



The Holy See

SOLEMNITY OF MARY, MOTHER OF GOD
AND 42nd WORLD DAY OF PEACE

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

St Peter's Basilica

Thursday, 1st January 2009

Venerable Brothers,

Mr Ambassadors,

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

On the first day of the year, divine Providence brings us together for a celebration that moves us each time because of the riches and beauty of its correspondence: the civil New Year converges with the culmination of the Octave of Christmas on which the divine Motherhood of Mary is celebrated, and this gathering is summed up felicitously in the World Day of Peace. In the light of Christ's Nativity, I am pleased to address my best wishes to each one for the year that has just begun. I address them in particular to Cardinal Renato Raffaele Martino and his collaborators of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, with special gratitude for their precious service. I also address them to the Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, and to the entire Secretariat of State; and likewise, with deep cordiality, I address them to the large number of Ambassadors present today. My good wishes echo the good wishes that the Lord himself has just addressed to us in the liturgy of the Word. A Word which, starting with the event in Bethlehem, recalled in its historical actuality by the Gospel of Luke (2: 16-21) and reinterpreted in all its saving importance by the Apostle Paul (Gal 4: 4-7), becomes a Blessing for the People of God and for all humanity.

Thus the ancient Jewish tradition of blessing is brought to completion (Nm 6: 22-27): the priests of Israel blessed the people by putting the Lord's Name upon them: "so shall they put my name upon the people of Israel". With a triple formula present in the First Reading the sacred Name was invoked upon the faithful three times, as a wish for grace and peace. This remote custom brings us back to an essential reality: to be able to walk on the way of peace, men and women and peoples need to be illumined by the "Face" of God and to be blessed by his "Name". Precisely this came about definitively with the Incarnation: the coming of the Son of God in our flesh and in

history brought an irrevocable blessing, a light that is never to be extinguished and offers believers and people of good-will alike the possibility of building the civilization of love and peace.

The Second Vatican Council said in this regard that "by his Incarnation, he, the Son of God, has in a certain way united himself with each man" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 22). This union confirms the original design of a humanity created in the "image and likeness" of God. In fact, the Incarnate Word is the one, perfect and consubstantial image of the invisible God. Jesus Christ is the perfect man. "Human nature", the Council reaffirms: "by the very fact that it was assumed... in him, has been raised in us also to a dignity beyond compare" (*ibid.*). For this reason the earthly history of Jesus that culminated in the Paschal Mystery is the beginning of a new world, because he truly inaugurated a new humanity, ever and only with Christ's grace, capable of bringing about a peaceful "revolution". This revolution was not an ideological but spiritual revolution, not utopian but real, and for this reason in need of infinite patience, sometimes of very long periods, avoiding any short cuts and taking the hardest path: the path of the development of responsibility in consciences.

Dear friends, this is the Gospel way to peace, the way that the Bishop of Rome is called to repropose with constancy every time that he sets his hand to writing the annual *Message for the World Day of Peace*. In taking this path it is at times necessary to review aspects and problems that have already been faced but that are so important that they constantly require fresh attention. This is the case of the theme I have chosen for the *Message this year*: "Fighting poverty to build peace". This is a theme that lends itself to a dual order of considerations which I can only mention briefly here. On the one hand the poverty Jesus chose and proposed and on the other, the poverty to be combated in order to bring the world greater justice and solidarity.

The first aspect acquires its ideal context during these days in the Christmas Season. The Birth of Jesus in Bethlehem reveals to us that God chose poverty for himself in coming among us. The scene that the shepherds were the first to see and that confirmed the angel's announcement to them, was a stable in which Mary and Joseph had found shelter, and a manger in which the Virgin had laid the newborn Child wrapped in swaddling clothes (cf. Lk 2: 7, 12, 16). *God chose this poverty*. He wanted to be born thus but we can immediately add: he wanted to live and also to die in this condition. Why? St Alphonsus Maria Liguori explains it in a Christmas carol that is known all over Italy: "You, Creator of the world had no clothes, no fire, O my Lord. My dear Divine Child, how I love this poverty, since for love you made yourself poorer still". This is the answer: love for us impelled Jesus not only to make himself man, but also to make himself poor. Along these same lines we can quote St Paul's words in the Second Letter to the Corinthians: "For you are well acquainted", he writes, with "the favour shown you by our Lord Jesus Christ: how for your sake he made himself poor though he was rich, so that you might become rich by his poverty" (8: 9). St Francis of Assisi was an exemplary witness of this poverty chosen for love. The Franciscan charism, in the history of the Church and of Christian civilization, constitutes a widespread trend of evangelical poverty which has done and continues to do such great good for the Church and for

the human family. Returning to St Paul's wonderful synthesis on Jesus, it is significant also for our reflection today that it was inspired in the Apostle precisely while he was urging the Christians of Corinth to be generous in collecting money for the poor. He explains: "I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want" (2 Cor 8: 13).

