



The Holy See

SOLEMNITY OF MARY, MOTHER OF GOD

45th WORLD DAY OF PEACE

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Vatican Basilica

Sunday, 1st January 2012

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Dear Brothers and Sisters!

On the first day of the year, the liturgy resounds in the Church throughout the world with the ancient priestly blessing that we heard during today's first reading: "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace" (*Num* 6:24-26). This blessing was entrusted by God, through Moses, to Aaron and his sons, that is, to the priests of the people of Israel. It is a triple blessing filled with light, radiating from the repetition of the name of God, the Lord, and from the image of his face. In fact, in order to be blessed, we have to stand in God's presence, take his Name upon us and remain in the cone of light that issues from his Face, in a space lit up by his gaze, diffusing grace and peace.

This was the very experience that the shepherds of Bethlehem had, who reappear in today's Gospel. They had the experience of standing in God's presence, they received his blessing not in the hall of a majestic palace, in the presence of a great sovereign, but in a stable, before a "babe lying in a manger" (*Lk* 2:16). From this child, a new light issues forth, shining in the darkness of the night, as we can see in so many paintings depicting Christ's Nativity. Henceforth, it is from him that blessing comes, from his name – Jesus, meaning "God saves" – and from his human face, in which God, the almighty Lord of heaven and earth, chose to become incarnate, concealing his

glory under the veil of our flesh, so as to reveal fully to us his goodness (cf. *Tit* 3:4).

The first to be swept up by this blessing was Mary the virgin, the spouse of Joseph, chosen by God from the first moment of her existence to be the mother of his incarnate Son. She is the “blessed among women” (*Lk* 1:42) – in the words of Saint Elizabeth’s greeting. Her whole life was spent in the light of the Lord, within the radius of his name and of the face of God incarnate in Jesus, the “blessed fruit of her womb”. This is how Luke’s Gospel presents her to us: fully intent upon guarding and meditating in her heart upon everything concerning her son Jesus (cf. *Lk* 2:19, 51). The mystery of her divine motherhood that we celebrate today contains in superabundant measure the gift of grace that all human motherhood bears within it, so much so that the fruitfulness of the womb has always been associated with God’s blessing. The Mother of God is the first of the blessed, and it is she who bears the blessing; she is the woman who received Jesus into herself and brought him forth for the whole human family. In the words of the liturgy: “without losing the glory of virginity, [she] brought forth into the world the eternal light, Jesus Christ our Lord” (*Preface I of the Blessed Virgin Mary*).

Mary is the mother and model of the Church, who receives the divine Word in faith and offers herself to God as the “good soil” in which he can continue to accomplish his mystery of salvation. The Church also participates in the mystery of divine motherhood, through preaching, which sows the seed of the Gospel throughout the world, and through the sacraments, which communicate grace and divine life to men. The Church exercises her motherhood especially in the sacrament of Baptism, when she generates God’s children from water and the Holy Spirit, who cries out in each of them: “Abba, Father!” (*Gal* 4:6). Like Mary, the Church is the mediator of God’s blessing for the world: she receives it in receiving Jesus and she transmits it in bearing Jesus. He is the mercy and the peace that the world, of itself, cannot give, and which it needs always, at least as much as bread.

Dear friends, peace, in the fullest and highest sense, is the sum and synthesis of all blessings. So when two friends meet, they greet one another, wishing each other peace. The Church too, on the first day of the year, invokes this supreme good in a special way; she does so, like the Virgin Mary, by revealing Jesus to all, for as Saint Paul says, “He is our peace” (*Eph* 2:14), and at the same time the “way” by which individuals and peoples can reach this goal to which we all aspire. With this deep desire in my heart, I am glad to welcome and greet all of you who have come to Saint Peter’s Basilica on this 45th World Day of Peace: Cardinals, Ambassadors from so many friendly countries, who more than ever on this happy occasion share with me and with the Holy See the desire for renewed commitment to the promotion of peace in the world; the President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, who with the Secretary and the officials of the Dicastery work in a particular way towards this goal; the other Bishops and Authorities present; the representatives of ecclesial Associations and Movements and all of you, brothers and sisters, especially those among you who work in the field of educating the young. Indeed – as you know – the role of education is what I highlighted in my Message for this year.

“Educating Young People in Justice and Peace” is a task for every generation, and thanks be to God, after the tragedies of the two great world wars, the human family has shown increasing awareness of it, as we can witness, on the one hand, from international statements and initiatives, and on the other, from the emergence among young people themselves, in recent decades, of many different forms of social commitment in this field. For the ecclesial community, educating men and women in peace is part of the mission received from Christ, it is an integral part of evangelization, because the Gospel of Christ is also the Gospel of justice and peace. But the Church, in recent times, has articulated a demand that affects everyone with a sensitive and responsible conscience regarding humanity’s future; the demand to respond to a decisive challenge that consists precisely in education. Why is this a “challenge”? For at least two reasons: in the first place, because in the present age, so strongly marked by a technological mentality, the desire to *educate* and not merely to *instruct* cannot be taken for granted, it is a choice; in the second place, because the culture of relativism raises a radical question: does it still make sense to educate? And then, to educate for what?

Naturally now is not the time to address these fundamental questions, which I have tried to answer on other occasions. Instead I would like to underline the fact that, in the face of the shadows that obscure the horizon of today’s world, to assume responsibility for educating young people in knowledge of the truth, in fundamental values and virtues, is to look to the future with hope. And in this commitment to a holistic education, formation in justice and peace has a place. Boys and girls today are growing up in a world that has, so to speak, become smaller, where contacts between different cultures and traditions, even if not always direct, are constant. For them, now more than ever, it is indispensable to learn the importance and the art of peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, dialogue and understanding. Young people by their nature are open to these attitudes, but the social reality in which they grow up can lead them to think and act in the opposite way, even to be intolerant and violent. Only a solid education of their consciences can protect them from these risks and make them capable of carrying on the fight, depending always and solely on the power of truth and good. This education begins in the family and is developed at school and in other formative experiences. It is essentially about helping infants, children and adolescents to develop a personality that combines a profound sense of justice with respect for their neighbour, with a capacity to address conflicts without arrogance, with the inner strength to bear witness to good, even when it involves sacrifice, with forgiveness and reconciliation. Thus they will be able to become people of peace and builders of peace.

In this task of educating young generations, a particular responsibility lies with religious communities. Every pathway of authentic religious formation guides the person, from the most tender age, to know God, to love him and to do his will. God is love, he is just and peaceable, and anyone wishing to honour him must first of all act like a child following his father’s example. One of the Psalms says: “The Lord does deeds of justice, gives judgment for all who are oppressed ... The Lord is compassion and love, slow to anger and rich in mercy” (*Ps* 102:6,8). In God, justice and mercy come together perfectly, as Jesus showed us through the testimony of his life. In

Jesus, “love and truth” have met, “justice and peace” have embraced (cf. *Ps* 84:11). In these days, the Church is celebrating the great mystery of the Incarnation: God’s truth has sprung from the earth and justice looks down from heaven, the earth has yielded its fruit (cf. *Ps* 84:12,13). God has spoken to us in his Son Jesus. Let us hear what God has to say: “a voice that speaks of peace” (*Ps* 84:9). Jesus is a way that can be travelled, open to everyone. He is the path of peace. Today the Virgin Mary points him out to us, she shows us the Way: let us walk in it! And you, Holy Mother of God, accompany us with your protection. Amen.

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