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Audience with the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See for the exchange of greetings for the New Year

This morning, in the Hall of Blessings, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See for the exchange of greetings for the new year.

After the introductory words from the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps, His Excellency Mr. Georges Poulides, Ambassador of Cyprus to the Holy See, the Pope delivered the following address:

Address of the Holy Father

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to welcome you this morning and to extend my personal greetings and good wishes for the New Year. In a special way, I thank His Excellency Ambassador George Poulides, Dean of the Diplomatic Corps, for his kind words, which eloquently expressed the concerns of the international community at the beginning of a year that we hope to be one of peace, but has instead dawned amid conflicts and divisions.

Our meeting is a fitting occasion for me to thank you for your efforts to foster good relations between the Holy See and your respective countries. Last year, our “diplomatic family” became even larger, thanks to the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Sultanate of Oman and the appointment of its first Ambassador, here present.

Here I would note that the Holy See has now appointed a resident Papal Representative in Hanoi, following last July’s conclusion of the relative agreement on the status of the Papal Representative. This is a sign of the intent to pursue the process already initiated in a spirit of reciprocal respect and trust, thanks also to frequent contacts on the institutional level and to cooperation with the local Church.

2023 also saw the ratification of the Supplementary Agreement to the 24 September 1998 Agreement between the Holy See and Kazakhstan on mutual relations, which facilitated the presence and work of pastoral agents in that country. The past year also marked the celebration of significant anniversaries: the hundredth anniversary of diplomatic relations with the Republic of Panama, the seventieth anniversary of those with the Islamic Republic of Iran, the sixtieth of those with the Republic of Korea, and the fiftieth of those with Australia.

Dear Ambassadors,

One word in particular resounds in the two principal Christian feasts. We hear it in the song of the angels who proclaimed in the night of the birth of the Saviour, and we hear it again in the greeting of the risen Jesus. That word is “peace”. Peace is primarily a gift of God, for it is he who has left us *his* peace (cf. *Jn* 14:27). Yet it is also a responsibility incumbent upon all of us: “Blessed are the peacemakers” (*Mt* 5:9). To strive for peace. A word so simple, yet so demanding and rich in meaning. Today I would like to concentrate our reflections on peace, at a moment in history when it is increasingly threatened, weakened and in part lost. For that matter, it is the responsibility of the Holy See within the international community to be a prophetic voice and to appeal to consciences.

On Christmas Eve 1944, Pope Pius XII delivered a memorable Radio Message to the peoples of the world. The Second World War was drawing to a close after more than five years of conflict and humanity sensed – in the Pope’s words – “an ever more clear and firm will: to make of this world war, this universal upheaval, the starting point for a new era marked by profound renewal”.^[1] Some eighty years later, the impetus for that “profound renewal”, appears to have receded, and our world is witnessing a growing number of conflicts that are slowly turning what I have often called “a third world war fought piecemeal” into a genuine global conflict.

Here, in your presence, I cannot fail to reiterate my deep concern regarding the events taking place in Palestine and Israel. All of us remain shocked by the October 7 attack on the Israeli people, in which great numbers of innocent persons were horribly wounded, tortured, and murdered, and many taken hostage. I renew my condemnation of this act and of every instance of terrorism and extremism. This is not the way to resolve disputes between peoples; those disputes are only aggravated and cause suffering for everyone. Indeed, the attack provoked a strong Israeli military response in Gaza that has led to the death of tens of thousands of Palestinians, mainly civilians, including many young people and children, and has caused an exceptionally grave humanitarian crisis and inconceivable suffering.

To all the parties involved I renew my appeal for a cease-fire on every front, including Lebanon, and the immediate liberation of all the hostages held in Gaza. I ask that the Palestinian people receive humanitarian aid, and that hospitals, schools and places of worship receive all necessary protection.

It is my hope that the international community will pursue with determination the solution of two states, one Israeli and one Palestinian, as well as an internationally guaranteed special status for the City of Jerusalem, so that Israelis and Palestinians may finally live in peace and security.

The present conflict in Gaza further destabilizes a fragile and tension-filled region. In particular, we cannot forget the Syrian people, living in a situation of economic and political instability aggravated by last February’s earthquake. May the international community encourage the parties involved to undertake a constructive and serious dialogue and to seek new solutions, so that the Syrian people need no longer suffer as a result of international sanctions. In addition, I express my profound distress for the millions of Syrian refugees still present in neighbouring countries like Jordan and Lebanon.

I think in a special way of the beloved Lebanese people, and I express my concern for the social and economic situation that they are experiencing. It is my hope that the institutional stalemate that has even further burdened them will be resolved and that the Land of Cedars will soon have a President.

