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Message from the World Day of Peace

Excerpts from the message of
Pope Benedict XVI for the
World Day of Peace, January 1,
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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" and worked for a universal acknowledgment of the lofty demands of peace.

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.

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" (Benedict XV). 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" (John Paul II).

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, 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.

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. 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 aberrant ideological and political systems that 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 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.

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.

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. Jesus defined himself as the Truth in person. 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 that gives us peace.

As a means of limiting the devastating consequences of war as much as possible, especially for civilians, the international community has created an 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.

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.

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, one's own convictions about the truth.

Nihilism and fundamentalism both show a dangerous contempt for human beings and human life, and ultimately for God himself. 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.

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.

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 place 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.

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. 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

The Catholic Church, while confirming her confidence in the United Nations Organization, 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. This international body 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.

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. 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.

BENEDICTUS PP. XVI

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