



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS FOR THE CELEBRATION OF THE FIFTIETH WORLD DAY OF PEACE

1 JANUARY 2017 *Nonviolence: a Style of Politics for Peace*

1. At the beginning of this New Year, I offer heartfelt wishes of peace to the world's peoples and nations, to heads of state and government, and to religious, civic and community leaders. I wish peace to every man, woman and child, and I pray that the image and likeness of God in each person will enable us to acknowledge one another as sacred gifts endowed with immense dignity. Especially in situations of conflict, let us respect this, our "deepest dignity",^[1] and make active nonviolence our way of life.

This is the fiftieth Message for the World Day of Peace. In the first, Blessed Pope Paul VI addressed all peoples, not simply Catholics, with utter clarity. "Peace is the only true direction of human progress – and not the tensions caused by ambitious nationalisms, nor conquests by violence, nor repressions which serve as mainstay for a false civil order". He warned of "the danger of believing that international controversies cannot be resolved by the ways of reason, that is, by negotiations founded on law, justice, and equity, but only by means of deterrent and murderous forces." Instead, citing the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* of his predecessor Saint John XXIII, he extolled "the sense and love of peace founded upon truth, justice, freedom and love". ^[2] In the intervening fifty years, these words have lost none of their significance or urgency.

On this occasion, I would like to reflect on *nonviolence* as a style of politics for peace. I ask God to help all of us to cultivate nonviolence in our most personal thoughts and values. May charity and nonviolence govern how we treat each other as individuals, within society and in international life. When victims of violence are able to resist the temptation to retaliate, they become the most credible promoters of nonviolent peacemaking. In the most local and ordinary situations and in the international order, may nonviolence become the hallmark of our decisions, our relationships and our actions, and indeed of political life in all its forms.

A broken world

2. While the last century knew the devastation of two deadly World Wars, the threat of nuclear war and a great number of other conflicts, today, sadly, we find ourselves engaged in a horrifying *world war fought piecemeal*. It is not easy to know if our world is presently more or less violent than in the past, or to know whether modern means of communications and greater mobility have made us more aware of violence, or, on the other hand, increasingly inured to it.

In any case, we know that this “piecemeal” violence, of different kinds and levels, causes great suffering: wars in different countries and continents; terrorism, organized crime and unforeseen acts of violence; the abuses suffered by migrants and victims of human trafficking; and the devastation of the environment. Where does this lead? Can violence achieve any goal of lasting value? Or does it merely lead to retaliation and a cycle of deadly conflicts that benefit only a few “warlords”?

Violence is not the cure for our broken world. Countering violence with violence leads at best to forced migrations and enormous suffering, because vast amounts of resources are diverted to military ends and away from the everyday needs of young people, families experiencing hardship, the elderly, the infirm and the great majority of people in our world. At worst, it can lead to the death, physical and spiritual, of many people, if not of all.

The Good News

3. Jesus himself lived in violent times. Yet he taught that the true battlefield, where violence and peace meet, is the human heart: for “it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come” (*Mk 7:21*). But Christ’s message in this regard offers a radically positive approach. He unfailingly preached God’s unconditional love, which welcomes and forgives. He taught his disciples to love their enemies (cf. *Mt 5:44*) and to turn the other cheek (cf. *Mt 5:39*). When he stopped her accusers from stoning the woman caught in adultery (cf. *Jn 8:1-11*), and when, on the night before he died, he told Peter to put away his sword (cf. *Mt 26:52*), Jesus marked out the path of nonviolence. He walked that path to the very end, to the cross, whereby he became our peace and put an end to hostility (cf. *Eph 2:14-16*). Whoever accepts the Good News of Jesus is able to acknowledge the violence within and be healed by God’s mercy, becoming in turn an instrument of reconciliation. In the words of Saint Francis of Assisi: “As you announce peace with your mouth, make sure that you have greater peace in your hearts”.^[3]

To be true followers of Jesus today also includes embracing his teaching about nonviolence. As my predecessor Benedict XVI observed, that teaching “is realistic because it takes into account that in the world there is *too much* violence, *too much* injustice, and therefore that this situation cannot be overcome except by countering it with *more* love, with *more* goodness. This ‘*more*’ comes from God”.^[4] He went on to stress that: “For Christians, nonviolence is not merely tactical behaviour but a person’s way of being, the attitude of one who is *so convinced of God’s love and power* that he or she is not afraid to tackle evil with the weapons of love and truth alone. Love of

one's enemy constitutes the nucleus of the 'Christian revolution'".[5] The Gospel command to *love your enemies* (cf. *Lk 6:27*) "is rightly considered the *magna carta* of Christian nonviolence. It does not consist in succumbing to evil..., but in responding to evil with good (cf. *Rom 12:17-21*), and thereby breaking the chain of injustice".[6]