Remaining on the Asian continent, I would also call the attention of the international community to Myanmar, and plead that every effort be made to offer hope to that land and a dignified future to its young, while at the same

time not neglecting the humanitarian emergency that the Rohingya continue to experience.

Alongside these complex situations, there are also signs of hope, as I was able to experience in the course of my Journey to Mongolia, to whose authorities I once more express my gratitude for their welcome. I also wish to thank the Hungarian authorities for the hospitality I received during my visit to that country last April. It was a journey into the heart of Europe, rich in history and culture, where I felt the affection of many people, yet sensed the proximity of a conflict that we would have considered unimaginable in the Europe of the twenty-first century.

Sadly, after nearly two years of large-scale war waged by the Russian Federation against Ukraine, the greatly desired peace has not yet managed to take root in minds and hearts, despite the great numbers of victims and the massive destruction. One cannot allow the persistence of a conflict that continues to metastasize, to the detriment of millions of persons; it is necessary to put an end to the present tragedy through negotiations, in respect for international law.

I also express my concern for the tense situation in the South Caucasus between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and I urge the parties to arrive at the signing of a peace treaty. It is urgent that a solution be found to the dramatic humanitarian situation of those living in that region, while favouring the return of refugees to their own homes in legality and security and with respect for the places of worship of the different religious confessions present there. These steps will help contribute to the building of a climate of trust between the two countries, in view of the greatly desired peace.

Turning our gaze to Africa, we are witnessing the suffering of millions of persons as a result of the numerous humanitarian crises that various sub-Saharan countries experience due to international terrorism, complex social political problems, and the devastating effects caused by climate change. Added to these are the effects of the military coups d'état that have occurred in several countries and certain electoral processes marked by corruption, intimidation and violence.

At the same time, I renew my appeal for serious efforts on the part of all engaged in the application of the November 2022 Pretoria Agreement, which put an end to the hostilities in Tigray. Likewise, for the pursuit of specific solutions to the tensions and violence that assail Ethiopia, and for dialogue, peace and stability among the countries of the Horn of Africa.

I would also like to bring up the tragic events in Sudan where sadly after months of civil war no way out is in sight, and the plight of the refugees in Cameroon, Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan. I had the joy of visiting the latter two countries at the beginning of last year, as a sign of my closeness to their people who are suffering, albeit in different contexts and situations. I express my heartfelt gratitude to the authorities of both countries for their efforts in organizing these visits and for their hospitality. My Journey to South Sudan also had an ecumenical flavour, since I was joined by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, as a sign of the shared commitment of our ecclesial communities to peace and reconciliation.

Although there are no open wars in the Americas, serious tensions exist between several countries, for example Venezuela and Guyana, while in others, such as Peru, we see signs of a polarization that compromises social harmony and weakens democratic institutions.

The situation in Nicaragua remains troubling: a protracted crisis with painful consequences for Nicaraguan society as a whole, and in particular for the Catholic Church. The Holy See continues to encourage a respectful diplomatic dialogue for the benefit of Catholics and the entire population.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Against this backdrop that I have sketched without any pretension to completeness, we find an increasingly lacerated world, but even more, millions of persons – men, women, fathers, mothers, children – whose faces are

for the most part unknown to us, and frequently overlooked.

Moreover, modern wars no longer take place only on clearly defined battlefields, nor do they involve soldiers alone. In a context where it appears that the distinction between military and civil objectives is no longer respected, there is no conflict that does not end up in some way indiscriminately striking the civilian population. The events in Ukraine and Gaza are clear proof of this. We must not forget that grave violations of international humanitarian law are war crimes, and that it is not sufficient to point them out, but also necessary to prevent them. Consequently, there is a need for greater effort on the part of the international community to defend and implement humanitarian law, which seems to be the only way to ensure the defence of human dignity in situations of warfare.

At the beginning of this year, the exhortation of the Second Vatican Council in *Gaudium et Spes* seems especially timely: “On the question of warfare, there are various international conventions, signed by many countries, aimed at rendering military action and its consequences less inhuman... These agreements must be honoured; indeed public authorities and specialists in these matters must do all in their power to improve these conventions and thus bring about a better and more effective curbing of the savagery of war”. [2]

Perhaps we need to realize more clearly that civilian victims are not “collateral damage”, but men and woman, with names and surnames, who lose their lives. They are children who are orphaned and deprived of their future. They are individuals who suffer from hunger, thirst and cold, or are mutilated as an effect of the power of modern explosives. Were we to be able to look each of them in the eye, call them by name, and learn something of their personal history, we would see war for what it is: nothing other than an immense tragedy, a “useless slaughter”, [3] one that offends the dignity of every person on this earth.

