

*1961  
Christmas  
Message*



*His Holiness  
Pope John XXIII*



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## 1961 CHRISTMAS MESSAGE



*Address Given by His Holiness,  
Pope John XXIII, on December 21, 1961*

The Birthday of The Lord, the Feast of Peace.

No matter how one seeks to tell the glories of the great mystery and to express the fulness of grace which gladdens every believer in Jesus Christ at this time, it is impossible to surpass what those few words contain.

This, then, is the message of Bethlehem: the glory of God, true peace, and the invitation to the human will to correspond with so great a gift. *Gloria in excelsis Deo; pax hominibus bonae voluntatis.*<sup>1</sup>

In the course of centuries the literature of those countries in which the light of Christ has shone has been unable to add anything to this threefold revelation which was declared to men at the coming of the Son of God into the world.

This is now the fourth Christmas on which We (the poor son of the people--if We may openly express what We inwardly consider Ourselves to be--called to the summit of the priesthood and the government of the Church) have, by the help of God's grace, put all Our heart into declaring this great message of peace.

On the previous occasions We rejoiced to set the peace of Bethlehem before all mankind from three different points of view. Always the peace of Christ, but as seen in the radiance of its noblest manifestations: peace and justice, peace and unity, peace and truth.

In this threefold radiance the most important and most precious blessings of mankind brilliantly shine forth. As an expression of the good wishes which men at this season exchange

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1. *Luke 2, 14.*

among themselves there is nothing more suitable than this manifold effulgence of the riches that the Word of God made Man brings down to earth for the redemption and exaltation of mankind.

You know well, dear children, how the Fathers of the Church, both East and West, the doctors and pontiffs whose voices intermingle and blend in harmony, are acknowledged to be the most faithful interpreters of the teaching, old but ever new, of heaven's message.

From that chorus one voice, familiar to Us from Our youth, rings out this year in accents of renewed fervor. It is the voice of St. Leo the Great, the fifteenth century of whose death We have recently celebrated in Our encyclical *Aeterna Dei*.

In the happy celebrations of last November it was a joy for Us to draw the inspiration of Our words from this great doctor. And similarly today, We delight to direct your eyes towards the stable of Bethlehem by means of words taken from his Christmas sermons--sermons which still preserve their lively personal style. Listen to his words:

*Generatio . . . Christi origo est populi christiani, et natalis capitis natalis est corporis.* Beloved children, what beautiful words are these: "The birth of Christ is the birth of the Christian people; the birthday of the Head is the birthday also of the body." And he continues:

"Even though everyone of those who are called has his own proper place, and even though the children of the Church are separated in time, nevertheless the whole body of the faithful, born of the waters of Baptism... is given life with Christ in this Nativity... And so the greatness of the gift which is bestowed on us requires of us a reverence befitting its splendor... What is more in keeping with the dignity of today's feast than peace, which at the Lord's birth was for the first time proclaimed by the choir of angels? It is peace that gives life to the sons of God, it is the nurse of goodness and the mother of unity... The birthday of Our Lord is the birthday of peace, for, as the Apostle says: 'He himself is our peace.'"<sup>2</sup>

The peace of wise and upright men--to paraphrase St. Leo's thought, which comes from above and raises up on high--is not to be confused with the easy-going indulgence of lovers of this world. It stands out against every obstacle and spurs men

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2. *Eph.* 2, 14.

away from dangerous pleasures to where true joys are to be found. May we, united in a single will and a single conviction, at one in faith and hope and love be led thither by the Spirit of Peace.<sup>3</sup>

These are the sublime words of St. Leo, and they speak clearly on points of doctrine and of practical life. Everything is there: Holy Church, with all its ranks of believers, its honorable priesthood and its supreme pontificate acting as an instrument destined by God for the uniting of the nations in such a way that a true and lasting elevation of human society may be established.

Yes, all that We expressed in greeting in Our three previous Christmas messages is contained there. Do you remember? Knowledge of the truth, *Pax et veritas* (peace and truth), leading us to adore the Son of God made man for us, and to accept His message of redemption. *Pax et veritas*, giving strength to high ideals and endurance to good resolutions of knowing and serving the truth. *Pax et unitas* (peace and unity), an urgent invitation to show loyalty to this Apostolic See which is the center of unity. And lastly, *Pax et iustitia* (peace and justice), for this vision of the unique reality of the Church contains invaluable means for building up a solid social structure and for establishing peaceful relations between men, whether between individuals of the same nation or the same trade, or whether on a universal scale in the world as a whole, which belongs to all and should guarantee to all employment and a life of peace.

To this threefold light of peace in truth, in unity, in justice, would it not be well to add, this year, for our greater spiritual profit, a fourth ray, the light of goodness, *Pax Christi in bonitate* (the peace of Christ in goodness).

How gladly do we turn our thoughts towards the glorious Kingdom of Christ in the spirit of the liturgy, which is soon to say: "The King of Peace is glorified and all the earth longs for His favor. The King of Peace is glorified over all the kings of the whole earth."<sup>4</sup> Let it be, then, the peace of Christ in goodness.

