

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
FOR THE CELEBRATION OF THE
WORLD DAY OF PEACE

1 JANUARY 1989

**TO BUILD PEACE,
RESPECT MINORITIES**

Introduction

1. "From the 19th century a certain political trend has spread and taken hold in all parts of the world according to which people of the same extraction wish to be independent and to set themselves up as a nation apart. But since, for various reasons, this cannot always be achieved, it follows that ethnic minorities are often included within the national borders of a different ethnic group, and this leads to quite complex problems" (Encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, III).

With these words, twenty-five years ago, my venerable predecessor Pope John XXIII pointed to one of the most delicate questions affecting contemporary society, a question which, with the passing of time, has become even more pressing since it is related to the organization of social and civil life within each country, as well as to the life of the international community.

It is for this reason that, in choosing a specific theme for the World Day of Peace, I think it appropriate to present for general reflection the problem of minorities. For we are all aware that, as the Second Vatican Council affirms, "peace is not merely the absence of war, nor can it be reduced solely to the maintenance of a balance of power between enemies" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 78). Rather, peace is a dynamic process which must take account of the many conditions and factors that can either favour it or disturb it.

It is clear that at this time of increased international *détente* resulting from agreements and mediations which allow us to look forward to solutions in favour of peoples who have been the victims of bloody conflicts, the question of minorities is assuming a notable importance. Consequently, it constitutes a matter for careful reflection on the part of political and religious leaders and all men and women of good will.

2. As communities which take their origin from separate cultural traditions, racial and ethnic stock, religious beliefs, or historical experiences, minority groups exist in almost all societies today. Some go very far back in time, others are of recent origin. The situations in which they live are so diverse that it is almost impossible to draw up a complete picture of them. On the one hand there are groups, even very small ones, which are able to preserve and affirm their own identity and are well integrated within the societies to which they belong. In some cases, such minority groups even succeed in imposing their control on the majority in public life.

On the other hand one sees minorities which exert no influence and do not fully enjoy their rights, but rather find themselves in situations of suffering and distress. This can lead them either to passive resignation or to unrest and even rebellion. Yet, neither passivity nor violence represents the proper path for creating conditions of true peace.

Some minority groups share another experience: that of separation or exclusion. While it is true that at times a group may deliberately choose to remain apart in order to protect its own way of life, it is more often true that minorities are confronted by barriers that keep them apart from the rest of society. While in such a context the minority group tends to become closed within itself, the majority group may foster a feeling of rejection towards this group as a whole or towards its individual members. When this happens, the latter are no longer in a position actively and creatively to contribute to building a peace based on the acceptance of legitimate differences.

Fundamental principles

3. In a nation made up of various groups of people there are two general principles which can never be abrogated and which constitute the basis of all social organization.

The first of these principles is the inalienable dignity of every human person, irrespective of racial, ethnic, cultural or national origin, or religious belief. Individuals do not exist for themselves alone, but achieve their full identity in relation to others. The same can be said about groups of people. They indeed have a right to a collective identity that must be safeguarded, in accordance with the dignity of each member. Such a right remains intact even in cases in which the group, or one of its members, acts against the common good. In such situations, the alleged abuse must be addressed by the competent authorities, without the whole group being condemned, since that would be against justice. At the same time, the members of minority groups have the duty to treat others with the same respect and sense of dignity.

The second principle concerns the fundamental unity of the human race, which takes its origin from the one God, the Creator, who, in the language of Sacred Scripture, "made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth" (*Acts 17:26*). The unity of the human family requires that the whole of humanity, beyond its ethnic, national, cultural and religious differences, should form a community that is free of discrimination between peoples and that strives for reciprocal solidarity. Unity also requires that differences between the members of the human family should be used to strengthen unity, rather than serve as a cause of division.

The obligation to accept and defend diversity belongs not only to the State and to the groups themselves. Every individual, as a member of the one human family, ought to understand and respect the value of human diversity and direct it to the common good. A mind that is open and desirous of knowing better the cultural heritage of the minority groups with which it comes into contact will help to eliminate attitudes of prejudice which hinder healthy social

relations. This is a process which has to be continuously fostered, since such attitudes tend to reappear time and again under new forms.

