

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, THE PATH TO PEACE

1. at the beginning of the new year I offer good wishes to each and all for serenity and prosperity, but especially for peace. Sadly, the year now ending has again been marked by persecution, discrimination, terrible acts of violence and religious intolerance.

My thoughts turn in a special way to the beloved country of Iraq, which continues to be a theatre of violence and strife as it makes its way towards a future of stability and reconciliation. I think of the recent sufferings of the Christian community, and in particular the reprehensible attack on the Syro-Catholic Cathedral of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Baghdad, where on 31 October two priests and over fifty faithful were killed as they gathered for the celebration of Holy Mass. In the days that followed, other attacks ensued, even on private homes, spreading fear within the Christian community and a desire on the part of many to emigrate in search of a better life. I assure them of my own closeness and that of the entire Church, a closeness which found concrete expression in the recent Special Assembly for the Middle East of the Synod of Bishops. The Synod encouraged the Catholic communities in Iraq and throughout the Middle East to live in communion and to continue to offer a courageous witness of faith in those lands.

I offer heartfelt thanks to those Governments which are working to alleviate the sufferings of these, our brothers and sisters in the human family, and I ask all Catholics for their prayers and support for their brethren in the faith who are victims of violence and intolerance. In this context, I have felt it particularly appropriate to share some reflections on religious freedom as the path to peace. It is painful to think that in some areas of the world it is impossible to profess one's religion freely except at the risk of life and personal liberty. In other areas we see more subtle and sophisticated forms of prejudice and hostility towards believers and religious symbols. At present, Christians are the religious group which suffers most from persecution on account of its faith. Many Christians experience daily affronts and often live in fear because of their pursuit of truth, their faith in Jesus Christ and their heartfelt plea for respect for religious freedom. This situation is unacceptable, since it represents an insult to God and to human dignity; furthermore, it is a threat to security and peace, and an obstacle to the achievement of authentic and integral human development.¹

Religious freedom expresses what is unique about the human person, for it allows us to direct our personal and social life to God, in whose light the identity, meaning and purpose of the person are fully understood. To deny or arbitrarily restrict this freedom is to foster a reductive vision of the human person; to eclipse the public role of religion is to create a society which is unjust, inasmuch as it fails to take account of the true nature of the human person; it is to stifle the growth of the authentic and lasting peace of the whole human family.

For this reason, I implore all men and women of good will to renew their commitment to building a world where all are free to profess their religion or faith, and to express their love of God with all their heart, with all their soul and with all their mind (cf. Mt 22:37). This is the sentiment which inspires and directs this Message for the XLIV World Day of Peace, devoted to the theme: Religious Freedom, the Path to Peace.

A sacred right to life and to a spiritual life

2. The right to religious freedom is rooted in the very dignity of the human person,² whose transcendent nature must not be ignored or overlooked. God created man and woman in his own image and likeness (cf. Gen 1:27). For this reason each person is endowed with the sacred right to a full life, also from a spiritual standpoint.

Without the acknowledgement of his spiritual being, without openness to the transcendent, the human person withdraws within himself, fails to find answers to the heart's deepest questions about life's meaning, fails to appropriate lasting ethical values and principles, and fails even to experience authentic freedom and to build a just society.³

Sacred Scripture, in harmony with our own experience, reveals the profound value of human dignity: "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have established, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man, that you care for him? Yet you have made him little less than God, and crowned him with glory and honour. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet" (Ps 8:3-

6).

Contemplating the sublime reality of human nature, we can experience the same amazement felt by the Psalmist. Our nature appears as openness to the Mystery, a capacity to ask deep questions about ourselves and the origin of the universe, and a profound echo of the supreme Love of God, the beginning and end of all things, of every person and people.⁴ The transcendent dignity of the person is an essential value of Judeo-Christian wisdom, yet thanks to the use of reason, it can be recognized by all. This dignity, understood as a capacity to transcend one's own materiality and to seek truth, must be acknowledged as a universal good, indispensable for the building of a society directed to human fulfilment. Respect for essential elements of human dignity, such as the right to life and the right to religious freedom, is a condition for the moral legitimacy of every social and legal norm.

