



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE BENEDICT XVI TO THE MEMBERS OF THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS*

Sala Regia

Thursday, 8 January 2009

*Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

The mystery of the incarnation of the Word, which we re-live each year on the Solemnity of Christmas, invites us to reflect on the events marking the course of history. And it is precisely in the light of this hope-filled mystery that this traditional meeting takes place with you, the distinguished members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See – a meeting which, at the beginning of this new year, offers us a fitting occasion to exchange cordial good wishes. I express my gratitude to His Excellency Ambassador Alejandro Valladares Lanza for the good wishes he has kindly offered me, for the first time as Dean of the Diplomatic Corps. My respectful greeting also goes to each of you, along with your families and staff, and, through you, to the peoples and governments of the countries which you represent. For everyone I ask God to grant the gift of a year rich in justice, serenity and peace.

At the dawn of this year 2009, I think with affection of all those who have suffered – whether as a result of grave natural catastrophes, particularly in Vietnam, Myanmar, China and the Philippines, in Central America and the Caribbean, and in Columbia and Brazil; or as a result of violent national or regional conflicts; or again as a result of terrorist attacks which have sown death and destruction in countries like Afghanistan, India, Pakistan and Algeria. Despite so many efforts, the peace we so desire still remains distant! Faced with this reality, we must not grow discouraged or lessen our commitment to a culture of authentic peace, but rather redouble our efforts on behalf of security and development. In this regard, the Holy See wished to be among the first to sign and ratify the “Convention on Cluster Munitions”, a document which also has the aim of reaffirming international humanitarian law. On the other hand, while noting with concern the signs of crisis

appearing in the area of disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation, the Holy See has continued to reaffirm that peace cannot be built when military expenses divert enormous human and material resources from projects for development, especially the development of the poorest peoples.

It is towards the poor, the all too many poor people on our planet, that I would like to turn my attention today, taking up [my Message for the World Day of Peace](#), devoted this year to the theme: "Fighting Poverty To Build Peace". The insightful analysis of [Pope Paul VI](#) in the Encyclical [Populorum Progressio](#) has lost none of its timeliness: "Today we see people trying to secure a sure food supply, cures for disease, and steady employment. We see them trying to eliminate every ill, to remove every obstacle which offends man's dignity. They are constantly striving to exercise greater personal responsibility; to do more, to learn more and to have more, in order to be more. And yet, at the same time, so many people continue to live in conditions which frustrate these legitimate desires" ([No. 6](#)). To build peace, we need to give new hope to the poor. How can we not think of so many individuals and families hard pressed by the difficulties and uncertainties which the current financial and economic crisis has provoked on a global scale? How can we not mention the food crisis and global warming, which make it even more difficult for those living in some of the poorest parts of the planet to have access to nutrition and water? There is an urgent need to adopt an effective strategy to fight hunger and to promote local agricultural development, all the more so since the number of the poor is increasing even within the rich countries. In this perspective, I am pleased that the recent Doha Conference on financing development identified some helpful criteria for directing the governance of the economic system and helping those who are most in need. On a deeper level, bolstering the economy demands rebuilding confidence. This goal will only be reached by implementing an ethics based on the innate dignity of the human person. I know how demanding this will be, yet it is not a utopia! Today more than in the past, our future is at stake, as well as the fate of our planet and its inhabitants, especially the younger generation which is inheriting a severely compromised economic system and social fabric.

Ladies and Gentlemen, if we wish to combat poverty, we must invest first and foremost in the young, setting before them an ideal of authentic fraternity. During my apostolic visits in the past year, I was able to meet many young people, especially in the extraordinary context of the celebration of the [Twenty-third World Youth Day in Sydney, Australia](#). My [apostolic journeys](#), beginning with my [visit to the United States](#), also allowed me to assess the expectations of many sectors of society with regard to the Catholic Church. In this sensitive phase of the history of humanity, marked by uncertainties and questioning, many people expect the Church to exercise clearly and courageously her mission of evangelization and her work of human promotion. It was in this context that I gave [my address at the headquarters of the United Nations Organization](#): sixty years after the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, I wished to stress that this document is founded on the dignity of the human person, which in turn is based on our shared human nature, which transcends our different cultures. A few months later, during [my pilgrimage to Lourdes](#) for the hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the appearances of the Virgin Mary to Saint Bernadette, I sought to emphasize that the message of conversion and love which radiates from

the grotto of Massabielle remains most timely, as a constant invitation to build our own lives and the relations between the world's peoples on the foundation of authentic respect and fraternity, in the awareness that this fraternity presupposes that all men and women have a common Father, God the Creator. Moreover, a society which is "secular" in a healthy way does not ignore the spiritual dimension and its values, since religion – and I thought it helpful to repeat this during [my pastoral visit to France](#) – is not an obstacle but rather a solid foundation for the building of a more just and free society.