The first thing that we see is Jesus inviting us from the crib of Bethlehem, anticipating the occasions in His later life

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3. St. Leo., *Sermon XXVI [On the Nativity VI]*, II, III, V; Migne, PL 54 - 213, 214, 216.

4. Vespers of Christmas.

when He, the Divine Master, will be held in reverence and hailed as rabbi by the enthusiastic crowds, and will say to them: "Learn from Me, for I am meek and humble of heart."<sup>5</sup>

This voice from the crib is the outward manifestation of the "goodness" of Jesus, of which He is the living reality and the divine source and whose grace is the universal authority of peace for all the world.

This authority, alas, full of humility and meekness, and holding out the joy of universal peace, remains with the passing of the years a sign of contradiction and of the obstinate hardness of men in their relations with one another.

If we look at the events of recent times, we might well say that in our day fear and alarm are producing a burning fever of estrangement one from another. And though this is uncounscious in many cases, it is, for all that, noticeable in dealings with others, and leads to continuous disturbance in domestic, social, civil and international relationships.

Such an observation is all the more tragic when one reflects that in the Creator's providential plan, men are meant to understand, to help and to complete one another by brotherly cooperation, by patiently overcoming differences and by sharing the goods of the earth fairly, *iustitia duce, caritate comite*, according to charity and justice.<sup>6</sup>

On this subject the Prophets and Psalms speak with clarity, inculcating goodness and love in the name of God. Isaias says: "Ease the insupportable burden, set free the over-driven; away with every yoke that galls! Share thy bread with the hungry, give the poor and the vagrant a welcome to thy house; meet thou the naked, clothe him; from thy own flesh and blood turn not away. The Lord will give thee rest continually, fill thy soul with comfort."<sup>7</sup>

If we consider mutual relationships as they exist today in national and international affairs, we can see how far they still are from the Divine Teaching which shines in the age of the Old Testament and bursts out into perfect light with the coming of the Divine Master in the fulness of time. All His teaching is an invitation to peace, for it proclaims the blessedness of peace. But here, on the contrary, under the cloak of fair words--when, at least, the outward appearance is maintained, and even that

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5. *Matt.* 11, 29.

6. Pius XII, encyclical *Sertum Laetitiae*, Nov. 1, 1939.

7. *Is.* 58, 6-7, 11.



unfortunately is not always the case--there is often a spirit opposed to peace.

It is the pride of the man of power who destroys. It is the greed of the man of wealth who hardens his heart to the needs of his brothers.<sup>8</sup> It is the callousness of the complacent man who pays no heed to the great cry of suffering which exists in the world. It is the selfishness of the man who thinks exclusively of himself.

In every case it is the goodness of Christ which is lacking, and which above all must provide the antidote to this spirit of contradiction and hard-heartedness, paving the way to a more peaceful attitude to things.

In Our encyclical, *Mater et Magistra*, it was Our wish to stress the fact that "when men are animated by the charity of Christ, they feel united, and the needs, sufferings and joys of others are felt as their own. Consequently the action of each one--as We said--cannot help but be more disinterested, more energetic, more humane, because charity is patient, is kind... seeketh not her own... rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth with the truth... hopeth all things, endureth all things."<sup>9</sup>

It is good that the supplication for peace which rises up this year from the crib of Bethlehem should be an invocation of goodness, an appreciation of true brotherhood, a resolution of sincere cooperation, shunning all intrigue and all those discordant elements which We have called and which We call again without disguising Our words: pride, greed, callousness, selfishness.

The invitation should be all the more pressing, for mutual distrust is making conditions progressively worse. Consider only the state of fearfulness in which men are living because of flaunted violence and fostered enmity, and it is clear that this is giving rise to a general coolness and making it more and more widespread.

In such a situation it is natural to think of the grave and solemn words of Christ, spoken in prophecy and warning: "Because iniquity hath abounded the charity of many shall grow cold."<sup>10</sup>

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8. 1 *John* 3, 17.

9. 1 *Cor.* 13, 4-7; A.A.S. LIII, (1961) p. 461.

10. *Matt.* 24, 12.

Man is no longer brother, good, merciful and loving to his fellow men, but has become a stranger, calculating, suspicious and selfish.

What a crying need there is for the only remedy, which is to be found in giving a welcome to Jesus of Bethlehem, the Lamb of God, who has come to take away the sin of the world,<sup>11</sup> in having recourse to His grace, in putting into practice His teaching of mercy.

O blessed feast of Christmas: meeting place of simple folk, invitation to inner purity, to goodness to all men, for "the kindness of God, Our Saviour, dawned on us, His great love for men."<sup>12</sup>

It is sad to have to deplore evil, but merely to deplore it does not remove it. We must desire, accomplish and exalt the good. It is goodness that we must openly proclaim before the world, so that it shines out and permeates every form of individual and social activity.