Religious freedom and mutual respect

3. Religious freedom is at the origin of moral freedom. Openness to truth and perfect goodness, openness to God, is rooted in human nature; it confers full dignity on each individual and is the guarantee of full mutual respect between persons. Religious freedom should be understood, then, not merely as immunity from coercion, but even more fundamentally as an ability to order one's own choices in accordance with truth.

Freedom and respect are inseparable; indeed, "in exercising their rights, individuals and social groups are bound by the moral law to have regard for the rights of others, their own duties to others and the common good of all".⁵

A freedom which is hostile or indifferent to God becomes self-negating and does not guarantee full respect for others. A will which believes itself radically incapable of seeking truth and goodness has no objective reasons or motives for acting save those imposed by its fleeting and contingent interests; it does not have an "identity"

to safeguard and build up through truly free and conscious decisions. As a result, it cannot demand respect from other "wills", which are themselves detached from their own deepest being and thus capable of imposing other "reasons" or, for that matter, no "reason" at all. **The illusion that moral relativism provides the key for peaceful coexistence is actually the origin of divisions and the denial of the dignity of human beings.** Hence we can see the need for recognition of a twofold dimension within the unity of the human person: a religious dimension and a social dimension. In this regard, "it is inconceivable that believers should have to suppress a part of themselves – their faith – in order to be active citizens. It should never be necessary to deny God in order to enjoy one's rights".⁶

The family, the school of freedom and peace

4. If religious freedom is the path to peace, religious education is the highway which leads new generations to see others as their brothers and sisters, with whom they are called to journey and work together so that all will feel that they are living members of the one human family, from which no one is to be excluded.

The family founded on marriage, as the expression of the close union and complementarity between a man and a woman, finds its place here as the first school for

the social, cultural, moral and spiritual formation and growth of children, who should always be able to see in their father and mother the first witnesses of a life directed to the pursuit of truth and the love of God. Parents must be always free to transmit to their children, responsibly and without constraints, their heritage of faith, values and culture. The family, the first cell of human society, remains the primary training ground for harmonious relations at every level of coexistence, human, national and international. Wisdom suggests that this is the road to building a strong and fraternal social fabric, in which young people can be prepared to assume their proper responsibilities in life, in a free society, and in a spirit of understanding and peace.

A common patrimony

5. It could be said that among the fundamental rights and freedoms rooted in the dignity of the person, religious freedom enjoys a special status. When religious freedom is acknowledged, the dignity of the human person is respected at its root, and the ethos and institutions of peoples are strengthened. On the other hand, whenever religious freedom is denied, and attempts are made to hinder people from professing their religion or faith and living accordingly, human dignity is offended, with a resulting threat to justice and peace, which are grounded in that right social order established in the light of Supreme Truth and Supreme Goodness.

Religious freedom is, in this sense, also an achievement of a sound political and juridical culture. It is an essential good: each person must be able freely to exercise the right to profess and manifest, individually or in community, his or her own religion or faith, in public and in private, in teaching, in practice, in publications, in worship and in ritual observances. There should be no obstacles should he or she eventually wish to belong to another religion or profess none at all. In this context,

international law is a model and an essential point of reference for states, insofar as it allows no derogation from religious freedom, as long as the just requirements of public order are observed.⁷ The international order thus recognizes that rights of a religious nature have the same status as the right to life and to personal freedom, as proof of the fact that they belong to the essential core of human rights, to those universal and natural rights which human law can never deny.

Religious freedom is not the exclusive patrimony of believers, but of the whole family of the earth's peoples. It is an essential element of a constitutional state; it cannot be denied without at the same time encroaching on all fundamental rights and freedoms, since it is their synthesis and keystone. It is "the litmus test for the respect of all the other human rights".⁸ While it favours the exercise of our most specifically human faculties, it creates the necessary premises for the attainment of an integral development which concerns the whole of the person in every single dimension.⁹

The public dimension of religion

6. Religious freedom, like every freedom, proceeds from the personal sphere and is achieved in relationship with others. Freedom without relationship is not full freedom. Religious freedom is not limited to the individual dimension alone, but is attained within one's community and in society, in a way consistent with the relational being of the person and the public nature of religion.

Relationship is a decisive component in religious freedom, which impels the community of believers to practise solidarity for the common good. In this communitarian

dimension, each person remains unique and unrepeatable, while at the same time finding completion and full realization.