Acts of discrimination and the very grave attacks directed at thousands of Christians in this past year show to what extent it is not merely material poverty, but also moral poverty, which damages peace. Such abuses, in fact, are rooted in moral poverty. As a way of reaffirming the lofty contribution which religions can make to the struggle against poverty and the building of peace, I would like to repeat in this assembly, which symbolically represents all the nations of the world, that Christianity is a religion of freedom and peace, and it stands at the service of the true good of humanity. To our brothers and sisters who are victims of violence, especially in Iraq and in India, I renew the assurance of my paternal affection; to the civil and political authorities, I urgently request that they be actively committed to ending intolerance and acts of harassment directed against Christians, to repairing the damage which has been done, particularly to the places of worship and properties; and to encouraging by every means possible due respect for all religions, outlawing all forms of hatred and contempt. I also express my hope that, in the Western world, prejudice or hostility against Christians will not be cultivated simply because, on certain questions, their voice causes disquiet. For their part, may the disciples of Christ, in the face of such adversity, not lose heart: witness to the Gospel is always a "sign of contradiction" vis-à-vis "the spirit of the world"! If the trials and tribulations are painful, the constant presence of Christ is a powerful source of strength. Christ's Gospel is a saving message meant for all; that is why it cannot be confined to the private sphere, but must be proclaimed from the rooftops, to the ends of the earth.

The birth of Christ in the lowly stable of Bethlehem leads us naturally to think of the situation in the Middle East and, in the first place, in the Holy Land, where, in these days, we have witnessed a renewed outbreak of violence provoking immense damage and suffering for the civilian population. This situation further complicates the quest for a settlement of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, something fervently desired by many of them and by the whole world. Once again I would repeat that military options are no solution and that violence, wherever it comes from and whatever form it takes, must be firmly condemned. I express my hope that, with the decisive commitment of the international community, the ceasefire in the Gaza strip will be re-established – an indispensable condition for restoring acceptable living conditions to the population –, and that negotiations for peace will resume, with the rejection of hatred, acts of provocation and the use of arms. It is very important that, in view of the crucial elections which will involve many of the inhabitants of the region in coming months, leaders will emerge who can decisively carry forward this process and guide their people towards the difficult yet indispensable reconciliation. This cannot be reached without the adoption of a global approach to the problems of these countries,

with respect for the legitimate aspirations and interests of all parties. In addition to renewed efforts aimed at the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which I have just mentioned, wholehearted support must be given to dialogue between Israel and Syria and, in Lebanon, to the current strengthening of institutions; this will be all the more effective if it is carried out in a spirit of unity. To the Iraqis, who are preparing again to take full control of their future, I offer a particular word of encouragement to turn the page and to look forward in order to rebuild without discrimination on the basis of race, ethnic group or religion. As far as Iran is concerned, tireless efforts must be made to seek a negotiated solution to the controversy concerning the nation's nuclear programme, through a mechanism capable of satisfying the legitimate demands of the country and of the international community. This would greatly favour détente in the region and in the world.

Looking to the great continent of Asia, I note with concern that, while in certain countries acts of violence continue, and in others the political situation remains tense, some progress has been made, enabling us to look to the future with greater confidence. I think for example of the new negotiations for peace in Mindanao, in the Philippines, and the new direction being taken in relations between Beijing and Taipei. In this same context of the quest for peace, a definitive solution of the ongoing conflict in Sri Lanka would also have to be political, since the humanitarian needs of the peoples concerned must continue to receive ongoing attention. The Christian communities living in Asia are often numerically small, yet they wish to contribute in a convincing and effective way to the common good, stability and progress of their countries, as they bear witness to the primacy of God which sets up a healthy order of values and grants a freedom more powerful than acts of injustice. The recent beatification, in Japan, of 188 martyrs brought this eloquently to mind. The Church, as has often been said, does not demand privileges, but the full application of the principle of religious freedom. In this perspective, it is important that, in central Asia, legislation concerning religious communities guarantee the full exercise of this fundamental right, in respect for international norms.

