



# The Holy See

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**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS  
POPE JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY  
OF THE UNITED NATIONS**

*Mr. President, Ladies and gentlemen: representatives of Member States,*

1. In June 1978, my Predecessor Pope Paul VI sent a personal message to the First Special Session of the United Nations devoted to Disarmament, in which he expressed his hopes that such an effort of good will and political wisdom by the international community would bring the result that humanity was looking for.

Four years later you are gathered here again to ask yourselves if those initiatives have been-at least partially-realized.

The answer to that question seems neither very reassuring nor very encouraging. If one compares the situation in the area of disarmament four years ago with that of today, there seems to be very little improvement. Some, in fact, think that there has been a deterioration at least in the sense that hopes born of that period could now be labeled as simple illusions. Such a stance could very easily lend itself to discouragement and impel those who are responsible to seek elsewhere for the solution to these problems-general or particular-which continue to disturb the lives of people.

That is, in fact, how many see the current situation. Figures from various sources all point to a serious increase in military expenditures represented by a greater production of different kinds of weapons along with which, according to specialized institutes, there is a new rise in the sale of weapons. Recently the news media has given a great deal of attention to research and use on a wider scale of chemical weapons. Moreover new kinds of nuclear weapons have also come into existence.

Before an assembly as competent as this one, there is no need to repeat the figures which your own organization has published on this subject. It is sufficient, as an indication, to refer to the

study according to which the sum total of military expenditures on the planet corresponds to a mean of \$100 per person per year, a figure which for many people who live on this earth is all they would have annually to survive.

Faced with these facts, I willingly want to express my satisfaction that the United Nations Organization has proposed to confront the problem of disarmament once again, and I am grateful for the courtesy so graciously extended to me to address some words to you on this occasion.

While it is not a member of your organization, for some time the Holy See has had a Permanent Mission of Observer, a post which allows it to follow your daily activities. No one is unaware of how much my Predecessors valued your work. I myself, especially at the time of my visit to the headquarters of the United Nations, have had the opportunity of making my own their words of appreciation for your organization. Like them I understand the difficulties. And while I am ever hopeful that your efforts be crowned with even more important and better results, I recognize its precious and irreplaceable role in helping ensure a more tranquil and peaceful future for the world.

This is the voice of one who has no interests nor political power, nor even less military force. It is a voice which is heard here again in this hall thanks to your courtesy. Here where practically all the nations, great and small, of the world come together, my words are meant to be the echo of the moral conscience of humanity "in the pure sense," if you will grant me that expression. My words bear with them no special interests or concerns of a nature which could mar their witness value and make them less credible.

A conscience illumined and guided by Christian faith, without doubt, but which is by that fact nonetheless profoundly human. It is therefore a conscience which is shared by all men and women of sincerity and good will.

My voice is the echo of the concerns and aspirations, the hopes and the fears of millions of men and women who, from every walk of life, are looking toward this Assembly asking, as they hope, if there will come forth some reassuring light or if there will be a new and more worrisome disappointment. Without claiming a mandate from all these people, I believe I can make myself the faithful interpreter to you of the feelings which are theirs.

I neither wish nor am I able to enter into the technical and political aspects of the problem of disarmament as they stand before you today. However, I would like to call your attention to some ethical principles which are at the heart of every discussion and every decision that might be looked for in this field.

2. My point of departure is rooted in a statement unanimously agreed upon not only by your citizens but also by the governments that you lead or you represent: the world wants peace; the world needs peace.

In our modern world to refuse peace means not only to provoke the sufferings and the loss that today more than ever-war, even a limited one, implies: it could also involve the total destruction of entire regions, not to mention the threat of possible or probable catastrophes in ever vaster and possibly even universal proportions.

Those who are responsible for the life of peoples seem above all to be engaged in a frantic search for political means and technical solutions which would allow the results of eventual conflicts "to be contained." While having to recognize the limits of their efforts in this direction, they persist in believing that in the long run war is inevitable. Above all this is found in the specter of a possible military confrontation between the two major camps which divide the world today and continues to haunt the future of humanity.

Certainly no power, and no statesman, would be of a mind to admit to planning war or to wanting to take such an initiative. Mutual distrust, however, makes us believe or fear that because others might nourish designs or desires of this type, each, especially among the great powers, seems to envisage no other possible solution than through necessity to prepare sufficiently strong defense to be able to respond to an eventual attack.

3. Many even think that such preparations constitute the way-even the only way-to safeguard peace in some fashion or at least to impede to the utmost in an efficacious way the outbreak of wars, especially major conflicts which might lead to the ultimate holocaust of humanity and the destruction of the civilization that man has constructed so laboriously over the centuries.

