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1948 Christmas Message of Pope Pius XII

Radio message to the world given
December 23, 1948, by His
Holiness, Pope Pius XII



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GRAVE yet tender, like the testament and last farewell of a most loving father, were the words of the Divine Redeemer to His first Vicar on earth: *Confirma fratres tuos* (Luke 22, 32), Strengthen thy brethren! These words have not ceased to echo in Our mind and heart since the day He willed, in His inscrutable design, to confide to Our weak hands the helm of Peter's Barque.

Although these immortal words are deeply engraven in the depths of Our mind, they are impressed still more upon Us whenever, exercising the Apostolic Ministry, We communicate to the Hierarchy and Faithful of the world the teaching, directives and exhortations which are needed for the complete fulfillment of the Church's saving mission and which must be suitably adapted to the ever-changing circumstances of time and place, while their substantial immutability is kept unchanged.

It is with singular and deep emotion that We experience the force of that Divine Command at the present moment when, beloved sons and daughters of the world, We are addressing

for the tenth time Our Christmas Message to you at the end of a decade which, for eventful happenings, oppressive anxiety and bitter woes, has not its equal in the course of human history.

Last Christmas, when We asked your prayers and cooperation on this same feast day, We expressed the hope that the year 1948, then about to begin, might be for Europe and for the whole society of nations tormented by so much disunion, a year of earnest reconstruction and the beginning of a rapid advance toward true peace.

Today, at the end of a year which began so hopefully, Our paternal voice again invites you, the upright and thoughtful, the sincere Christians, to ponder over the present state of humanity and of Christendom, and to consider what plan should be adopted to advance sincerely and securely along the path pointed out by the exacting necessities of the times and by your own conscience.

Any clear-sighted person who has the moral strength and courage to look truth squarely in the face, even if it be painful and humiliating, must

fully recognize that this year of 1948, which dawned full of high and well-founded expectations, appears now at its close to have arrived at one of those crucial points, where the path which previously disclosed pleasant vistas seems to open instead on the brink of a precipice where pitfalls and dangers fill good and generous people with increasing anxiety.

Nevertheless, or rather for this very reason, beloved sons and daughters, while faint-heartedness begins to overcome the minds even of the courageous, and doubts assail the most enlightened and determined men, We feel ourselves more than ever obliged to answer the Divine Command: "*Confirma fratres tuos.*"

To all of you, even those at the extremities of the earth, We send as Our Christmas greeting the words by which the Prophet announced the work of redemption and the decisive victory of the reign of Christ: "Strengthen ye the feeble hands, and confirm the weak knees. Say to the faint-hearted: Take courage and fear not; behold your God . . . will come and will save you." (Is. 35, 3-4.)

As the successor of Him to Whom the Divine Promise was addressed: "I have prayed for you" (Luke 22, 32), We know full well that when the fight against the powers of darkness is most arduous and enters phases that are decisive and, humanly speaking, alarming, it is then that the Lord is all the closer to His Church and to His faithful. Fully convinced and aware of this Divine assistance, We remind all those who glory in the name of Catholic Christians of a two-

fold sacred duty indispensable for the bettering of the present condition of human society:

(1) Unshakeable fidelity to the heritage of truth brought to the world by the Redeemer.

(2) Conscientious fulfillment of the precept of justice and love, necessary presupposition for the triumph on earth of a social order worthy of the Divine King of Peace.

We would fail in gratitude to the Almighty, Giver of all grace and Furnisher of every good, if We did not recognize that the year now coming to a close, despite all its anxieties and sufferings, was also rich in spiritual consolations, in happy experiences and encouraging success. It was a year in which the Church among all peoples, and in every country and continent, has given unmistakable and splendid proofs of life and vigor, of activity and resistance, and of rapid progress. And those not only justify the brightest hopes in the spiritual field, but have also produced tangible results in the titanic debate in which the human race finds itself involved while struggling for its healing and its peace.

A glorious series of religious functions, of Eucharistic and Marian congresses, of important centenary celebrations and impressive gatherings, have proved to any impartial observer that neither the war nor its aftermath, nor the tenacity of the enemies of Christ in their discordant and destructive plans have been able to dry up or contaminate the limpid sources whence the Church has drawn the life-giving strength for nearly 20 cen-

tures. Everywhere there is a quickening and throbbing of life which strives especially among Catholic youth to bring the Gospel truths and the salutary force of its doctrine into all the spheres of human activity; its aim is to help and save even those who up to the present have closed their hearts to such beneficent action with great loss to themselves.