The contribution of religious communities to society is undeniable. Numerous charitable and cultural institutions testify to the constructive role played by believers in

the life of society. More important still is religion's ethical contribution in the political sphere. Religion should not be marginalized or prohibited, but seen as making an effective contribution to the promotion of the common good. In this context mention should be made of the religious dimension of culture, built up over centuries thanks to the social and especially ethical contributions of religion. This dimension is in no way discriminatory towards those who do not share its beliefs, but instead reinforces social cohesion, integration and solidarity.

Religious freedom, a force for freedom and civilization: dangers arising from its exploitation

7. The exploitation of religious freedom to disguise hidden interests, such as the subversion of the established order, the hoarding of resources or the grip on power of a single group, can cause enormous harm to societies. Fanaticism, fundamentalism and practices contrary to human dignity can never be justified, even less so in the

name of religion. The profession of a religion cannot be exploited or imposed by force. States and the various human communities must never forget that religious freedom is the condition for the pursuit of truth, and truth does not impose itself by violence but "by the force of its own truth".¹⁰ In this sense, religion is a positive driving force for the building of civil and political society.

How can anyone deny the contribution of the world's great religions to the development of civilization? The sincere search for God has led to greater respect for human dignity. Christian communities, with their patrimony of values and principles, have contributed much to making individuals and peoples aware of their identity and their dignity, the establishment of democratic institutions and the recognition of human rights and their corresponding duties.

Today too, in an increasingly globalized society, Christians are called, not only through their responsible involvement in civic, economic and political life but also through the witness of their charity and faith, to offer a valuable contribution to the laborious and stimulating pursuit of justice, integral human development and the right ordering of human affairs. The exclusion of religion from public life deprives the latter of a dimension open to transcendence. Without this fundamental experience it becomes difficult to guide societies towards universal ethical principles and to establish at the national and international level a legal order which fully recognizes and respects fundamental rights and freedoms as these are set forth in the goals – sadly still disregarded or contradicted – of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

An issue of justice and civility: fundamentalism and hostility to believers compromise the positive secularity of states

8. The same determination that condemns every form of fanaticism and religious fundamentalism must also oppose every form of hostility to religion that would restrict the public role of believers in civil and political life.

It should be clear that religious fundamentalism and secularism are alike in that both represent extreme forms of a rejection of legitimate pluralism and the principle of secularity. Both absolutize a reductive and partial vision of the human person, favouring in the one case forms of religious integralism and, in the other, of rationalism. A society that would violently impose or, on the contrary, reject religion is not only unjust to individuals and to God, but also to itself. God beckons humanity with a loving plan that, while engaging the whole person in his or her natural and spiritual dimensions, calls for a free and responsible answer which engages the whole heart and being, individual and communitarian. Society too, as an expression of the person and of all his or her constitutive dimensions, must live and organize itself in a way that favours openness to transcendence. Precisely for this reason, the laws and institutions of a society cannot be shaped in such a way as to ignore the religious dimension of its citizens or to prescind completely from it. Through the democratic activity of citizens conscious of their lofty calling, those laws and institutions must adequately reflect the authentic nature of the person and support its religious dimension. Since the latter is not a creation of the state, it cannot be manipulated by the state, but must rather be acknowledged and respected by it.

Whenever the legal system at any level, national or international, allows or tolerates religious or antireligious fanaticism, it fails in its mission, which is to protect and promote justice and the rights of all. These matters cannot be left to the discretion of the legislator or the majority since, as Cicero once pointed out, justice is something more than a mere act which produces and applies law. It entails acknowledging the dignity of each person¹¹ which, unless religious freedom is guaranteed and lived in its essence, ends up being curtailed and offended, exposed to the risk of falling under the sway of idols, of relative goods which then become absolute. All this exposes society to the risk of forms of political and ideological totalitarianism which emphasize public power while demeaning and restricting freedom of conscience, thought and religion as potential competitors.

Dialogue between civil and religious institutions

9. The patrimony of principles and values expressed by an authentic religiosity is a source of enrichment for peoples and their ethos. It speaks directly to the conscience and mind of men and women, it recalls the need for moral conversion, and it encourages the practice of the virtues and a loving approach to others as brothers and sisters, as members of the larger human family.¹²

With due respect for the positive secularity of state institutions, the public dimension of religion must always be acknowledged. A healthy dialogue between civil and religious institutions is fundamental for the integral development of the human person and social harmony.