In this approach one can see the "philosophy of peace" which was proclaimed in the ancient Roman principle: *Si vis pacem, para bellum*. Put in modern terms, this "philosophy" has the label of "deterrence," and one can find it in various guises of the search for a "balance of forces" which sometimes has been called, and not without reason, the "balance of terror."

As my Predecessor Paul VI put it: "The logic underlying the request for the balances of power impels each of the adversaries to seek to ensure a certain margin of superiority, for fear of being left at a disadvantage" (Message to the United Nations General Assembly, May 24, 1978: *The Teachings of Pope Paul VI*, vol. 11, 1978, p. 202).

Thus in practice the temptation is easy-and the danger always present-to see the search for balance turned into a search for superiority of a type that sets off the arms race in an even more dangerous way.

In reality this is the tendency which seems to continue to be prevalent today perhaps in an even more accentuated fashion than in the past. You have taken as your specific purpose in this Assembly to search how it could be possible to reverse this trend.

This purpose could seem to be in a sense "minimalist," but it is of vital importance. For only a real renewal can raise the hope that humanity will commit itself on the road that leads to the goal that everyone so much desires, even if many still consider it a utopia: total disarmament, which is mutual and surrounded by such guarantees of effective controls that it gives to everyone confidence and necessary security.

In addition this special session surely reflects another truth: like peace, the world wants disarmament; the world needs disarmament.

Moreover, all the work which has gone on in the Committee for Disarmament, in the various commissions and sub-commissions and within governments, as well as the attention of the public, all give witness to the importance that is being placed today on the difficult question of disarmament.

The actual convocation of this meeting indicates a judgment: the nations of the world are already overarmed and are overcommitted to policies that continue that trend. Implicit in this judgment is the conviction that this is wrong and that the nations so involved in these actions need to re-think their positions.

However, the situation is a complex one where a number of values- some of the highest order- come to play. It is one where there are divergent viewpoints that can be expressed. We must therefore face up to these problems with realism and honesty.

That is why, before all else, I pray to God that He might grant you the strength of spirit and good will that will be needed for you to complete your task and further the great cause of peace, which is the ultimate goal of all your efforts at this special session.

That is why my every word is intended to be a word of encouragement and of hope: encouragement that you may not let your energies weaken at the complexities of the questions or at the failures of the past and unfortunately the present; hope because we know that only people who build in hope can have the vision necessary to progress patiently and tenaciously towards goals that are worthy of the best efforts and the common good of all.

4. Perhaps no other question of our day touches so many aspects of the human condition as that of armaments and disarmament. There are questions on the scientific and technical level; there are social and economic questions. There are deep problems of a political nature that touch the relations between states and among peoples.

Our world-wide arms systems impinge in great measure on cultural developments. But at the heart of them all there are present spiritual questions which concern the very identity of man, and his choices for the future and for generations yet to come. Sharing my thoughts with you, I am

conscious of all the technical, scientific, social, economic, political aspects, but especially of the ethical, cultural and spiritual ones.

5. Since the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the "atomic age," the attitude of the Holy See and the Catholic Church has been clear. The Church has continually sought to contribute to peace and to build a world that would not have recourse to war to solve disputes. It has encouraged the maintenance of an international climate of mutual trust and cooperation. It has supported those structures which would help ensure peace. It has called attention to the disastrous effects of war. With the growth of new and more lethal means of destruction, it has pointed to the dangers involved and, going beyond the immediate perils, it has indicated what values to develop in order to foster cooperation, mutual trust, fraternity and peace.

My Predecessor, Pius XII, as early as 1946, referred to "the might of new instruments of destruction" which "brought the problems of disarmament into the center of international discussions under completely new aspects" (Address to the College of Cardinals, December 24, 1946).

Each successive Pope and the Second Vatican Council continued to express their convictions, introducing them into the changing and developing situation of armaments and arms control. If men would bend to the task with good will and with the goal of peace in their hearts and in their plans, then adequate measures could be found, appropriate structures erected to ensure the legitimate security of every people in mutual respect and peace; thus the need for these grand arsenals of fear and the threat of death would become superfluous.

The teaching of the Catholic Church in this area has been clear and consistent. It has deplored the arms race, called nonetheless for mutual progressive and verifiable reduction of armaments as well as greater safeguards against possible misuse of these weapons. It has done so while urging that the independence, freedom and legitimate security of each and every nation be respected.