This is a crucial point that brings us to the second aspect: there is a poverty, a deprivation, which God does not desire and which should be "fought" as the theme of this World Day of Peace says; a poverty that prevents people and families from living as befits their dignity; a poverty that offends justice and equality and that, as such, threatens peaceful co-existence. This negative acceptance also includes all the non-material forms of poverty that are also to be found in the rich and developed societies: marginalization, relational, moral and spiritual poverty (cf. *Message for the World Day of Peace 2009*, n. 2). In *my Message* I wanted once again, following in the wake of my Predecessors, to consider attentively the complex phenomenon of globalization and its relation to widespread poverty. In the face of widespread scourges such as pandemic diseases (*ibid.*, n. 4), child poverty (*ibid.*, n. 5), the food crisis (*ibid.*, n. 7), I have unfortunately had to return to denouncing the unacceptable arms race. On the one hand the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* is being celebrated, and on the other, military expenditure is increasing, thereby violating the *Charter of the United Nations*, which endeavours to reduce this expenditure to the minimum (cf. art. 26). Furthermore, globalization eliminates certain barriers but it can build others (*op. cit. Message for the World Day of Peace 2009*, n. 8). The international community and the individual States must therefore always be alert; they must never lose sight of the dangers of conflict. On the contrary, they must strive to keep the level of solidarity high. The current global financial crisis must be seen in this regard also as a bench test: are we ready to interpret it, in its complexity, as a challenge for the future and not only as an emergency to which we must find short-term solutions? Are we prepared to undertake a profound revision of the prevalent model of development in order to correct it with concerted, far-sighted interventions? In reality, this is required by the state of the planet's ecological health and especially the cultural and moral crisis whose symptoms have been visible for some time in every part of the world, far more than by the immediate financial problems.

Thus it is necessary to seek to establish a "virtuous circle" between the poverty "to be chosen" and the poverty "to be fought". This gives access to a path rich in fruits for humanity's present and future and which could be summarized thus: to fight the evil poverty that oppresses so many men and women and threatens the peace of all, it is necessary to rediscover moderation and solidarity as evangelical, and at the same time universal, values. More practically, it is impossible to combat poverty effectively unless one does what St Paul wrote to the Corinthians, in other words if one does not seek "to create equality", reducing the gap between those who waste the superfluous and those who lack what they need. This entails just and sober decisions, which are moreover made obligatory by the need to administer the earth's limited resources wisely. When he says that Jesus Christ "for [our] sake became poor", St Paul offers an important indication not only from the theological point of view but also at the sociological level; not in the sense that poverty is a value

in itself, but because it is a condition that demonstrates solidarity. When Francis of Assisi stripped himself of his possessions, it was a decision to witness that was inspired in him directly by God, but at the same time it shows everyone the way of trust in Providence. Thus, in the Church, the vow of poverty is the commitment of some, but it reminds all of the need to be detached from material goods and of the primacy of spiritual riches. This is therefore the message for us today: the poverty of Christ's Birth in Bethlehem, as well as being the subject of adoration for Christians, is also a school of life for every man. It teaches us that to fight both material and spiritual poverty, the path to take is the path of solidarity that impelled Jesus to share our human condition.

Dear brothers and sisters, I believe that the Virgin Mary must have asked herself this question several times: why did Jesus choose to be born of a simple, humble girl like me? And then, why did he want to come into the world in a stable and have his first visit from the shepherds of Bethlehem? Mary received her answer in full at the end, having laid in the tomb the Body of Jesus, dead and wrapped in a linen shroud (cf. Lk 23: 53). She must then have fully understood the mystery of the poverty of God. She understood that God made himself poor for our sake, to enrich us with his poverty full of love, to urge us to impede the insatiable greed that sparks conflicts and divisions, to invite us to moderate the mania to possess and thus to be open to reciprocal sharing and acceptance. Let us trustingly address to Mary, Mother of the Son of God who made himself our brother, our prayer that she will help us follow in his footsteps, to fight and overcome poverty, to build true peace, which is *opus iustitiae*. Let us entrust to her the profound desire to live in peace that wells up in the hearts of the vast majority of the Israeli and Palestinian peoples, once again jeopardized by the outbreak of violence on a massive scale in the Gaza Strip, in response to other violent incidents. Even violence, even hatred and distrust are forms of poverty perhaps the most appalling "to fight". May they not get the upper hand! In this regard the Pastors of those Churches, in these distressing days, have made their voices heard. Together with them and their beloved faithful, especially those of the small but fervent parish of Gaza, let us place at Mary's feet our anxieties for the present and our fears for the future, and likewise the well-founded hope that with the wise and far-sighted contribution of all it will not be impossible to listen to one another, to come to one another's help and to give concrete responses to the widespread aspiration to live in peace, safety and dignity. Let us say to Mary: accompany us, heavenly Mother of the Redeemer, throughout the year that begins today, and obtain from God the gift of peace for the Holy Land and for all humanity. Holy Mother of God, pray for us. Amen.