



The Holy See

MEMINISSE IU VAT

ENCYCLICAL OF POPE PIUS XII
ON PRAYERS FOR THE PERSECUTED CHURCH
TO THE VENERABLE BRETHREN, THE PATRIARCHS, PRIMATES,
ARCHBISHOPS, BISHOPS, AND OTHER LOCAL ORDINARIES
IN PEACE AND COMMUNION WITH THE APOSTOLIC SEE

*Venerable Brethren,
Greetings and Apostolic Benediction.*

1. It is helpful to recall, when new dangers threaten Christians and the Church, the Spouse of the Divine Redeemer, that We - like Our Predecessors in bygone days - have turned in prayer to the Virgin Mary, our loving Mother, and have urged the whole flock entrusted to Our care to place itself confidently under her protection.
2. Thus, when the world was rocked by a terrible war, We did not simply preach peace to citizens, peoples, and nations, nor did We merely work to restore to mutual agreement - under the standard of truth, justice, and love - those whom strife had divided. On the contrary, when all human resources and human plans proved ineffective, in many letters of exhortation and in a holy crusade of prayer We invoked heaven's help through the mighty intercession of the great Mother of God, to whose Immaculate Heart We consecrated Ourselves and the whole human race.[1]
3. By now, of course, that war is over, but a just peace does not yet prevail, nor do men live in concord founded on brotherly understanding. For the seeds of war either lurk in hiding or - from time to time - erupt threateningly and hold the hearts of men in frightened suspense, especially since human ingenuity has devised weapons so powerful that they can ravage and sink into general destruction, not only the vanquished, but the victors with them, and all mankind.
4. If we weigh carefully the causes of today's crises and those that are ahead, we shall soon find that human plans, human resources, and human endeavors are futile and will fail when Almighty

God - He who enlightens, commands, and forbids; He who is the source and guarantor of justice, the fountainhead of truth, the basis of all laws - is esteemed but little, denied His proper place, or even completely disregarded. If a house is not built on a solid and sure foundation, it tumbles down; if a mind is not enlightened by the divine light, it strays more or less from the whole truth; if citizens, peoples, and nations are not animated by brotherly love, strife is born, waxes strong, and reaches full growth.

5. It is Christianity, above all others, which teaches the full truth, real justice, and that divine charity which drives away hatred, ill will, and enmity. Christianity has been given charge of these virtues by the Divine Redeemer, who is the way, the truth, and the life,[2] and she must do all in her power to put them to use. Anyone, therefore, who knowingly ignores Christianity - the Catholic Church - or tries to hinder, demean, or undo her, either weakens thereby the very bases of society, or tries to replace them with props not strong enough to support the edifice of human worth, freedom, and well-being.

6. There must, then, be a return to Christian principles if we are to establish a society that is strong, just, and equitable. It is a harmful and reckless policy to do battle with Christianity, for God guarantees, and history testifies, that she shall exist forever. Everyone should realize that a nation cannot be well organized or well ordered with religion.

7. As a matter of fact, religion contributes more to good, just, and orderly life than it could if it had been conceived for no other purpose than to supply and augment the necessities of mortal existence. For religion bids men live in charity, justice, and obedience to law; it condemns and outlaws vice; it incites citizens to the pursuit of virtue and thereby rules and moderates their public and private conduct. Religion teaches mankind that a better distribution of wealth should be had, not by violence or revolution, but by reasonable regulations, so that the proletarian classes which do not yet enjoy life's necessities or advantages may be raised to a more fitting status without social strife.

8. As We reflect on this subject, from a vantage point that enables Us to transcend the tides of human passion and to love as a father the people of every race, two matters come to mind which cause Us great worry and anxiety.

9. The first of these is that there are some countries in which Christian principles and the Catholic religion are not given their proper place. Great numbers of the citizens, especially from the ranks of the uneducated, are easily won over by widely published errors, particularly since these are often colored with the appearances of truth. The seductive allurements of vice, which tend to corrupt minds through all sorts of publications, motion pictures, and television performances, are a special menace to unsuspecting young people.

10. There are writers and publishers whose goal is not to turn their readers to truth, virtue, and

wholesome entertainment, but to stir up vicious and violent appetites solely for the sake of gain, and even to assail and defile with lies, calumnies, and accusations all that is holy, beautiful, and noble. Unfortunately, the truth is often distorted; lies and scandals are published abroad. The obvious result is damage to civil society and harm to the Church.