Peace within the one human family requires a constructive development of what distinguishes us as individuals and peoples, and of what constitutes our identity. Furthermore, on the part of all social groups, whether constituted as States or not, peace requires a readiness to contribute to the building of a peaceful world. The micro-community and the macro-community are bound by reciprocal rights and duties, the observance of which serves to consolidate peace.

Rights and duties of minorities

4. One of the objectives of a State ruled by law is that all its citizens may enjoy the same dignity and the same equality before the law. Nonetheless, the existence of minorities as identifiable groups within a State raises the question of their specific rights and duties.

Many of these rights and duties have to do precisely with the relationship of minority groups to the State. In some cases, these rights have been codified and minorities enjoy specific legal protection. But not infrequently, even where the State guarantees such protection, minorities can suffer discrimination and exclusion. In these cases, the State itself has an obligation to promote and foster the rights of the minority groups, since peace and internal security can only be guaranteed through respect for the rights of all those for whom the State has responsibility.

5. The first right of minorities is the right to exist. This right can be ignored in many ways, including such extreme cases as its denial through overt or indirect forms of genocide. The right to life as such is inalienable, and the State which perpetrates or tolerates acts aimed at endangering the lives of its citizens belonging to minority groups violates the fundamental law governing the social order.

6. The right to exist can be undermined also in more subtle ways. Certain peoples, especially those identified as native or indigenous, have always maintained a special relationship to their land, a relationship connected with the group's very identity as a people having their own tribal, cultural and religious traditions. When such indigenous peoples are deprived of their land they lose a vital element of their way of life and actually run the risk of disappearing as a people.

7. Another right which must be safeguarded is the right of minorities to preserve and develop their own culture. It is not unheard of that minority groups are threatened with cultural extinction. In some places, in fact, laws have been enacted which do not recognize their right to use their own language. At times people are forced to change their family and place names. Some minorities see their artistic and literary expressions ignored, with their festivals and celebrations given no place in public life. All this can lead to the loss of a notable cultural heritage. Closely connected with this right is the right to have contact with groups having a common cultural and historical heritage but living in the territory of another State.

8. Here I will make only a brief mention of the right to religious freedom, since this was the theme of my Message for last year's World Day of Peace. This right applies to all religious communities, as well as to individuals, and includes the free manifestation of religious beliefs, both individually and collectively. Consequently, religious minorities must be able to worship as a community, according to their own rites. They must also be in a position to provide religious education through appropriate teaching programmes and to utilize the necessary means to this end.

Moreover, it is very important that the State should effectively ensure and promote the observance of religious freedom, especially when, alongside the great majority who follow one religion, there exist one or more minority groups of another faith.

Finally, religious minorities must be guaranteed a legitimate freedom of exchange and contacts with other communities, both within and outside their own national borders .

9. Today, fundamental human rights are enshrined in many international and national declarations. However essential these juridical instruments may be, they are still not enough to overcome deep-seated attitudes of prejudice and distrust, or to eliminate ways of thinking which lead to actions directed against minority groups. The translation of law into behaviour constitutes a long and slow process, especially with a view to eradicating such attitudes. This does not make the process any less urgent. Not only the State, but also each individual has the obligation to do everything possible to achieve this goal. The State, though, can play an important role by favouring the promotion of cultural initiatives and exchanges which aid mutual understanding, as well as educational programmes which help to train young people to respect others and reject all prejudices, many of which stem from ignorance. Parents too have a great responsibility, since children learn much from observation and tend to adopt their parents' attitudes towards other peoples and groups.

There is no doubt that the development of a culture based on respect for others is essential to the building of a peaceful society. But unfortunately the evidence today is that the effective exercise of this respect meets with considerable difficulties.

In practice, the State must be alert to prevent new forms of discrimination, as for example in access to housing or employment. In this respect the policies of public authorities are often laudably complemented by the generous initiatives of voluntary groups, religious organizations and people of good will, working to lower tensions and promote greater social justice by helping so many brothers and sisters to find work and decent housing.

10. Delicate problems arise when a minority group puts forward claims which have particular political implications. A group may sometimes be seeking independence or at least greater political autonomy.

I wish to restate that, in such delicate circumstances, dialogue and negotiation are the obligatory path to peace. The willingness of parties involved to meet and talk to one another is the indispensable condition for reaching an equitable solution to the complex problems that

can seriously obstruct peace. And a refusal to enter into dialogue can open the door to violence.