I wish to reassure you that the constant concern and consistent efforts of the Catholic Church will not cease until there is a general verifiable disarmament, until the hearts of all are won over to those ethical choices which will guarantee a lasting peace.

6. In turning to the current debate that concerns you, and to the subject at hand, we must recognize that no element in international affairs stands alone and isolated from the many-faceted interests of nations. However, it is one thing to recognize the interdependence of questions; it is another to exploit them in order to gain advantage in another. Armaments, nuclear weapons and disarmament are too important in themselves and for the world ever to be made part of a strategy which would exploit their intrinsic importance in favor of politics or other interests.

7. Therefore, it is important and right that every serious proposal that would contribute to real

disarmament and that would create a better climate be given the prudent and objective consideration it deserves. Even small steps can have a value which would go beyond their material or technical aspects. Whatever the area under consideration, we need today freshness of perspective and a capacity to listen respectfully and carefully to the honest suggestions of every responsible party in this matter.

In this context there is what I would call the phenomenon of rhetoric. In an area already tense and fraught with unavoidable dangers, there is no place for exaggerated speech or threatening stances. Indulgence in rhetoric, in inflamed and impassioned vocabulary, in veiled threat and scare tactics can only exacerbate a problem that needs sober and diligent examination.

On the other hand, governments and their leaders cannot carry on the affairs of state independent of the wishes of their peoples. The history of civilization gives us stark examples of what happens when that is tried. Currently the fear and preoccupation of so many groups in various parts of the world reveal that people are more and more frightened about what would happen if irresponsible parties unleash some nuclear war.

In fact, just about everywhere peace movements have been developing. In several countries, these movements, which have become very popular, are being supported by an increasing sector of the citizenry from various social levels, different age groups and backgrounds, but especially by youth. The ideological bases of these movements are multiple. Their projects, proposals and policies vary greatly and can often lend themselves to political exploitation. However, all these differences of form and shape manifest a profound and sincere desire for peace.

May I also join myself to the spirit of your draft appeal to public opinion for the birth of a truly universal consciousness of the terrible risks of war. May that consciousness in its turn lead to a general spirit of peace.

8. In current conditions "deterrence" based on balance, certainly not as an end in itself but as a step on the way toward a progressive disarmament, may still be judged morally acceptable. Nonetheless in order to ensure peace, it is indispensable not to be satisfied with this minimum which is always susceptible to the real danger of explosion.

What then can be done? In the absence of a supranational authority of the type Pope John XXIII sought in his Encyclical *Pacem in terris*, one which one would have hoped to find in the United Nations Organization, the only realistic response to the threat of war still is negotiation. Here I would like to remind you of an expression of Saint Augustine which I have already cited in another context: "Destroy war by the words of negotiations, but do not destroy men by the sword." Today once again, before you all, I reaffirm my confidence in the power of true negotiations to arrive at just and equitable solutions. Such negotiations demand patience and diligence and most notably lead to a reduction of armaments that is balanced, simultaneous and internationally controlled.

To be even more precise: the development of armaments seems to lead to the increasing interdependence of kinds of armaments. In these conditions, how can one countenance a balanced reduction if negotiations do not include the whole gamut of arms? To that end the continuation of the study of the "Complete Program of Disarmament" that your organization has already undertaken, could facilitate the needed coordination of different forums and bring to their results greater truth, equity and efficacy.

9. In fact, nuclear weapons are not the only means of war and destruction. The production and sale of conventional weapons throughout the world is a truly alarming and evidently growing phenomenon. No negotiations about armaments would be complete if they were to ignore the fact that 80 percent of the expenditures for weapons are devoted to conventional arms. Moreover, the traffic in these weapons seems to be developing at an increasing rate and seems to be directed most of all toward developing countries. Every step taken to limit this production and traffic and to bring them under an ever more effective control will be an important contribution to the cause of peace.

Recent events have sadly confirmed the destructive capacities of conventional weapons and the sad plight of nations tempted to use them to solve disputes.

10. To focus, however, on the quantitative aspects of armaments, nuclear and conventional, is not enough. A very special attention must be paid to the qualitative improvement of these arms because of new and more advanced technologies. Here one confronts one of the essential elements in the arms race. To overlook this would be to fool ourselves and to deal dishonestly with those who desire peace.

Research and technology must always be at the service of man. In our day, the use and misuse of science and technology for other purposes is a too well-known fact. In my address to UNESCO on June 2, 1980, I spoke extensively with men of culture and science on this subject. May I be allowed today at least to suggest that a significant percentage of the research that is currently being expended in the field of arms technology and science be directed towards life and the welfare of man.