Every individual must be good because he is the mirror of a clear conscience which does not admit of duplicity, cunning or hardness of heart. He must be good by being given continually to interior purification and true perfection, by being faithful to an unshakable purpose, the measure of all his thoughts and actions.

"The family too must be good," with mutual love burning like a flame in the exercise of all virtue. Goodness sweetens and strengthens paternal authority, and is nurtured by maternal tenderness. It encourages obedience on the part of the children, controls the exuberance of youth, inspires necessary sacrifices.

There is furthermore that goodness which should rule our actions "outside the confines of the home," though in union with it. Various applications can be given in the schools of all grades, in the various institutions of civic life, which is ordered to the harmonious association of citizens based on peace, respect and friendship. All the relationships of the social order are founded on goodness, which St. Leo the Great recommends in the most vivid language: "To commit injustice and to make reparation--this is the prudence of this world. On the contrary, not to render evil for evil is the virtuous expression of Christian forgiveness. . . . Therefore let humility be loved and let the faithful shun all arrogance. Let everyone give preference to his brethren

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11. cf. *John* 1, 29.

12. *Tit.* 3, 4.



before himself, and let no one seek his own interest, but that of his neighbor, so that where all are filled with benevolence, there may be no place left for the poison of enmity.”<sup>13</sup>

“And finally all humanity must be good.” These words, which resound through the ages and are now repeated with modern accents, recalled the duty incumbent on all men to be good. That means to be just, upright, generous, disinterested, willing to understand and to forgive, ready to grant pardon with magnanimity. As an invitation to the exercise of this duty, We turn to the appeal, which with all trust We started out to make in this radio broadcast, to desire peace and to eliminate all obstacles in its way.

We cannot believe that the terrific energy now under the control of man will be released for the world’s destruction. For side by side with elements of fear and apprehension, there are positive signs of goodwill that is constructive and productive of good. While We give thanks to the Lord, the source of goodness, We also give voice to a heartfelt appeal that all those who control economic forces should risk everything--but not the peace of the world and the lives of men--to seek every means that modern progress has put at their disposal to increase the welfare and security of the world, and not to sow distrust and mutual suspicion. And again, to use the words of Our encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, “We point out with sadness . . . that while on the one hand are brought out in strong relief situations of want, and the specter of misery and hunger haunts us, on the other hand scientific discoveries, technical inventions and economic resources are being used, often extensively, to provide terrible instruments of ruin and death.”<sup>14</sup>

We also appeal to those responsible for forming public opinion, even if only in a limited area, to fear the severe judgment of God and of history and to proceed with caution, governed by a sense of balance. On not a few occasions in modern times--and this We state with candor and regret--the press has contributed to the production of an atmosphere of aversion, enmity and discord.

We appeal to the rulers of nations, who today hold in their hands the fate of mankind. You also are men, fragile and mortal.

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13. *Sermon XXXVII [On the Epiphany VII]*, IV; Migne, PL 54, 259.

14. A.A.S. LIII (1961) p. 448.

Upon you are the anxious eyes of your fellowmen, who are first your brothers before they are your subjects. With the authority which We have received from Jesus Christ, We say: Shun all thought of force; think of the tragedy of initiating a chain reaction of acts, decisions and resentments that could erupt into rash and irreparable deeds. You have received great powers not to destroy but to build, not to divide but to unite, not to cause tears to be shed but to provide employment and security.

These are the various applications of that goodness that should penetrate every aspect of human life. This goodness is power and dominion over oneself, patience with others, charity that is neither extinguished nor dimmed because it sincerely wills the welfare of all according to the immortal words of St. Augustine: "It remains peaceful in the midst of insults, productive of good amidst hate; meek in spite of anger, harmless amidst snares: it groans among the iniquitous, and breathes in the truth: *inter iniquitates gemens, in veritate respirans.*"<sup>15</sup>

Venerable brethren and beloved children. In the renewed contemplation of the Son of God made Man, may the message of goodness and evangelical charity come to all men in its full clarity. May it be to all believers a new inspiration to live it in its fulness, giving an example to an anxious world. May it appeal to all men of goodwill to make salutary reflections on the applications of those principles upon which well-ordered social life is founded.

The humble Vicar of Christ in raising his voice wished to propose with the clearest evidence the common obligation that flows from the very essence of Christmas.

As We end this message, Our thoughts turn with affection to all humanity for whose salvation the Divine Word became incarnate, and in particular to the suffering, to those enduring tribulations of mind and body, to those who are denied justice and charity. To all go Our paternal good wishes for all consolation.

We cannot pass over the anxiety that Our heart feels at the thought that when next Christmas day dawns upon the world, there will still be people without peace, without security, without religious liberty--people tormented by the specter of war and famine. For them Our most fervent prayers and supplications rise to heaven, together with a paternal wish that all difficulties

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15. *Sermon 350, 3.*

and controversies be resolved equitably and a renewed appeal to the rulers of all nations that through their united efforts justice, equity, and that longed for peace may be realized.

On the note of peace, founded on true goodness, We are pleased to end Our message to which We add Our best wishes and the gift of the apostolic blessing.



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