In some situations of conflict, terrorist groups unduly arrogate to themselves the exclusive right to speak in the name of a minority, depriving it of the possibility of freely and openly choosing, its own representatives and of seeking a solution without intimidation. In addition, the members of such minority communities too often suffer from the acts of violence wrongfully committed in their name.

May those who follow the inhuman path of terrorism hear my voice: to strike blindly, kill innocent people or carry out bloody reprisals does not help a just evaluation of the claims advanced by the minorities for whom they claim to act! (cf. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 24).

11. Every right carries with it corresponding duties . Members of minority groups also have their own duties towards society and the State in which they live: in the first place, the duty to cooperate, like all citizens, for the common good. Minorities, in fact, must offer their own specific contribution to the building of a peaceful world that will reflect the rich diversity of all its inhabitants.

Secondly, a minority group has the duty to promote the freedom and dignity of each one of its members and to respect the decisions of each one, even if someone were to decide to adopt the majority culture.

In situations of real injustice it may be the duty of groups which have emigrated to other countries to demand respect for the legitimate rights of the members of their group who remain oppressed in their place of origin and who cannot themselves make their voice heard. In such cases great prudence and enlightened discernment must be exercised, especially when it is difficult to have objective information about the changing conditions of life of the people involved.

All members of minority groups, wherever they may be, must conscientiously judge the correctness of their claims in the light of historical developments and present reality. Not to do so would involve the risk of remaining prisoners of the past without prospects for the future .

Building peace

12. In the above reflections one can perceive the outline of a just and peaceful society, to the achievement of which all have a responsibility to contribute with every possible effort. Building this society requires a wholehearted commitment to eliminate not only evident discrimination but also all barriers that divide groups. Reconciliation according to justice and with respect for the legitimate aspirations of all sectors of the community must be the rule. Above all and in all, the patient effort to build a peaceful society finds strength and fulfilment in the love that embraces all peoples. Such a love can be expressed in countless concrete ways of serving the rich diversity of the human race, which is one in origin and destiny.

The increased awareness which is found today at every level regarding the situation of minority groups constitutes for our own times a hopeful sign for the coming generations and for the aspirations of minority groups themselves. Indeed, in a sense, respect for minorities is to be considered the touchstone of social harmony and the index of the civic maturity attained by a country and its institutions. In a truly democratic society, to guarantee the participation of minorities in political life is a sign of a highly developed civilization, and it brings honour upon those nations in which all citizens are guaranteed a share in national life in a climate of true freedom.

13. Finally, I wish to address a special appeal to my brothers and sisters in Christ. Whatever our origin and wherever we live, all of us know through faith that in Christ "we all have access in one Spirit to the Father" for we have become "members of the household of God" (*Eph* 2:18, 19). As members of the one family of God we can tolerate no division or discrimination in our midst. When the Father sent his Son into the world he entrusted him with a mission of universal salvation. Jesus came that "all may have life and have it abundantly" (*Jn* 10:10). No person, no group is excluded from this mission of unifying love which has now been entrusted to us. We too must pray as Jesus did on the very eve of his death, with the simple and sublime words: "Father may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you" (*Jn* 17: 21).

This prayer must be our life's work, our witness, since as Christians we acknowledge that we have a common Father who makes no distinction of persons and "loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing" (*Dt* 10:18).

14. When the Church speaks of discrimination in general or, as in this Message, of the particular discrimination that affects minority groups, she addresses her own members first of all, whatever their position or responsibility in society. Just as there can be no place for discrimination within the Church, so no Christian can knowingly foster or support structures and attitudes that unjustly divide individuals or groups. This same teaching must be applied to those who have recourse to violence or support it.

15. In closing, I would like to express my spiritual closeness to those members of minority groups who are suffering. I know their moments of pain and their reasons for legitimate pride. My prayer is that their trials may soon cease and that all may be secure in the enjoyment of their rights. I in turn ask for prayers, that the peace we seek may be an ever more genuine peace, built on the "cornerstone" which is Christ himself (cf. *Eph* 2:20-22).

May God bless everyone with the gift of his peace and his love!

From the Vatican, 8 December 1988.

JOANNES PAULUS PP. II