The severe trials the Church has undergone because of the war and its aftermath, the painful losses and serious injury she has sustained, have served only to give more comforting and encouraging proof of her energy and resistance. Tossed about by the storm and waves, she has kept intact and inviolate her vital fibre. In all those countries where to profess the Catholic Faith really means to suffer persecution, there have been and there are still thousands of valiant men and women who, undismayed by sacrifices, proscriptions and torture, and fearless in the face of prison and death, do not bow the knee before the Baal of might and power (3 Kings, 19, 18). Their names are unknown for the most part to the general public, but they are written in indelible characters in the annals of the Church.

It is for Us a duty to honor these faithful valiant people, these tireless, courageous chosen ones, who are blessed by God. For them the hardships of the present time, the sorrows and the maternal tears of the Spouse of Christ are neither a stumbling block nor foolishness, but an occasion and a stimulus to show forth—not in words but by actions—the integrity and unselfishness of their pur-

pose, their unflinching fidelity and the sublime generosity of their hearts. Words fail to pay a worthy tribute and extol in a fitting way the heroism of these most faithful among the faithful. To each one of them We express Our praise and Our gratitude. The Lord, Who promised to remember before His Heavenly Father those who confessed Him before men (Matt. 10, 32) will be their eternal recompense.

If the constancy and steadfastness of so many brethren in the Faith is a source of joy and holy pride for Us, We cannot pass over the obligation of mentioning those also whose thoughts and sentiments bear the imprint of the spirit and difficulties of the times. How many have suffered harm, and how many have been shipwrecked in their faith and in their very belief in God. How many, carried away by a wave of secularism or hostility toward the Church, have lost the freshness and the serenity of a Faith which up till then had been the support and the light of their lives. Others, violently uprooted and torn from their native soil, wander aimlessly about—exposed, particularly in the case of the young, to a spiritual and moral ruin, the danger of which it would be impossible to over-estimate.

The maternal eye of the Church follows with watchful love and redoubled care the souls of those temporarily lost or in danger. She is not angry. She prays, not condemns. She waits: She is waiting the return of those children of hers and is anxious to find means of hastening that hour.

That is why the Church shrinks from no sacrifice, finds no trouble too burdensome to such an end. She is ready for everything, except one thing: that she be not asked to gain the return of the children who have left her—either in the distant past or recently—at the expense of any diminution or tarnishing of the deposit of Christian Faith confided to her keeping.

It seems to Us that a brief clarification is opportune with respect to some harsh statements against the Catholic Church and the Papacy uttered by certain dissidents. Our duty of charity and of love is certainly not lessened by attacks or by insults. We know how to distinguish between the people, often deprived of freedom, and the systems that rule them. We are cognizant of the servile dependence that some representatives of a religion called "orthodox" display toward a concept of life whose ultimate goal—repeatedly proclaimed—is the elimination of all trace of Christian religion.

We are not unaware of the harrowing path that must be traveled by many of Our beloved sons and daughters whom a public system of violence has driven to cut themselves formally away from the Mother Church to which their deepest convictions united them. With profound emotion We admire the heroic steadfastness of some; with deep sorrow and unfeigned paternal affection We witness the spiritual anguish of others whose external resistance has given way under the excess of unjust pressure and who outwardly ac-

cepted a separation which their hearts abhor and their consciences reprove.

Fidelity to the Divine patrimony of truth confided to the Church does not in any way condemn the Catholic Christian—as not a few believe or seem to believe—to an attitude of diffident reserve or cold indifference in the face of the grave and urgent duties of the present hour.

On the contrary: the spirit and the example of Our Lord, Who came to seek and save what was lost; the commandment of love, and, generally speaking, the special significance that radiates from the good tidings; the history of the Church which proves how she has always been the staunch and constant support of every force for good and for peace; the teaching and exhortations of the Roman Pontiffs, especially in the course of recent decades, dealing with the conduct of Christians toward the neighbor, society and the State—all this serves to proclaim the believer's duty to take his share, generously, courageously and according to his station and capacity, in questions that a tormented and agitated world has to solve in the field of social justice, no less than on the international plane of law and peace.

A convinced Christian cannot confine himself within an easy and egoistical "isolationism," when he witnesses the needs and the misery of his brothers; when pleas for help come to him from these in economic distress; when he knows the aspirations of the working classes for more normal and just conditions of life; when he is aware of the abuses of an eco-

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economic system which puts money above social obligations; when he is not ignorant of the aberrations of an intransigent nationalism which denies or spurns the common bonds linking the separate nations together, and imposing on each one of them many and varied duties toward the great family of nations.

