve this difficult situation. Emergency interventions, necessary as they are, are not enough in cases of unemployment, illness or similar circumstances which are beyond the control of the individual,(8) but efforts must also be made to enable the poor to take responsibility for their own livelihood and to be freed from a system of demeaning assistance programmes.

### ***Global Progress in Solidarity***

9. The rapid advance towards the globalization of economic and financial systems also illustrates the urgent need to establish who is responsible for guaranteeing the global common good and the exercise of economic and social rights. The free market by itself cannot do this, because in fact there are many human needs which have no place in the market. "Even prior to the logic of a fair exchange of goods and the forms of justice appropriate to it, there exists something which is due to man because he is man, by reason of his lofty dignity".(9)

The effects of the recent economic and financial crises have had heavy consequences for countless people, reduced to conditions of extreme poverty. Many of them had only just reached a position which allowed them to look to the future with optimism. Through no fault of their own, they have seen these hopes cruelly dashed, with tragic results for themselves and their children. And how can we ignore the effects of fluctuations in the financial markets? We urgently need a new vision of global progress in solidarity, which will include an overall and sustainable development of society, so as to enable all people to realize their potential.

In this context, I make a pressing appeal to all those with responsibility for financial relations on the worldwide level. I ask them to make a sincere effort to find a solution to the frightening problem of the international debt of the poorest nations. International financial institutions have initiated concrete steps in this regard which merit appreciation. I appeal to all those involved in this problem, especially the more affluent nations, to provide the support necessary to ensure the full success of this initiative. An immediate and vigorous effort is needed, as we look to the year 2000, to ensure that the greatest possible number of nations will be able to extricate themselves from a now intolerable situation. Dialogue among the institutions involved, if prompted by a sincere willingness to reach agreement, will lead—I am certain—to a satisfactory and definitive solution. In this way, lasting development will become a possibility for those Nations facing the greatest

difficulties, and the millennium now before us will become for them too a time of renewed hope.

### ***Responsibility for the Environment***

10. The promotion of human dignity is linked to the right to a healthy environment, since this right highlights the dynamics of the relationship between the individual and society. A body of international, regional and national norms on the environment is gradually giving juridic form to this right. But juridic measures by themselves are not sufficient. The danger of serious damage to land and sea, and to the climate, flora and fauna, calls for a profound change in modern civilization's typical consumer life-style, particularly in the richer countries. Nor can we underestimate another risk, even if it is a less drastic one: people who live in poverty in rural areas can be driven by necessity to exploit beyond sustainable limits the little land which they have at their disposal. Special training aimed at teaching them how to harmonize the cultivation of the land with respect for the environment needs to be encouraged.

The world's present and future depend on the safeguarding of creation, because of the endless interdependence between human beings and their environment. Placing human well-being at the centre of concern for the environment is actually the surest way of safeguarding creation; this in fact stimulates the responsibility of the individual with regard to natural resources and their judicious use.

### ***The Right to Peace***

11. In a sense, promoting the right to peace ensures respect for all other rights, since it encourages the building of a society in which structures of power give way to structures of cooperation, with a view to the common good. Recent history clearly shows the failure of recourse to violence as a means for resolving political and social problems. War destroys, it does not build up; it weakens the moral foundations of society and creates further divisions and long-lasting tensions. And yet the news continues to speak of wars and armed conflicts, and of their countless victims. How often have my Predecessors and I myself called for an end to these horrors! I shall continue to do so until it is understood that war is the failure of all true humanism.(10)

Thanks be to God, steps have been taken in some regions towards the consolidation of peace. Great credit must go to those courageous political leaders who are resolved to continue negotiations even when the situation seems impossible. But at the same time how can we not denounce the massacres still taking place in other regions, with the uprooting of entire peoples from their lands and the destruction of homes and crops? Mindful of the innumerable victims, I call on the leaders of the Nations and on all people of good will to come to the aid of those involved—especially in Africa—in cruel conflicts, sometimes prompted by external economic interests, and to help them to bring these conflicts to an end. A concrete step in this regard is certainly the eradication of trafficking in arms destined for countries at war, and the support of the

leaders of those peoples in their quest for the path of dialogue. This is the path worthy of the human person, this is the path of peace!

I think with sorrow of those living and growing up against a background of war, of those who have known nothing but conflict and violence. Those who survive will carry the scars of this terrible experience for the rest of their lives. And what shall we say about children forced to fight? Can we ever accept that lives which are just beginning should be ruined in this way? Trained to kill and often compelled to do so, these children cannot fail to have serious problems in their future insertion into civil society. Their education is interrupted and their chances of employment are stifled: what a terrible legacy for their future! Children need peace; they have a right to it.

To the thought of these children I also wish to add a mention of the children who are victims of land mines and other devices of war. Despite efforts already being made to remove mines, we are now witnessing an unbelievable and inhuman paradox: with disregard for the clearly expressed will of governments and peoples to put a final end to the use of such an insidious weapon, mines are still being laid even in places which had already been cleared.