11. And secondly, We are aware - to the great sorrow of Our fatherly heart - that the Catholic Church, in both its Latin and Oriental rites, is beset in many lands by such persecutions that the clergy and faithful, if not in so many words, certainly in fact, are confronted with this dilemma: to give up public profession and propagation of their faith, or to suffer penalties, even very serious ones. As a result, many bishops have been driven from their sees or so impeded that they cannot freely exercise their ministry; they have even been cast into prison or exiled. And so with rash daring men undertake to fulfill the words: "I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered."^[3]

12. In addition, newspapers, magazines, and other publications put out by Catholics have been almost completely silenced, as if truth were subject to the exclusive control and discretion of political rulers, and as though divine and human learning and the liberal arts need not be free if they are to flourish for the public and common good.

13. Schools once conducted by Catholics have been interdicted and closed; those that replace them either teach nothing at all of God and religion, or - as is more common - expound and popularize the lethal tenets of atheism.

14. Missionaries who have left their homes and dear native lands and suffered many serious discomforts in order to bring the light and the strength of the gospel to others, have been driven from many regions as menaces and evil-doers, so that the clergy who remain, since they are too few in relation to the region's population, and are also hated and persecuted in their turn, cannot adequately provide for the needs of the faithful.

15. The Church's rights, including the right, under the mandate of the Holy See, to choose and consecrate bishops who will lawfully govern the Christian flock, have been trod under foot, to the great loss of the faithful, as if the Catholic Church were a creature of a single nation, dependent on its civil authority, and not a divine institution extending to all peoples.

16. But despite these grave and distressing problems, a thought comes to Us which gives Our paternal heart great comfort. It is this: We know that most of the faithful, of both the Latin and the Oriental rites, are practicing and defending their ancestral faith tenaciously - despite the fact that they have not the help and assistance which their lawful pastors could give them, were they not far away or otherwise impeded. These Christians hold fast to the faith with courage, and place their hope in Him who knows well the tears and suffering of those "who suffer persecution for justice' sake,"^[4] in Him who "does not delay in his promises"^[5] but will some day comfort his children with

the reward they have earned.

17. In a particular way, therefore, We exhort with paternal affection those of Our Venerable Brothers and beloved children who are under many dangerous and deceitful pressures - pressures which would urge them to stop supporting the firm, solid, and constant unity of the Church and that close union with the Apostolic See without which this unity cannot have a sure foundation.

18. This unity is, indeed, being attacked by false doctrines and by a variety of insidious strategems. But all should remember that the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, the Church, must be "closely joined and knit together through every joint of the system according to the function in due measure of each single part,"[6] "until We all attain to the unity of the faith and of the deep knowledge of the Son of God, to perfect manhood, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ,"[7] whose Vicar on earth is - by divine appointment - the Roman Pontiff, as successor of Peter.

19. They should recall and meditate upon the wise words of Saint Cyprian, bishop and martyr: "The Lord spoke thus to Peter: *I say to thee, thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church.* . . .[8] On Peter alone He raised His Church. . . We must all resolutely preserve and defend this unity, but especially we bishops who govern the Church. . .

20. "For the Church is one, although she embraces greater and greater multitudes in the course of her prolific growth. So the sun has many rays, but one light; a tree has many branches, but one trunk rooted firmly in the ground; and when many streams issue from a single source, though their number seems to come directly from the abundance of flowing water, still there is only one source. Shut out a ray of the sun: the unity of its light has not been sundered; tear a branch from a tree: that branch no longer puts forth shoots; block a stream from its source: that stream dries up.

21. "In like manner, the Church is steeped in the Lord's light and spreads the rays of that light through the world: but it is one light and its unity is not several. The Church extends her branches over the whole world in rich profusion; her full, flowing streams spread everywhere: but there is only one trunk, only one source. . .