More powerful than violence

4. Nonviolence is sometimes taken to mean surrender, lack of involvement and passivity, but this is not the case. When Mother Teresa received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, she clearly stated her own message of active nonviolence: "We in our family don't need bombs and guns, to destroy to bring peace – just get together, love one another... And we will be able to overcome all the evil that is in the world".[7] For the force of arms is deceptive. "While weapons traffickers do their work, there are poor peacemakers who give their lives to help one person, then another and another and another"; for such peacemakers, Mother Teresa is "a symbol, an icon of our times".[8] Last September, I had the great joy of proclaiming her a Saint. I praised her readiness to make herself available for everyone "through her welcome and defence of human life, those unborn and those abandoned and discarded... She bowed down before those who were spent, left to die on the side of the road, seeing in them their God-given dignity; she made her voice heard before the powers of this world, so that they might recognize their guilt for the crimes – the crimes! – of poverty they created".[9] In response, her mission – and she stands for thousands, even millions of persons – was to reach out to the suffering, with generous dedication, touching and binding up every wounded body, healing every broken life.

The decisive and consistent practice of nonviolence has produced impressive results. The achievements of Mahatma Gandhi and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan in the liberation of India, and of Dr Martin Luther King Jr in combating racial discrimination will never be forgotten. Women in particular are often leaders of nonviolence, as for example, was Leymah Gbowee and the thousands of Liberian women, who organized pray-ins and nonviolent protest that resulted in high-level peace talks to end the second civil war in Liberia.

Nor can we forget the eventful decade that ended with the fall of Communist regimes in Europe. The Christian communities made their own contribution by their insistent prayer and courageous action. Particularly influential were the ministry and teaching of Saint John Paul II. Reflecting on the events of 1989 in his 1991 Encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, my predecessor highlighted the fact that momentous change in the lives of people, nations and states had come about "by means of peaceful protest, using only the weapons of truth and justice".[10] This peaceful political transition was made possible in part "by the non-violent commitment of people who, while always refusing to yield to the force of power, succeeded time after time in finding effective ways of bearing witness to the truth". Pope John Paul went on to say: "May people learn to fight for justice without violence, renouncing class struggle in their internal disputes and war in international ones".[11]

The Church has been involved in nonviolent peacebuilding strategies in many countries, engaging even the most violent parties in efforts to build a just and lasting peace.

Such efforts on behalf of the victims of injustice and violence are not the legacy of the Catholic Church alone, but are typical of many religious traditions, for which “compassion and nonviolence are essential elements pointing to the way of life”.^[12] I emphatically reaffirm that “no religion is terrorist”.^[13] Violence profanes the name of God.^[14] Let us never tire of repeating: “The name of God cannot be used to justify violence. Peace alone is holy. Peace alone is holy, not war!”^[15]

The domestic roots of a politics of nonviolence

5. If violence has its source in the human heart, then it is fundamental that nonviolence be practised before all else within families. This is part of that joy of love which I described last March in my Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, in the wake of two years of reflection by the Church on marriage and the family. The family is the indispensable crucible in which spouses, parents and children, brothers and sisters, learn to communicate and to show generous concern for one another, and in which frictions and even conflicts have to be resolved not by force but by dialogue, respect, concern for the good of the other, mercy and forgiveness.^[16] From within families, the joy of love spills out into the world and radiates to the whole of society.^[17] An ethics of fraternity and peaceful coexistence between individuals and among peoples cannot be based on the logic of fear, violence and closed-mindedness, but on responsibility, respect and sincere dialogue. Hence, I plead for disarmament and for the prohibition and abolition of nuclear weapons: nuclear deterrence and the threat of mutual assured destruction are incapable of grounding such an ethics.^[18] I plead with equal urgency for an end to domestic violence and to the abuse of women and children.