11. In his address to the United Nations Organization on October 4, 1965, Pope Paul VI stated a profound truth when he said: "Peace, as you know, is not built up only by means of politics or the balance of forces and interests. It is constructed with the mind, with ideas, with works of peace." The products of the mind-ideas-the products of culture, and the creative forces of peoples are meant to be shared. Strategies of peace which remain on the scientific and technical level and which merely measure out balances and verify controls will never be sufficient for real peace unless bonds that link peoples to one another are forged and strengthened. Build up the links that unite people together. Build up the means that will enable peoples and nations to share their culture and values with one another. Put aside all the narrow interests that leave one nation at the

mercy of another economically, socially or politically.

In this same vein, the work of many qualified experts plumbing the relationship between disarmament and development is to be commended for study and action. The prospect of diverting material and resources from the development of arms to the development of peoples is not a new one. Nonetheless, it is a pressing and compelling one which the Catholic Church has for a long time endorsed. Any new dynamism in that direction coming from this Assembly would be met with the approbation and support of men and women of good will everywhere.

The building of links among peoples means the rediscovery and reassertion of all the values that reinforce peace and that join people together in harmony. This also means the renewal of what is best in the heart of man, the heart that seeks the good of the other in friendship and love.

12. May I close with one last consideration. The production and the possession of armaments are a consequence of an ethical crisis that is disrupting society in all its political, social and economic dimensions. Peace, as I have already said several times, is the result of respect for ethical principles. True disarmament, that which will actually guarantee peace among peoples, will come about only with the resolution of this ethical crisis. To the extent that the efforts at arms reduction and then of total disarmament are not matched by parallel ethical renewal, they are doomed in advance to failure.

The attempt must be made to put our world aright and to eliminate the spiritual confusion born from a narrow-minded search for interest or privilege or by the defense of ideological claims: this is a task of first priority if we wish to measure any progress in the struggle for disarmament. Otherwise we are condemned to remain at face-saving activities.

For the root cause of our insecurity can be found in this profound crisis of humanity. By means of creating consciences sensitive to the absurdity of war, we advance the value of creating the material and spiritual conditions which will lessen the glaring inequalities and which will restore to everyone that minimum of space that is needed for the freedom of the spirit.

The great disparity between the rich and the poor living together on this one planet is no longer supportable in a world of rapid universal communications, without giving birth to a justified resentment that can turn to violence. Moreover the spirit has basic and inalienable rights. For it is with justice that these rights are demanded in countries where the space is denied them to live in tranquillity according to their own convictions. I invite all those struggling for peace to commit themselves to the effort to eliminate the true causes of the insecurity of man of which the terrible arms race is only one effect.

13. To reverse the current trend in the arms race involves, therefore, a parallel struggle on two fronts: on the one side, an immediate and urgent struggle by governments to reduce progressively



and equally their armaments; on the other hand, a more patient but nonetheless necessary struggle at the level of the consciences of peoples to take their responsibility in regard to the ethical cause of the insecurity that breeds violence by coming to grips with the material and spiritual inequalities of our world.

With no prejudice of any kind, let us unite all our intellectual and spiritual forces, those of statesmen, of citizens, of religious leaders, to put an end to violence and hatred and to seek out the paths of peace.

Peace is the supreme goal of the activity of the United Nations. It must become the goal of all men and women of good will. Unhappily still in our days, sad realities cast their shadows across the international horizon, causing the suffering of destruction, such that they could cause humanity to lose the hope of being able to master its own future in harmony and in the collaboration of peoples.

Despite the suffering that invades my soul, I feel empowered, even obliged, solemnly to reaffirm before all the world what my Predecessors and I myself have repeated so often in the name of conscience, in the name of morality, in the name of humanity and in the name of God:

Peace is not a utopia, nor an inaccessible ideal, nor an unrealizable dream.

War is not an inevitable calamity.

Peace is possible.

And because it is possible, peace is our duty: our grave duty, our supreme responsibility.

Certainly peace is difficult; certainly it demands much good will, wisdom, and tenacity. But man can and he must make the force of reason prevail over the reasons of force.

That is why my last word is yet a word of encouragement and of exhortation. And since peace, entrusted to the responsibility of men and women, remains even then a gift of God, it must also express itself in prayer to Him who holds the destinies of all peoples in His hands.

May I thank you for the activity you undertake to make the cause of disarmament go forward: disarming the engines of death and disarming spirits. May God bless your efforts and may this Assembly remain in history a sign of reassurance and hope.

*Vatican, 7 June 1982.*

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