The Catholic doctrine on the State and civil society has always been based on the principle that, in keeping with the will of God, the nations form together a community with a common aim and common duties. Even when the proclamation of this principle and its practical consequences gave rise to violent reactions, the Church denied her assent to the erroneous concept of an absolutely autonomous sovereignty divested of all social obligations.

The Catholic Christian, persuaded that every man is his neighbor and that every nation is a member, with equal rights, of the family of nations, cooperates wholeheartedly in those generous efforts whose beginnings might be meagre and which frequently encounter strong opposition and obstacles, but which aim at saving individual States from the narrowness of a self-centered mentality. This latter attitude of mind has been largely responsible for the conflicts of the past, and unless finally overcome or at least held in check, could lead to new conflagrations that might mean death to human civilization.

Since the cessation of hostilities, men have never been so obsessed as today by the nightmare of another war and by anxiety for the peace.

They alternate between two extremes. Some adopt the ancient motto, not completely false, but which is easily misunderstood and has often been misused: *si vis pacem para bellum*; if you desire peace, prepare for war. Others think to find safety in the formula: peace at all costs!

Both parties want peace while both endanger it: on one side by arousing distrust, on the other by promoting a security which can prepare the way for aggression. Thus both, without wishing it, compromise the cause of peace at the very time when the human race, crushed under the weight of armaments and in agony at the prospect of fresh and even worse conflicts, shudders at the thought of a future catastrophe. Hence We should like to point out briefly the characteristics of a real Christian will for peace.

(1) The Christian will for peace comes from God. He is the "God of Peace" (Rom. 15, 33); He has created the world to be an abode of peace; He has given His commandment of peace, that "tranquillity in order" of which St. Augustine speaks.

The Christian will for peace has its weapons too. But its principal arms are those of prayer and love; constant prayer to the Father in Heaven, Father of us all; brotherly love among all men and all nations, since all are sons of the same Father Who is in Heaven; love which, with patience, always succeeds in being disposed and ready to achieve understanding and agreement with everyone.

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These two arms have their source in God, and when they are lacking, where people only know how to wield material weapons, there can be no real will for peace. For purely material armament necessarily awakens distrust, and creates what amounts to a climate of war. Who, then, can fail to see how important it is for the nations to preserve and strengthen the Christian way of life, and how grave is their responsibility in the selection and supervision of those to whom they entrust the immediate control of armaments?

(2) The Christian will for peace is easily identified. Obedient to the Divine precept of peace, it will never turn a question of national prestige or honor into an argument for war or even for a threat of war. It is very careful to avoid recourse to the force of arms in the defense of rights which, however legitimate, do not offset the risk of kindling a blaze with all its tremendous spiritual and material consequences.

Here, likewise, the responsibility of the nations is perfectly clear with respect to the paramount problems of the education of youth and the moulding of public opinion, which modern methods and instruments render so sensitive and changeable today, in every department of a nation's life. But this influence must be carefully exerted to support the common interest of all States in the defense of peace. Every violator of the law should be banished in disgrace to solitary confinement by civil society, as a disturber of the peace. May the United Nations Organization become

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the full and faultless expression of this international solidarity for peace, erasing from its institutions and its statutes every vestige of its origin which was of necessity a solidarity in war.

(3) The Christian will for peace is practical and realistic. Its immediate aim is to remove, or at least to mitigate the causes of tension which aggravate the danger of war morally and materially. These causes are, among others, chiefly the comparative scantiness of national territory and the want of raw materials. So instead of sending foodstuffs, at enormous expense, to refugee groups, crowded into the best place available, why not facilitate the emigration and immigration of families, directing them to countries where they will find more readily the food they need?

And instead of restricting production, often for no just reason, why not allow the people to produce to the limit of its normal capacity and so gain its daily bread as the reward of its own labor, rather than receive it as a gift? Finally, instead of setting up barriers to prevent one another's access to raw materials, why not make their use and exchange free of all unnecessary restrictions, especially of those which created a harmful situation of economic disparity?

(4) The genuine Christian will for peace means strength, not weakness or weary resignation. It is completely one with the will for peace of Eternal and Almighty God. Every war of aggression against these goods which the Divine plan for peace

obliges men unconditionally to respect and guarantee and accordingly to protect and defend, is a sin, a crime, an outrage against the majesty of God, the Creator and Ordainer of the world.

