

DIGNITAS HUMANA

Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace

Christchurch Diocese, Easter 2002

Pope John Paul II devoted his annual World Day of Peace message to a reflection on how society ought to respond to acts of terrorism. The Pope wants to assist a far-reaching resurgence of the human spirit and to stir serious and mature thinking on this theme.

The Commission thinks it very timely to present some extracts from the Pope's message, published for January 1st, 2002.

* Numbers printed at the end of sections indicate the paragraphs in the Pope's text from which the extract has been taken.

God is stronger than evil

The Pope begins by referring to the terrorist attack on New York and Washington, on September 11th, 2001.

On that day, a terrible crime was committed: in a few brief hours thousands of innocent people of many ethnic backgrounds were slaughtered. Since then, people throughout the world have felt a profound personal vulnerability and a new fear for the future. Addressing this state of mind, the Church testifies to her hope, based on the conviction that evil, the *mysterium iniquitatis*, does not have the final word in human affairs. The history of salvation, narrated in Sacred Scripture, sheds clear light on the entire history of the world and shows us that human events are always accompanied by the merciful Providence of God, who knows how to touch even the most hardened of hearts and bring good fruits even from what seems utterly barren soil. (No. 1)

The reality of terrorism

In recent years, especially since the end of the Cold War, terrorism has developed into a sophisticated network of political, economic and technical collusion, which goes beyond national borders to embrace the whole world. Well-organized terrorist groups can count on huge financial resources and develop wide-ranging strategies, striking innocent people who have nothing to do with the aims pursued by the terrorists.

When terrorist organizations use their own followers as weapons to be launched against defenceless and unsuspecting people they show clearly the death-wish that feeds them. Terrorism springs from hatred, and it generates isolation, mistrust and closure. Violence is added to violence in a tragic sequence that exasperates successive generations, each one inheriting the hatred, which divided those that went before. *Terrorism is built on contempt for human life.* For this reason, not only does it commit intolerable crimes, but because it resorts to terror as a political and military means it is itself *a true crime against humanity.* (No. 4)

The fight against terrorism

There exists therefore a right to defend oneself against terrorism, a right which, as always, must be exercised with respect for moral and legal limits in the choice of ends and means. The guilty must be correctly identified, since criminal culpability is always personal and cannot be extended to the nation, ethnic group or religion to which the terrorists may belong. International co-operation in the fight against terrorist activities must also include a courageous and resolute political, diplomatic and economic commitment to relieving situations of oppression and marginalization, which facilitate the designs of terrorists. (No. 5)

Terrorism and the poor

The recruitment of terrorists in fact is easier in situations where rights are trampled upon and injustices tolerated over a long period of time. Still, it must be firmly stated that the injustices existing in the world can never be used to excuse acts of terrorism, and it should be noted that the victims of the radical breakdown of order which terrorism seeks to achieve include above all the countless millions of men and women who are least well-positioned to withstand a collapse of international solidarity—namely, the people of the developing world, who already live on a thin margin of survival and who would be most grievously affected by global economic and political chaos. The terrorist claim to be acting on behalf of the poor is a patent falsehood. (No. 5)

Fundamentalism

Those who kill by acts of terrorism actually despair of humanity, of life, of the future. In their view, everything is to be hated and destroyed. Terrorists hold that the truth in which they believe or the suffering that they have undergone are so absolute that their reaction in destroying even innocent lives is justified. Terrorism is often the outcome of that fanatic *fundamentalism* which springs from the conviction that one's own vision of the truth must be forced upon everyone else. Instead, even when the truth has been reached—and this can happen only in a limited and imperfect way—it can never be imposed. Respect for a person's conscience, where the image of God himself is reflected (cf. *Gen 1:26-27*), means that we can only propose the truth to others, who are then responsible for accepting it. To try to impose on others by violent means what we consider to be the truth is an offence against human dignity, and ultimately an offence against God whose image that person bears. For this reason, what is usually referred to as fundamentalism is an attitude radically opposed to belief in God. *Terrorism exploits not just people, it exploits God: it ends by making him an idol to be used for one's own purposes.* (No. 6)

Restoring the moral and social order

Recent events, including the terrible killings just mentioned, move me to return to a theme which often stirs in the depths of my heart when I remember the events of history which have marked my life, especially my youth. I have often paused to reflect on the persistent question: *how do we restore the moral and social order subjected to such horrific violence?* My reasoned conviction, confirmed in turn by biblical revelation, is that the shattered order cannot be fully restored except by a response that combines justice with forgiveness. *The pillars of true peace are justice and that form of love which is forgiveness.* (No. 2)