Wars, nonetheless, are able to continue thanks to the enormous stock of available weapons. There is need to pursue a policy of disarmament, since it is illusory to think that weapons have deterrent value. The contrary is true: the availability of weapons encourages their use and increases their production. Weapons create mistrust and divert resources. How many lives could be saved with the resources that today are misdirected to weaponry? Would it not be better to invest those resources in the pursuit of genuine global security? The challenges of our time transcend borders, as we see from the variety of crises – of food, the environment, the economy and health care – that have marked the beginning of the century. Here I reiterate my proposal that a global fund be established to finally eliminate hunger [4] and to promote a sustainable development of the entire planet.

Among the threats caused by these instruments of death, I cannot fail to mention those produced by nuclear arsenals and the development of increasingly sophisticated and destructive weapons. Here, I once more affirm the immorality of manufacturing and possessing nuclear weapons. In this regard, I express my hope for the resumption, at the earliest date possible, of negotiations for the restart of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, better known as the “Iran Nuclear Deal,” to ensure a safer future for all.

To pursue peace, however, it is not enough simply to eliminate the implements of war; its root causes must be eradicated. Foremost among these is hunger, a scourge that continues to afflict entire areas of our world while others are marked by massive waste of food. Then there is the exploitation of natural resources, which enriches a few while leaving entire populations, the natural beneficiaries of these resources, in a state of destitution and poverty. Connected to this is the exploitation of people forced to work for low wages and lacking real prospects for professional growth.

The causes of conflict also include natural and environmental disasters. To be sure, there are disasters that human beings cannot control. I think of the recent earthquakes in Morocco and China that resulted in hundreds of victims, as well as the severe earthquake that struck Türkiye and part of Syria, and took a terrible toll of death and destruction. I think too of the flood that struck Derna in Libya, effectively destroying the city, not least because of the simultaneous collapse of two dams.

Yet there are also disasters that are attributable to human activity or neglect and contribute seriously to the

current climate crisis, such as the deforestation of the Amazon, the “green lung” of the earth.

The climate and environmental crisis was the topic of the 28th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP28) held last month in Dubai. I regret that I was unable to participate personally. The Conference began in conjunction with the World Meteorological Organization’s announcement that 2023 was the warmest year on record in comparison with the 174 years previous. The climate crisis demands an increasingly urgent response and full involvement on the part of all, including the international community as a whole.[5]

The adoption of the final document at COP28 represents an encouraging step forward; it shows that, in the face of today’s many crises, multilateralism can be renewed through the management of the global climate issue in a world where environmental, social and political problems are closely connected. At COP28, it became clear that the present decade is critical for dealing with climate change. Care for creation and peace “are the most urgent issues and they are closely linked”. [6] For this reason, I express my hope that what was adopted in Dubai will lead to “a decisive acceleration of the ecological transition, through means... [to be] achieved in four sectors: energy efficiency; renewable sources; the elimination of fossil fuels; and education in lifestyles that are less dependent on the latter”. [7]

Wars, poverty, the mistreatment of our common home and the ongoing exploitation of its resources, which lead to natural disasters, also drive thousands of people to leave their homelands in search of a future of peace and security. In journeying, they risk their lives along dangerous routes, like those through the Sahara desert, in the Darién forest on the border between Colombia and Panama in Central America, in the north of Mexico at the border with the United States, and above all on the Mediterranean Sea. Sadly, in the last ten years the Mediterranean has turned into a great cemetery, as tragedies continue to unfold, due also to unscrupulous human traffickers. Let us not forget that the great number of victims include many unaccompanied minors.

The Mediterranean should instead be a *laboratory of peace*, “a place where different countries and realities can encounter each other on the basis of the humanity we all share”. [8] I wished to emphasize this in Marseille, during my Apostolic Journey for the *Rencontres Méditerranéennes*, and I am grateful to the organizers and the French authorities for having made that Journey possible. Faced with such an immense tragedy, we can easily end up closing our hearts, entrenching ourselves behind fears of an “invasion.” We are quick to forget that we are dealing with people with faces and names, and we overlook the specific vocation of this, “our sea” (*mare nostrum*), to be not a tomb but a place of encounter and mutual enrichment between individuals, peoples and cultures. This does not detract from the fact that migration should be regulated, in order to accept, promote, accompany and integrate migrants, while at the same time respecting the culture, sensitivities and security of the peoples that accept responsibility for such acceptance and integration. We need likewise to insist on the right of people to remain in their homeland and the corresponding need to create the conditions for the effective exercise of this right.