Seeds of war are also being spread by the massive and uncontrolled proliferation of small arms and light weapons, which it seems are passing freely from one area of conflict to another, increasing violence along the way. Governments must adopt appropriate measures for controlling the production, sale, importation and exportation of these instruments of death. Only in this way will it be possible to deal effectively and completely with the problem of the massive illegal traffic in arms.

### ***A Culture of Human Rights, the Responsibility of All***

12. It is not possible to discuss this topic more fully here. I would however like to emphasize that no human right is safe if we fail to commit ourselves to safeguarding all of them. When the violation of any fundamental human right is accepted without reaction, all other rights are placed at risk. It is therefore essential that there should be a global approach to the subject of human rights and a serious commitment to defend them. Only when a culture of human rights which respects different traditions becomes an integral part of humanity's moral patrimony shall we be able to look to the future with serene confidence.

In effect, how could there be war if every human right were respected? Complete observance of human rights is the surest road to establishing solid relations between States. The culture of human rights cannot fail to be a culture of peace. Every violation of human rights carries within it the seeds of possible conflict. My Venerable Predecessor, the Servant of God Pius XII, at the end of the Second World War asked the question: "If one people is crushed to death by force, who will dare promise the rest of the world security in a lasting peace?".(11)



The promotion of a culture of human rights which engages consciences requires all sectors of society to work together. I would like to mention specifically the role of the mass media, which are so important in forming public opinion, and consequently in influencing people's behaviour. Just as we could not deny their responsibility in cases of the violation of human rights arising from any exaltation of violence on their part, so it is right to give them credit for the noble initiatives of dialogue and solidarity which have come about thanks to their insistence on promoting mutual understanding and peace.

### ***A Time of Decision, a Time of Hope***

13. The new millennium is close at hand, and its approach has filled the hearts of many with hope for a more just and fraternal world. This is an aspiration which can, and indeed must, become a reality!

It is in this context that I now address you, dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, who in all parts of the world take the Gospel as the pattern of your lives: become heralds of human dignity! Faith teaches us that every person has been created in the image and likeness of God. Even when man refuses it, the Heavenly Father's love remains steadfast; his is a love without limits. He sent his Son Jesus to redeem every individual, restoring each one's full human dignity.(12) With this in mind, how can we exclude anyone from our care? Rather, we must recognize Christ in the poorest and the most marginalized, those whom the Eucharist—which is communion in the body and blood of Christ given up for us—commits us to serve.(13) As the parable of the rich man, who will remain for ever without a name, and the poor man called Lazarus clearly shows, “in the stark contrast between the insensitive rich man and the poor in need of everything, God is on the latter's side”.(14) We too must be on this same side.

The third and final year of preparation for the Jubilee is marked by a spiritual pilgrimage to the Father's house: all are invited to walk the path of authentic conversion, which involves rejecting evil and making a positive choice for good. On the threshold of the year 2000, it is our duty to renew our commitment to safeguarding the dignity of the poor and the marginalized, and to recognize in a practical way the rights of those who have no rights. Let us raise our voices on their behalf, by living in its fullness the mission which Christ entrusted to his disciples! This is the spirit of the now imminent Jubilee.(15)

Jesus taught us to call God “Father”, *Abba*, thus revealing to us the depth of our relationship with him. Infinite and eternal is his love for every person and for all humanity. Eloquent in this regard are God's words found in the book of the Prophet Isaiah:

“Can a woman forget her baby at the breast,  
or fail to cherish the child of her womb?  
Yet even if these forget,

I will never forget you.  
 See, upon the palms of my hands  
 I have written your name” (49:15-16).

Let us accept the invitation to share this love! In it is found the secret of respect for the rights of every woman and every man. The dawn of the new millennium will thus find us more ready to build peace together.

*From the Vatican, 8 December 1998.*

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(1) Cf. *Redemptor Hominis* (4 March 1979), 17: AAS 71 (1979), 296.

(2) Cf. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Preamble.

(3) Cf. in particular the *Vienna Declaration* (25 June 1993), Preamble, 2.

(4) John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae* (25 March 1995), 57: AAS 87 (1995), 465.

(5) Cf. *ibid.*, 10, *loc. cit.*, 412.

(6) Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis Humanae*, 3.

(7) Cf. Article 18.

(8) Cf. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Article 25, 1.

(9) John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus* (1 May 1991), 34: AAS 83 (1991), 836.

(10) Cf. in this regard the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2307-2317.

(11) Address to a group of representatives from the Congress of the United States of America (21 August 1945): *Discorsi e Radiomessaggi di Sua Santità Pio XII*, VII (1945-1946), 141.

(12) Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptor Hominis* (4 March 1979), 13-14: AAS 71 (1979), 282-286.

(13) Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1397.

(14) John Paul II, Angelus Address, 27 September 1998, 1: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 28-29 September 1998, p. 5.

(15) Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (10 November 1994), 49-51: AAS 87 (1995), 35-36.

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