But in the present circumstances, how can we speak of justice and forgiveness as the source and condition of peace? *We can and we must*, no matter how difficult this may be; a difficulty, which often comes from thinking that justice and forgiveness are irreconcilable. But forgiveness is the opposite of resentment and revenge, not of justice. In fact, true peace is “the work of justice” (*Is 32:17*). As the Second Vatican Council put it, peace is “the fruit of that right ordering of things with which the divine founder has invested human society and

which must be actualized by man thirsting for an ever more perfect reign of justice” (Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 78). For more than fifteen hundred years, the Catholic Church has repeated the teaching of Saint Augustine of Hippo on this point. He reminds us that the peace which can and must be built in this world is the peace of right order—*tranquillitas ordinis*, the tranquillity of order (cf. *De Civitate Dei*, 19, 13).

Justice is necessary but requires forgiveness too

True peace therefore is the fruit of justice, that moral virtue and legal guarantee which ensures full respect for rights and responsibilities, and the just distribution of benefits and burdens.

But because human justice is always fragile and imperfect, subject as it is to the limitations and egoism of individuals and groups, it must include and, as it were, be completed by the *forgiveness which heals and rebuilds troubled human relations from their foundations*. This is true in circumstances great and small, at the personal level or on a wider, even international scale. Forgiveness is in no way opposed to justice, as if to forgive meant to overlook the need to right the wrong done. It is rather the fullness of justice, leading to that tranquillity of order that is much more than a fragile and temporary cessation of hostilities, involving as it does the deepest healing of the wounds which fester in human hearts. Justice and forgiveness are both essential to such healing. (No. 3)

Forgiveness - the basis of society

Forgiveness is above all a personal choice, a decision of the heart to go against the natural instinct to pay back evil with evil. The measure of such a decision is the love of God who draws us to himself in spite of our sin. It has its perfect exemplar in the forgiveness of Christ, who on the Cross prayed: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (*Lk 23:34*)

Forgiveness therefore has a divine source and criterion. This does not mean that its significance cannot also be grasped in the light of human reasoning; and this, in the first place, on the basis of what people experience when they do wrong. They experience their human weakness, and they want others to deal leniently with them. Why not therefore do towards others what we want them to do towards us? All human beings cherish the hope

of being able to start all over again, and not remain forever shut up in their own mistakes and guilt. They all want to raise their eyes to the future and to discover new possibilities of trust and commitment. (No. 8)

Forgiveness therefore, as a fully human act, is above all a personal initiative. But individuals are essentially social beings, situated within a pattern of relationships through which they express themselves in ways both good and bad. Consequently, *society too is absolutely in need of forgiveness*. Families, groups, societies, states and the international community itself need forgiveness in order to renew ties that have been sundered, go beyond sterile situations of mutual condemnation and overcome the temptation to discriminate against others without appeal. *The ability to forgive lies at the very basis of the idea of a future society marked by justice and solidarity*.

By contrast, the failure to forgive, especially when it serves to prolong conflict, is extremely costly in terms of human development. Resources are used for weapons rather than for development, peace and justice. What sufferings are inflicted on humanity because of the failure to reconcile! What delays in progress because of the failure to forgive! *Peace is essential for development, but true peace is made possible only through forgiveness*. (No. 9)

The paradox of forgiveness

Forgiveness is not a proposal that can be immediately understood or easily accepted; in many ways it is a paradoxical message. Forgiveness in fact always involves an *apparent* short-term loss for a *real* long-term gain. Violence is the exact opposite; opting as it does for an apparent short-term gain, it involves a real and permanent loss. Forgiveness may seem like weakness, but it demands great spiritual strength and moral courage, both in granting it and in accepting it. It may seem in some way to diminish us, but in fact it leads us to a fuller and richer humanity, more radiant with the splendour of the Creator. (No. 10)

Religion and terrorism

It is a profanation of religion to declare oneself a terrorist in the name of God, to do violence to others in his name. Terrorist violence is a contradiction of faith in God, the Creator of man, who cares for man and loves him. It is altogether

contrary to faith in Christ the Lord, who taught his disciples to pray: *“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors”* (Mt 6:12). (No 7)

In this whole effort, religious leaders have a weighty responsibility. The various Christian confessions, as well as the world's great religions, need to work together to eliminate the social and cultural causes of terrorism. They can do this by teaching the greatness and dignity of the human person, and by spreading *a clearer sense of the oneness of the human family*.