Living in love and in truth

10. In a globalized world marked by increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies, the great religions can serve as an important factor of unity and peace for the human family. On the basis of their religious convictions and their reasoned pursuit of the common good, their followers are called to give responsible expression to their commitment within a context of religious freedom. Amid the variety of religious cultures, there is a need to value those elements which foster civil coexistence, while rejecting whatever is contrary to the dignity of men and women.

The public space which the international community makes available for the religions and their proposal of what constitutes a "good life" helps to create a measure of agreement about truth and goodness, and a moral consensus; both of these are fundamental to a just and peaceful coexistence. The leaders of the great religions, thanks to their position, their influence and their authority in their respective communities, are the first ones called to mutual respect and dialogue.

Christians, for their part, are spurred by their faith in God, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, to live as brothers and sisters who encounter one another in the Church and

work together in building a world where individuals and peoples "shall not hurt or destroy ... for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Is 11:9).

Dialogue as a shared pursuit

11. For the Church, dialogue between the followers of the different religions represents an important means of cooperating with all religious communities for the common good. The Church herself rejects nothing of what is true and holy in the various religions. "She has a high regard for those ways of life and conduct, precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women".¹³

The path to take is not the way of relativism or religious syncretism. The Church, in fact, "proclaims, and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life (Jn 14:6); in Christ, in whom God reconciled all things to himself, people find the fullness of the religious life".¹⁴ Yet this in no way excludes dialogue and the common pursuit of truth in different areas of life, since, as Saint Thomas Aquinas would say, "every truth, whoever utters it, comes from the Holy Spirit".¹⁵

The year 2011 marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the World Day of Prayer for Peace convened in Assisi in 1986 by Pope John Paul II. On that occasion the leaders of the great world religions testified to the fact that religion is a factor of union and peace, and not of division and conflict. The memory of that experience gives reason to hope for a future in which all believers will see themselves, and will actually be, agents of justice and peace.

Moral truth in politics and diplomacy

12. Politics and diplomacy should look to the moral and spiritual patrimony offered by the great religions of the world in order to acknowledge and affirm universal truths, principles and values which cannot be denied without denying the dignity of the human person. But what does it mean, in practical terms, to promote moral truth in the world of politics and diplomacy? It means acting in a responsible way on the basis of an objective and integral knowledge of the facts; it means deconstructing political ideologies which end up supplanting truth and human dignity in order to promote pseudo-values under the pretext of peace, development and human rights; it means fostering an unswerving commitment to base positive law on the principles of the natural law.¹⁶ All this is necessary and consistent with the respect for the dignity and worth of the human person enshrined by the world's peoples in the 1945 Charter of the United Nations, which presents universal values and moral principles as a point of reference for the norms, institutions and systems governing coexistence on the national and international levels.

Beyond hatred and prejudice

13. Despite the lessons of history and the efforts of states, international and regional organizations, non-governmental organizations and the many men and women of good will who daily work to protect fundamental rights and freedoms, today's world also witnesses cases of persecution, discrimination, acts of violence and intolerance based on religion. In a particular way, in Asia and in Africa, the chief victims are the members of religious minorities, who are prevented from freely professing or changing their religion by forms of intimidation and the violation of their rights, basic freedoms and essential goods, including the loss of personal freedom and life itself.

There also exist – as I have said – more sophisticated forms of hostility to religion which, in Western countries, occasionally find expression in a denial of history and the rejection of religious symbols which reflect the identity and the culture of the majority of citizens. Often these forms of hostility also foster hatred and prejudice; they are inconsistent with a serene and balanced vision of pluralism and the secularity of institutions, to say nothing of the fact that coming generations risk losing contact with the priceless spiritual heritage of their countries.

Religion is defended by defending the rights and freedoms of religious communities. The leaders of the great world religions and the leaders of nations should therefore renew their commitment to promoting and protecting religious freedom, and in particular to defending religious minorities; these do not represent a threat to the identity of the majority but rather an opportunity for dialogue and mutual cultural enrichment. Defending them is the ideal way to consolidate the spirit of good will, openness and reciprocity which can ensure the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms in all areas and regions of the world.