A people threatened with an unjust aggression, or already its victim, may not remain passively indifferent, if it would think and act as befits Christians. All the more does the solidarity of the family of nations forbid others to behave as mere spectators, in an attitude of apathetic neutrality. Who will ever measure the harm already caused in the past by such indifference to war of aggression, which is quite alien to the Christian instinct? How much more keenly has it brought home to the "great" and specially to the "small," the sense of their insecurity? Has it brought any advantage in recompense? On the contrary; it has only reassured and encouraged the authors and fomentors of aggression, while it obliges the several peoples, left to themselves, to increase their armaments indefinitely.

Resting for support on God and on the order He established, the Christian will for peace is thus as strong as steel. Its temper is quite different from mere humanitarian sentiment, too often little more than a matter of pure impression, which detests war only because of its horrors and atrocities, its destruction and its aftermath, but not for the added reason of its injustice. Such a sentiment, under a hedonistic and utilitarian disguise, and materialistic in its source, lacks the solid foundation of

a strict and unqualified obligation. It creates conditions which encourage the deception resulting from sterile compromise, the attempt to save oneself at the expense of others, and the success in every case of the aggressor.

This is so true that neither the sole consideration of the sorrows and evils resulting from war, nor the careful weighing of the act against the advantage, avail to determine finally, whether it is morally licit, or even in certain concrete circumstances obligatory (provided always there be solid probability of success) to repel an aggressor by force of arms.

One thing, however, is certain: the commandment of peace is a matter of Divine law. Its purpose is the protection of the goods of humanity, inasmuch as they are gifts of the Creator. Among these goods some are of such importance for society, that it is perfectly lawful to defend them against unjust aggression. Their defense is even an obligation for the nations as a whole who have a duty not to abandon a nation that is attacked.

The certainty that this duty will not go unfulfilled will serve to discourage the aggressor and thus war will be avoided or, if the worst should come, its sufferings will at least be lessened.

In this way, a better meaning is given to the dictum; *si vic pacem pare bellum*, as also to the phrase "peace at all costs." What really matters is the sincere and Christian will for peace. We are compelled to it surely by the following considerations: The

spectacle of the ruins of the last war, the silent reproach which rises from the great cemeteries where the tombs of the victims of war are marshalled in endless ranks, the still unsatisfied longing of prisoners and refugees to return home, the anguish and dereliction of many political captives, worry of unjust persecution. But we ought to find a still greater incentive in the potent word of the Divine commandment of peace—the gently penetrating glance of the Divine Child in the manger.

Listen to the admirable words of the Apostle of the Gentiles ringing out in the night like the bells of Christmas—he too was once a slave to petty prejudices of national and racial pride, laid low with him on the road to Damascus: "He (Christ Jesus) is our peace: He has made the two nations one . . . killing all enmities in His own person . . . coming, He announced the good tidings of peace to you who were afar off, and of peace to those who were near." (EP. 2.2, 14.16.17).

Hence at the present hour, with all the power at Our command, We con-
jure you, beloved sons and daughters of the entire world: work for a peace that is in accordance with the Heart of the Redeemer.

Together with all upright men, who, even though not fighting in your ranks, are united with you in the community of this ideal, work strenuously for the propagation and triumph of the Christian will for peace.

It is, however, with special confidence that We turn to Catholic youth. The unforgettable demonstrations of

last September brought to Rome, in an unprecedented multitude, the representatives of Catholic youth from the most diverse nations. They gave unmistakable proof of their solidarity in the will for peace.

From the steps of Our patriarchal Vatican Basilica, on that occasion we blessed *in paci*: the house of peace, calculated to give to the youth of the Catholic world gathered in front of the cupola of St. Peter's a realization that they belong to one great family which embraces all its sons with equal love.

To you, young people, who bear in the flower of your age the responsibility of a tomorrow still so uncertain, We say: Be not content with building the *domus pacis* on the Via Aurelia. That is, only by devotion and determination in making of the world itself a *domus pacis*, over which the spirit and the promises of Bethlehem may reign serenely, can afflicted humanity find peace at long last.

With this hope We invoke the protection of the Most High on all peoples and nations, especially on those who more than others are exposed to the threat of war, to unrest and to devastation.

And on this Christmas Eve, why should Our thought not turn back once again to the land of Palestine, where the Son of God made Man spent his earthly life; to that Palestine where, even after the suspension of hostilities, there is still no sign of a secure basis for peace? May a happy solution be finally found which will mean help for so many thousand unhappy refugees and satisfy at the