The Jubilee of Mercy that ended in November encouraged each one of us to look deeply within and to allow God’s mercy to enter there. The Jubilee taught us to realize how many and diverse are the individuals and social groups treated with indifference and subjected to injustice and violence. They too are part of our “family”; they too are our brothers and sisters. The politics of nonviolence have to begin in the home and then spread to the entire human family. “Saint Therese of Lisieux invites us to practise the little way of love, not to miss out on a kind word, a smile or any small gesture which sows peace and friendship. An integral ecology is also made up of simple daily gestures that break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness”.^[19]

My invitation

6. Peacebuilding through active nonviolence is the natural and necessary complement to the Church’s continuing efforts to limit the use of force by the application of moral norms; she does so by her participation in the work of international institutions and through the competent contribution made by so many Christians to the drafting of legislation at all levels. Jesus himself offers a

“manual” for this strategy of peacemaking in the Sermon on the Mount. The eight Beatitudes (cf. *Mt* 5:3-10) provide a portrait of the person we could describe as blessed, good and authentic. Blessed are the meek, Jesus tells us, the merciful and the peacemakers, those who are pure in heart, and those who hunger and thirst for justice.

This is also a programme and a challenge for political and religious leaders, the heads of international institutions, and business and media executives: to apply the Beatitudes in the exercise of their respective responsibilities. It is a challenge to build up society, communities and businesses by acting as peacemakers. It is to show mercy by refusing to discard people, harm the environment, or seek to win at any cost. To do so requires “the willingness to face conflict head on, to resolve it and to make it a link in the chain of a new process”.^[20] To act in this way means to choose solidarity as a way of making history and building friendship in society. Active nonviolence is a way of showing that unity is truly more powerful and more fruitful than conflict. Everything in the world is inter-connected.^[21] Certainly differences can cause frictions. But let us face them constructively and non-violently, so that “tensions and oppositions can achieve a diversified and life-giving unity,” preserving “what is valid and useful on both sides”.^[22]

I pledge the assistance of the Church in every effort to build peace through active and creative nonviolence. On 1 January 2017, the new Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development will begin its work. It will help the Church to promote in an ever more effective way “the inestimable goods of justice, peace, and the care of creation” and concern for “migrants, those in need, the sick, the excluded and marginalized, the imprisoned and the unemployed, as well as victims of armed conflict, natural disasters, and all forms of slavery and torture”.^[23] Every such response, however modest, helps to build a world free of violence, the first step towards justice and peace.

In conclusion

7. As is traditional, I am signing this Message on 8 December, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Mary is the Queen of Peace. At the birth of her Son, the angels gave glory to God and wished peace on earth to men and women of good will (cf. *Luke* 2:14). Let us pray for her guidance.

“All of us want peace. Many people build it day by day through small gestures and acts; many of them are suffering, yet patiently persevere in their efforts to be peacemakers”.^[24] In 2017, may we dedicate ourselves prayerfully and actively to banishing violence from our hearts, words and deeds, and to becoming nonviolent people and to building nonviolent communities that care for our common home. “Nothing is impossible if we turn to God in prayer. Everyone can be an artisan of peace”.^[25]

From the Vatican, 8 December 2016

Franciscus

- [1] Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 228.
- [2] PAUL VI, Message for the First World Day of Peace, 1 January 1968.
- [3] “The Legend of the Three Companions”, *Fonti Francescane*, No. 1469.
- [4] BENEDICT XVI, *Angelus*, 18 February 2007.
- [5] Ibid.
- [6] Ibid.
- [7] MOTHER TERESA, Nobel Lecture, 11 December 1979.
- [8] Meditation, “The Road of Peace”, Chapel of the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, 19 November 2015.
- [9] Homily for the Canonization of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, 4 September 2016.
- [10] No. 23.
- [11] Ibid.
- [12] Address to Representatives of Different Religions, 3 November 2016.
- [13] Address to the Third World Meeting of Popular Movements, 5 November 2016.
- [14] Cf. Address at the Interreligious Meeting with the Sheikh of the Muslims of the Caucasus and Representatives of Different Religious Communities, Baku, 2 October 2016.
- [15] Address in Assisi, 20 October 2016.
- [16] Cf. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, 90-130.
- [17] Cf. *ibid.*, 133, 194, 234.
- [18] Cf. Message for the Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons, 7 December 2014.
- [19] Encyclical *Laudato Si'*, 230.
- [20] Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 227.

[21] Cf. Encyclical *Laudato Si'*, 16, 117, 138.

[22] Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 228.

[23] Apostolic Letter issued *Motu Proprio* instituting the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, 17 August 2016.

[24] *Regina Coeli*, Bethlehem, 25 May 2014.

[25] Appeal, Assisi, 20 September 2016.