In confronting this challenge, no country should be left alone, nor can any country think of addressing the issue in isolation, through more restrictive and repressive legislation adopted at times under pressure of fear or in pursuit of electoral consensus. In this regard, I welcome the commitment of the European Union to seek a common solution through the adoption of the new Pact on Migration and Asylum, while at the same time noting some of its limitations, especially concerning the recognition of the right to asylum and the danger of arbitrary detention.

Dear Ambassadors,

The path to peace calls for respect for life, for every human life, starting with the life of the unborn child in the mother’s womb, which cannot be suppressed or turned into an object of trafficking. In this regard, I deem deplorable the practice of so-called surrogate motherhood, which represents a grave violation of the dignity of the woman and the child, based on the exploitation of situations of the mother’s material needs. A child is always a gift and never the basis of a commercial contract. Consequently, I express my hope for an effort by the international community to prohibit this practice universally. At every moment of its existence, human life must

be preserved and defended; yet I note with regret, especially in the West, the continued spread of a culture of death, which in the name of a false compassion discards children, the elderly and the sick.

The path to peace calls for respect for human rights, in accordance with the simple yet clear formulation contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, whose seventy-fifth anniversary we recently celebrated. These principles are self-evident and commonly accepted. Regrettably, in recent decades attempts have been made to introduce new rights that are neither fully consistent with those originally defined nor always acceptable. They have led to instances of ideological colonization, in which gender theory plays a central role; the latter is extremely dangerous since it cancels differences in its claim to make everyone equal. These instances of ideological colonization prove injurious and create divisions between states, rather than fostering peace.

Dialogue, on the other hand, must be the soul of the international community. The current situation is also the result of the weakening of structures of multilateral diplomacy that arose after the Second World War.

Organizations established to foster security, peace and cooperation are no longer capable of uniting all their members around one table. There is the risk of a “monadology” and of splitting into “clubs” that only admit states deemed ideologically compatible. Even agencies devoted to the common good and to technical questions, which have thus far proved effective, risk paralysis due to ideological polarization and exploitation by individual states.

In order to relaunch a shared commitment to the service of peace, there is a need to recover the roots, the spirit and the values that gave rise to those organizations, while at the same time taking into account the changed context and showing regard for those who do not feel adequately represented by the structures of international organizations.

To be sure, dialogue requires patience, perseverance and an ability to listen, yet when sincere attempts are made to put an end to disagreements, significant results can be achieved. One example that comes to mind is the Belfast Agreement, also known as the Good Friday Agreement, signed by the British and Irish governments, whose twenty-fifth anniversary was commemorated last year. Putting an end to thirty years of violent conflict, it can serve as an example to motivate and encourage authorities to trust in peace processes, whatever the hardships and sacrifices they entail.

The way to peace is through political and social dialogue, since it is the basis for civil coexistence in a modern political community. 2024 will witness elections being held in many nations. Elections are an essential moment in the life of any country, since they allow all citizens responsibly to choose their leaders. The words of Pope Pius XII remain as timely as ever: “To express one’s own view of the duties and sacrifices imposed on him or her; not to be compelled to obey without first being heard – these are two rights of the citizen which find expression in democracy, as its very name implies. From the stability, harmony and good fruits produced by this contact between the citizens and the government of the state, one may recognize whether a democracy is truly sound and well balanced, and perceive the vigour of its life and development”.^[9]

It is important, then, that citizens, especially young people who will be voting for the first time, consider it one of their primary duties to contribute to the advancement of the common good through a free and informed participation in elections. Politics, for its part, should always be understood not as an appropriation of power, but as the “highest form of charity”,^[10] and thus of service to one’s neighbour within a local or national community.

The path to peace also passes through interreligious dialogue, which before all else requires the protection of religious freedom and respect for minorities. It is painful to note, for example, that an increasing number of countries are adopting models of centralized control over religious freedom, especially by the massive use of technology. In other places, minority religious communities often find themselves in increasingly precarious situations. In some cases, they risk extinction due to a combination of terrorism, attacks on their cultural heritage and more subtle measures such as the proliferation of anti-conversion laws, the manipulation of electoral rules and financial restrictions.

Of particular concern is the rise in acts of anti-Semitism in recent months. Once again, I would reiterate that this

scourge must be eliminated from society, especially through education in fraternity and acceptance of others.