22. "And He who does not have the Church as his mother, cannot have God as his father. . . He who does not uphold this unity does not uphold the law of God, does not uphold the faith of the Father and the Son, and has neither life nor salvation."[9]

23. These words of the saintly martyr and bishop afford comfort, encouragement, and a shield of strength - especially since they cannot maintain communication with the Holy See (or cannot easily do so) and are in serious peril, since they must surmount many obstacles and deceits. Those in such a plight should rely upon God's help, which they must never cease to implore in humble prayer. They must remember that all who persecute the Church - as history shows - have

passed like shadows, but the sun of God's truth never sets, because "the word of the Lord endures forever." [10]

24. The society which Christ founded can be attacked, but not defeated, for she draws her strength from God, not from man. And yet, there is no doubt that she will be harassed through the centuries by persecutions, by contradictions, by calumnies - as was the lot long ago of her Divine Founder - for He said: "If they have persecuted me, they will persecute you also." [11] But it is equally certain that, just as Christ our Redeemer rose in triumph, so the Church shall someday win a peaceful victory over all her enemies.

25. Have confidence, therefore; be brave and steadfast soldiers. We wish to counsel you in the words of St. Ignatius, martyr, although We know you do not require such counsel: "Serve Him for whom you fight. . . May none of you desert Him! Your baptism must be a shield; your faith a helmet; your charity a lance; your patience a suit of armor. Your works should be your credentials, so that you may be worthy to receive your reward." [12]

26. And the beautiful words of Bishop St. Ambrose should give you sure hope and unwavering courage: "Hold on to the tiller of faith so that the rough winds of this world may not bandy you. The sea is vast and large, but do not fear; *for he has established it (the earth) upon the water, and set it firmly upon the rivers.* [13] And so it is understandable that the Lord's Church stands unmoved among the waves of this world, for she is built on the apostolic rock and holds fast to her foundation, unmoved by the onslaughts of the raging sea. [14] She is battered by the surf, but is not shaken. The physical elements of this world crash with thunder about her, but she provides a safe port for those who toil on the deep." [15]

27. In the apostolic age, when the Christians of a particular region were suffering unusual hardship, all the others - united with them by the bonds of charity - raised suppliant prayers to God, the Father of mercies, with the one accord of brothers, that He might deign in His goodness to strengthen the hearts of their brothers and might cause better times to come quickly upon the whole Church.

28. So too today, Venerable Brothers, We pray that God's comfort may descend, in answer to their brothers' prayers, upon all in Eastern Europe and in Asia who are oppressed by a wretched and inimical state of affairs.

29. And since We have great confidence in the intercessory power of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, it is Our ardent wish that, during the novena customarily held before the Feast of the Assumption, all Catholics throughout the world raise public prayers to heaven for the Church, which is - as We have said - afflicted and harassed in certain lands.

30. We confidently hope that Mary will not refuse or leave unfilled Our entreaties and the

unanimous prayers of all Catholics - she whom We, with divine approval, decreed and proclaimed, in the Holy Year of 1950, to have been taken up, body and soul, into the abode of blessedness in heaven;[16] she whom We solemnly declared and ordained to be properly venerated by all mankind as the Queen of Heaven;[17] she, finally, whose maternal graces We invited a multitude to enjoy on the centenary of her appearances, as a gracious giver of gifts, in the grotto of Lourdes to an innocent girl.[18]

31. By your entreaties and your example, Venerable Brothers, may the flocks entrusted to you approach the altars of the Mother of God prayerfully and in great numbers on the days named. May they pray with one voice and one spirit that she who "became a cause of salvation to the whole human race"[19] might obtain for the Church the freedom she needs if she is to bring men to eternal salvation, reenforce just laws with the mandates of conscience, and bolster the bases of civil society.

32. Through Mary's maternal intercession, they should pray particularly that shepherds kept far from their flocks, or otherwise restrained from the free exercise of their ministry, may be restored as speedily as possible to the positions they formerly, and properly, held; that the faithful who are beset by intrigues, falsehoods, and dissension, might find strength in the full light of truth and in unqualified union and charity; that the wavering and weak might be so strengthened by God's grace that they will be ready and able to bear up under any hardship without abandoning Christian faith and Christian unity.

33. We ardently pray that every diocese might soon have its lawful shepherd again. May Christian principles be taught freely in all lands and among all classes of citizens.

34. May the young, in grade schools and high schools, in workshops and on farms, escape the snares of materialistic, atheistic, and hedonistic doctrines, which cripple the wings of the mind and cut the sinews of virtue. May they rather be illumined with the light of the wisdom of God's gospel, which will rouse, raise, and direct them to what is best.

35. May the gates of truth be everywhere unobstructed; may no one bar those gates unjustly. May all men realize that nothing can withstand for long the force of truth or charity.