Religious freedom in the world

14. Finally I wish to say a word to the Christian communities suffering from persecution, discrimination, violence and intolerance, particularly in Asia, in Africa, in the Middle East and especially in the Holy Land, a place chosen and blessed by God. I assure them once more of my paternal affection and prayers, and I ask all those in authority to act promptly to end every injustice against the Christians living in those lands. In the face of present difficulties, may Christ's followers not lose heart, for witnessing to the Gospel is, and always will be, a sign of contradiction.

Let us take to heart the words of the Lord Jesus: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted ... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied ... Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven" (Mt 5:4-12). Then let us renew "the pledge we give to be forgiving and to pardon when we invoke God's forgiveness in the Our Father. We

ourselves lay down the condition and the extent of the mercy we ask for when we say: 'And forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven those who are in debt to us' (Mt 6:12)".¹⁷ Violence is not overcome by violence. May our cries of pain always be accompanied by faith, by hope and by the witness of our love of God. I also express my hope that in the West, and especially in Europe, there will be an end to hostility and prejudice against Christians because they are resolved to orient their lives in a way consistent with the values and principles expressed in the Gospel. May Europe rather be reconciled to its own Christian roots, which are fundamental for understanding its past, present and future role in history; in this way it will come to experience justice, concord and peace by cultivating a sincere dialogue with all peoples.

Religious freedom, the path to peace

15. The world needs God. It needs universal, shared ethical and spiritual values, and religion can offer a precious contribution to their pursuit, for the building of a just and peaceful social order at the national and international levels.

Peace is a gift of God and at the same time a task which is never fully completed. A society reconciled with God is closer to peace, which is not the mere absence of war or the result of military or economic supremacy, much less deceptive ploys or clever manipulation. Rather, peace is the result of a process of purification and of cultural, moral and spiritual elevation involving each individual and people, a process in which human dignity is fully respected. I invite all those who wish to be peacemakers, especially the young, to heed the voice speaking within their hearts and thus to find in God the stable point of reference for attaining authentic freedom, the inexhaustible force which can give the world a new direction and spirit, and overcome the mistakes of the past. In the words of Pope Paul VI, to whose wisdom and farsightedness we owe the institution of the World Day of Peace: "It is necessary before all else to provide peace with other weapons – different from those destined to kill and exterminate mankind. What are needed above all are moral weapons, those which give strength and prestige to international law – the weapon, in the first place, of the observance of pacts".¹⁸ Religious freedom is an authentic weapon of peace, with an historical and prophetic mission. Peace brings to full fruition the deepest qualities and potentials of the human person, the qualities which can change the world and make it better. It gives hope for a future of justice and peace, even in the face of grave injustice and material and moral poverty. May all men and women, and societies at every level and in every part of the earth, soon be able to experience religious freedom, the path to peace!

From the Vatican, 8 December 2010

BENEDICTUS PP XVI

- 1 Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 29, 55-57.
- 2 Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis Humanae*, 2.
- 3 Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 78.
- 4 Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate*, 1.
- 5 ID., Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis Humanae*, 7.
- 6 BENEDICT XVI, Address to the General Assembly of the United Nations (18 April 2008): AAS 100 (2008), 337.
- 7 Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis Humanae*, 2.
- 8 JOHN PAUL II, Address to Participants in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) (10 October 2003), 1: AAS 96 (2004), 111.
- 9 Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 11.
- 10 Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis Humanae*, 1.
- 11 Cf. CICERO, *De Inventione*, II, 160.
- 12 Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Address to Representatives of Other Religions in the United Kingdom (17 September 2010): *L'Osservatore Romano* (18 September 2010), p. 12.
- 13 Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate*, 2.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 *Super Evangelium Joannis*, I, 3.
- 16 Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Address to Civil Authorities and the Diplomatic Corps in Cyprus (4 June 2010): *L'Osservatore Romano* (6 June 2010), p. 8; INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *The Search for Universal Ethics: A New Look at Natural Law*, Vatican City, 2009.

17 PAUL VI, Message for the 1976 World Day of Peace: AAS 67 (1975), 671.

18 Ibid., p. 668.

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