Equally troubling is the increase in persecution and discrimination against Christians, especially over the last ten years. At times, this involves nonviolent but socially significant cases of gradual marginalization and exclusion from political and social life and from the exercise of certain professions, even in traditionally Christian lands. Altogether, more than 360 million Christians around the world are experiencing a high level of discrimination and persecution because of their faith, with more and more of them being forced to flee their homelands.

Finally, the path to peace passes through education, which is the principal means of investing in the future and in young people. I have vivid memories of the celebration of World Youth Day in Portugal last August. As I renew my gratitude to the Portuguese authorities, civil and religious, for their hard work in organizing the event, I continue to treasure that encounter with more than a million young people from all over the world, brimming with enthusiasm and zest for life. Their presence was a great hymn to peace and a testimony to the fact that “unity is greater than conflict”[11] and that it is “possible to build communion amid disagreement”. [12]

In recent times, the challenges faced by educators have come to include the ethical use of new technologies. The latter can easily become a means of spreading division or lies, “fake news”, yet they also serve as a source of encounter and mutual exchange, and an important vehicle for peace. “The remarkable advances in new information technologies, particularly in the digital sphere, thus offer exciting opportunities and grave risks, with serious implications for the pursuit of justice and harmony among peoples”. [13] For this reason, I thought it important to devote this year’s Message for the World Day of Peace to the subject of artificial intelligence, one of the most significant challenges for the years to come.

It is essential that technological development take place in an ethical and responsible way, respecting the centrality of the human person, whose place can never be taken by an algorithm or a machine. “The inherent dignity of each human being and the fraternity that binds us together as members of the one human family must undergird the development of new technologies and serve as indisputable criteria for evaluating them before they are employed, so that digital progress can occur with due respect for justice and contribute to the cause of peace”. [14]

Consequently, careful reflection is required at every level, national and international, political and social, to ensure that the development of artificial intelligence remains at the service of men and women, fostering and not obstructing – especially in the case of young people – interpersonal relations, a healthy spirit of fraternity, critical thinking and a capacity for discernment.

In this regard, the two Diplomatic Conferences of the World Intellectual Property Organization, which will take place in 2024 with the participation of the Holy See as a Member State, will prove particularly important. In the view of the Holy See, intellectual property is essentially directed to the promotion of the common good and cannot be detached from ethical requirements, lest situations of injustice and undue exploitation arise. Special concern must also be shown for the protection of the human genetic patrimony, by prohibiting practices contrary to human dignity, such as the patenting of human biological material and the cloning of human beings.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

This year the Church is preparing for the Holy Year that will begin next Christmas. In a particular way, I express my gratitude to the Italian authorities, national and local, for their efforts in preparing the City of Rome to welcome great numbers of pilgrims and to enable them to draw spiritual fruit from their experience of the Jubilee.

Today, perhaps more than ever, we need a Holy Year. Amid many causes of suffering that lead to a sense of hopelessness not only in those directly affected but throughout our societies; amid the difficulties experienced by our young people, who instead of dreaming of a better future often feel helpless and frustrated; and amid the gloom of this world that seems to be spreading rather than receding, the Jubilee is a proclamation that God never abandons his people and constantly keeps open the doors to his Kingdom. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Jubilee is a season of grace that enables us to experience God’s mercy and the gift of his peace. It

is also a season of righteousness, in which sins are forgiven, reconciliation prevails over injustice, and the earth can be at rest. For everyone – Christians and non-Christians – the Jubilee can be a time when swords are beaten into ploughshares, a time when one nation will no longer lift up sword against another, nor learn war any more (cf. *Is* 2:4).

Dear brothers and sisters, this is my heartfelt wish for each of you, dear Ambassadors, for your families and colleagues, and for the peoples you represent.

Thank you and a Happy New Year to all of you!

[1] Christmas Radio Message to the Peoples of the World, 24 December 1944.

[2] Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* on the Church in the Modern World (7 December 1965), 79.

[3] Cf. BENEDICT XV, Letter to the Leaders of the Belligerent Peoples (1 August 1917).

[4] Cf. Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* on Fraternity and Social Friendship (3 October 2020), 262.

[5] Cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Laudate Deum* to All People of Good Will on the Climate Crisis (4 October 2023).

[6] Address to the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2 December 2023.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Address for the Conclusion of the “*Rencontres Méditerranéennes*”, Marseille, 23 September 2023, 1.

[9] Christmas Radio Message to the Peoples of the World, 24 December 1944.

[10] PIUS XI, Audience to the Leaders of the Catholic University Federation, 18 December 1927.

[11] Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* on the Proclamation of the Gospel in today’s World (24 November 2013), 228.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Message for the 2024 World Day of Peace (8 December 2023), 1.

[14] Ibid, 2.