36. And, finally, may the heralds of the gospel soon seek out again the peoples whom they once led to Christ with apostolic zeal and exhausting toil, and whom they ardently desire to raise to a richer Christian and civil culture, even at the cost of difficulty, toil, and adversity.

37. May all the faithful ask these favors of the dear Mother of God; and for those who persecute the Christian religion may the faithful implore forgiveness in that spirit of charity which led the Apostle of the Gentiles to say, "Bless those who persecute you." [20] They should also be mindful to pray that these men be given God's grace and heavenly light, which alone can scatter the

shadows of error and set consciences aright.

38. But, as you well know, Venerable Brothers, a renewal of Christian life must accompany these public petitions. Otherwise such prayers are idle words, which cannot be wholly pleasing to God.

39. And so, out of that ardent and zealous charity with which all Christians are bound to love the Catholic Church, they should address their prayers to heaven, but they should also offer interior acts of penance, works of virtue, sacrifices, inconveniences, and all the pains and hardships under which we labor, of necessity, in this mortal life, but which we should occasionally, take upon ourselves voluntarily, in a spirit of generosity.

40. Through this sound renewal of their way of life, joined with suppliant prayers, they will win God's favor for themselves and for holy Church, whom they must embrace as they would a loving mother.

41. The faithful should present the sort of picture - as often as circumstances require - which is described so wonderfully, beautifully, and meaningfully in the *Letter to Diognetus*: "The Christians . . . are in the flesh, but do not live by the flesh. They dwell on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey valid laws, and even go beyond the demands of law in the conduct of their lives. They love all men, and yet all men persecute them. They are not understood, and yet they are condemned; they are put to death, and yet their life is quickened. . . They are dishonored, and yet in the midst of dishonor they find honor. Their good name is railed at, and yet is presented as evidence of their justice. . . When they conduct themselves like honest men, they are punished like criminals; while they are being punished, they rejoice as though they are being exalted...[21]

42. "To express all this briefly: what the soul is to the body, Christians are to the world."[22]

43. If a Christian way of life flourishes again, as it did in the age of the Apostles and martyrs, then we can reasonably hope that the Blessed Virgin Mary - who longs with a mother's heart that all her sons should live virtuously - will graciously heed our prayers and will soon grant, in response to our petitions, happier and more peaceful times for the Church of her Only Begotten Son and for the whole human society.

44. We wish, Venerable Brothers, that you will make Our wishes and exhortations known on Our behalf, in the way you think best, to the faithful entrusted to your care. Meanwhile, as a pledge of heaven's blessing and a witness of Our paternal good will, We lovingly impart Our Apostolic Benediction to each of you, to the flocks entrusted to you, and individually to each of those who suffer persecution and torment because they defend the rights of the Church and give evidence of the love they bear her.

Written at Rome, in Saint Peter's, on the fourteenth day of July, in the year 1958, the twentieth of

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1. Cfr. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 34 (1942), 345-46.
 2. Cfr. *John* 14:6.
 3. *Matt.* 26:31; cfr. *Zach.* 13:7.
 4. *Matt.* 5:10.
 5. *2 Pet.* 3:9.
 6. *Eph.* 4:16.
 7. *Eph.* 4:13.
 8. Cfr. *Matt.* 16:18 ff.
 9. Cyprian, *De unitate Ecclesiae*, IV, V, VI: PL IV, 513, 514, 516-20.
 10. *1 Pet.* 1:25.
 11. *John* 15:20.
 12. St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to St. Polycarp* VI, 2: PG V, 723-726.
 13. *Ps.* 23:2.
 14. Cfr. *Matt.* 16:18.
 15. Saint Ambrose, *Epistle II*: PL XVI, 917.
 16. Cf. the Bull *Munificentissimus Deus*: AAS (1950) 753 ff.
 17. Cf. the encyclical letter *Ad Caeli Reginam*: AAS (1954) 625 ff.
 18. Cfr. the apostolic constitution *Primo exacto*: AAS (1957) 1051 ff. [Eng. tr. in TPS (Winter 1957-58) vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 259 ff. - Ed.], and the encyclical epistle *Le Pèlerinage de Lourdes*: AAS (1957) 605 ff.

19. Saint Irenaeus, *Contra haereses* III, 22: PG VII, 959.

20. *Rom.* 12:14.

21. *Epistle to Diognetus* V: PG II, 1174-1175.

22. *Ibid.* VI: PG IV, 1175.