In a few months, I will have the joy of meeting many of our brothers and sisters in the faith and in our common humanity who dwell in Africa. In anticipation of this visit, which I have so greatly desired, I ask the Lord to open their hearts to welcome the Gospel and to live it consistently, building peace by fighting moral and material poverty. A very particular concern must be shown for children: twenty years after the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, they remain very vulnerable. Many children have the tragic experience of being refugees and displaced persons in Somalia, Darfur and the Democratic Republic of Congo. There are waves of migration involving millions of persons in need of humanitarian assistance and who above all have been deprived of their elementary rights and offended in their dignity. I ask political leaders on the national and international levels to take every measure necessary to resolve the current conflicts and to put an end to the injustices which caused them. I express my hope that in Somalia the restoration of the State will finally make progress, in order to end the interminable sufferings of the inhabitants of that country. In Zimbabwe, likewise, the situation remains critical and considerable

humanitarian assistance is needed. The peace agreement in Burundi has brought a glimmer of hope to the region. I ask that it be applied fully, and thus become a source of inspiration for other countries which have not yet found the path of reconciliation. The Holy See, as you know, follows with special attention the continent of Africa and is pleased to have established diplomatic relations with Botswana in the past year.

In this vast panorama embracing the whole world, I wish likewise to dwell for a moment on Latin America. There too, people desire to live in peace, liberated from poverty and able freely to exercise their fundamental rights. In this context, the needs of emigrants need to be taken into consideration by legislation which would make it easier to reunite families, reconciling the legitimate requirements of security with those of inviolable respect for the person. I would also like to praise the overriding commitment shown by some governments towards re-establishing the rule of law and waging an uncompromising battle against the drug trade and political corruption. I am pleased that, thirty years after the start of the papal mediation between Argentina and Chile concerning their dispute over the southern territories, those two countries have in some way sealed their desire for peace by raising a monument to my venerable predecessor, [Pope John Paul II](#). I hope, moreover, that the recent signing of the Agreement between the Holy See and Brazil will facilitate the free exercise of the Church's mission of evangelization and further strengthen her cooperation with the civil institutions for an integral human development. For five centuries the Church has accompanied the peoples of Latin America, sharing their hopes and their concerns. Her Pastors know that, to favour the authentic progress of society, their proper task is to enlighten consciences and to form lay men and women capable of engaging responsibly in temporal affairs, at the service of the common good.

Turning lastly to the nations which are nearer at hand, I wish to greet the Christian community of Turkey, while recalling that, during this special Holy Year marking the two-thousandth anniversary of the birth of the Apostle Paul, numerous pilgrims are making their way to Tarsus, his native city, a fact which once more indicates how closely this land is linked to the origins of Christianity. The hope of peace is alive in Cyprus, where negotiations for a just solution to problems associated with the division of the Island have resumed. As for the Caucasus, I wish to affirm once more that the conflicts involving the states of the Region cannot be settled by recourse to arms; and, in thinking of Georgia, I express my hope that all the commitments subscribed to in the ceasefire of last August – an agreement concluded thanks to the diplomatic efforts of the European Union – will be honoured, and that the return of the displaced to their homes will be provided for as quickly as possible. Finally, with regard to the Southeast of Europe, the Holy See pursues its commitment to stability in the region, and hopes that conditions will continue to be created for a future of reconciliation and of peace between the populations of Serbia and Kosovo, with respect for minorities and commitment to the preservation of the priceless Christian artistic and cultural patrimony which constitutes a treasure for all humanity.

Ladies and Gentlemen, at the conclusion of this overview which, due to its brevity, cannot mention

all the situations of suffering and poverty close to my heart, I return to [my Message for the celebration of this year's World Day of Peace](#). There I recalled that the poorest human beings are unborn children ([No. 3](#)). But I cannot fail to mention, in conclusion, others who are poor, like the infirm, the elderly left to themselves, broken families and those lacking points of reference. Poverty is fought if humanity becomes more fraternal as a result of shared values and ideals, founded on the dignity of the person, on freedom joined to responsibility, on the effective recognition of the place of God in the life of man. In this perspective, let us fix our gaze on Jesus, the lowly infant lying in the manger. Because he is the Son of God, he tells us that fraternal solidarity between all men and women is the royal road to fighting poverty and to building peace. May the light of his love illumine all government leaders and all humanity! May that light guide us throughout this year which has now begun! I wish all of you a happy New Year.

**L'Osservatore Romano. Weekly Edition in English n. 2 pp.8, 9.*

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