In bearing common witness to the truth that the deliberate murder of the innocent is a grave evil always, everywhere, and without exception, the world's religious leaders will help to form the morally sound public opinion that is essential for building an international civil society capable of pursuing the tranquillity of order in justice and freedom. (No. 12)

Prayer for peace

Precisely for this reason, prayer for peace is not an afterthought to the work of peace. It is of the very essence of building the peace of order, justice, and freedom. To pray for peace is to open the human heart to the inroads of God's power to renew all things. With the life-giving force of his grace, God can create openings for peace where only obstacles and closures are apparent; he can strengthen and enlarge the solidarity of the human family in spite of our endless history of division and conflict.
(No. 14)

The Church and the Internet

The Church has recently published two major documents dealing with the Internet. One is called “The Church and the Internet ”and the other “Ethics and the Internet.” Both are published by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. Some extracts from “The Church and the Internet” follow - numbers given refer to the paragraphs in the original text.

The Church and the media

The Church has a two-fold aim in regard to the media. One aspect is to encourage their right development and right use for the sake of human development, justice, and peace—for the

upbuilding of society at the local, national, and community levels in light of the common good and in a spirit of solidarity. Considering the great importance of social communications, the Church seeks "honest and respectful dialogue with those responsible for the communications media"—a dialogue that relates primarily to the shaping of media policy. "On the Church's side this dialogue involves efforts to understand the media—their purposes, procedures, forms and genres, internal structures and modalities—and to offer support and encouragement to those involved in media work. On the basis of this sympathetic understanding and support, it becomes possible to offer meaningful proposals for removing obstacles to human progress and the proclamation of the Gospel.

Modern media provide a new means of proclaiming the gospel. As well, they created a new culture, so that , to a great extent human experience itself is an experience of media. Into this new culture, the Gospel must be integrated.

All this applies to the Internet. And even though the world of social communications "may at times seem at odds with the Christian message, it also offers unique opportunities for proclaiming the saving truth of Christ to the whole human family. Consider the positive capacities of the Internet to carry religious information and teaching beyond all barriers and frontiers. Such a wide audience would have been beyond the wildest imaginings of those who preached the Gospel before us. (No. 4)

It (*the Internet*) offers people direct and immediate access to important religious and spiritual resources—great libraries and museums and places of worship, the teaching documents of the Magisterium, the writings of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church and the religious wisdom of the ages. It has a remarkable capacity to overcome distance and isolation, bringing people into contact with like-minded persons of good will who join in virtual communities of faith to encourage and support one another. (No. 5)

The Church also needs to understand and use the Internet as a tool of internal communications. This requires keeping clearly in view its special character as a direct, immediate, interactive, and participatory medium. (No. 6)

The Internet presents problems also

At a very deep level, the world of the media can sometimes seem indifferent and even hostile to

Christian faith and morality. This is partly because media culture is so deeply imbued with a typically postmodern sense that the only absolute truth is that there are no absolute truths or that, if there were, they would be inaccessible to human reason and therefore irrelevant.

Among the specific problems presented by the Internet is the presence of hate sites devoted to defaming and attacking religious and ethnic groups. Some of these target the Catholic Church. Like pornography and violence in the media, Internet hate sites are "reflections of the dark side of a human nature marred by sin". And while respect for free expression may require tolerating even voices of hatred up to a point, industry self-regulation—and, where required, intervention by public authority—should establish and enforce reasonable limits to what can be said.

The proliferation of web sites calling themselves Catholic creates a problem of a different sort. As we have said, church-related groups should be creatively present on the Internet; and well-motivated, well-informed individuals and unofficial groups acting on their own initiative are entitled to be there as well. But it is confusing, to say the least, not to distinguish eccentric doctrinal interpretations, idiosyncratic devotional practices, and ideological advocacy bearing a 'Catholic' label from the authentic positions of the Church. (No. 8)

The suggested solution is the voluntary certification of Catholic sites so that Internet users have reliable guide to what is authentic Catholic teaching.

DIGNITAS HUMANA

Issue:V *The name of the newsletter, which is Latin for the dignity of the person, expresses the cornerstone principle of Catholic Social Teaching: "the human person is and ought to be the principle, the subject and the end of all social institutions." No 1881, Catechism of the Catholic Church.*

This fifth issue of DIGNITAS HUMANA has been published with funding provided by CARITAS.