



# The Holy See

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SOLEMNITY OF MARY, MOTHER OF GOD

43rd WORLD DAY OF PEACE

**HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI**

Vatican Basilica

Friday, 1st January 2010

(Video)

*Images of the celebration*

*Venerable Brothers,  
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

On the first day of the New Year we have the joy and the grace of celebrating the Most Holy Mother of God and, at the same time, the World Day of Peace. In both these events we are celebrating Christ, Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary and our true peace! To all of you who are gathered here: representatives of the world's peoples, of the Roman and universal Church, priests and faithful; and to all who are connected via radio and television, I repeat the words of the ancient Blessing: "The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace" (Nm 6: 26). Today I wish to develop precisely the theme of the Face and of faces, in the light of the word of God the Face of God and human faces a theme that also gives us a key to the interpretation of the problem of peace in the world.

We heard in both the First Reading from the Book of Numbers and in the Responsorial Psalm, several expressions with reference to God that contain the metaphor of the face: "The Lord make his face to shine upon you, / and be gracious to you" (Nm 6: 25). "May God be gracious to us and bless us /and make his face to shine upon us / that your way may be known upon earth, / your saving power among all nations" (Ps 67[66]: 1-3). The face is the expression of the person par

excellence. It is what makes him or her recognizable and from it transpire sentiments, thoughts and heartfelt intentions. God by his nature is invisible, yet the Bible applies this image to him too. Showing his face is an expression of his benevolence, whereas hiding it indicates his anger and indignation. The Book of Exodus says that "The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex 33: 11), and again it was to Moses that the Lord promised his closeness with a very unusual formula: "my presence [face] will go with you, and I will give you rest" (Ex 33: 14). The Psalms show believers to us as those who seek God's Face (cf. Ps 27[26]: 8); 105[104]: 4), and who, in worship, long to see him (Ps 42[41]: 3) and tell us that "the upright" shall "behold his face" (Ps 11[10]: 7).

One may interpret the whole biblical narrative as the gradual revelation of the Face of God, until it reaches his full manifestation in Jesus Christ. "When the time had fully come", the Apostle Paul has reminded us today too, "God sent forth his Son", (Gal 4: 4), immediately adding, "born of woman, born under the law". God's Face took on a human face, letting itself be seen and recognized in the Son of the Virgin Mary, who for this reason we venerate with the loftiest title of "Mother of God". She, who had preserved in her heart the secret of the divine motherhood, was the first to see the face of God made man in the small fruit of her womb. The Mother had a very special, unique and, in a certain way, exclusive relationship with the newborn Son. The first face a child sees is that of his mother and this gaze is crucial for his relationship with life, with himself, with others and with God; it is also crucial if he is to become a "son of peace" (Lk 10: 6). Among the many typologies of icons of the Virgin Mary in the Byzantine tradition is the one called "of tenderness" that portrays the Child Jesus with his face resting, cheek to cheek, against his Mother's. The Child gazes at the Mother and she is looking at us, almost as if to mirror for those who are observing and praying the tenderness of God who came down to her from Heaven and was incarnate in the Son of man, whom she holds in her arms. We can contemplate in this Marian image something of God himself: a sign of the ineffable love that impelled him "to give his Only Son" (cf. Jn 3: 16). But that same icon also shows us, in Mary, the face of the Church which reflects Christ's light upon us and upon the whole world, the Church through which the Good News reaches every person: "You are no longer a slave but a son" (Gal 4: 7), as once again we read in St Paul.

Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood, Mr Ambassadors, dear friends, meditating on the mystery of the Face of God and on the human face is a privileged path that leads to peace. It starts, in fact, with a respectful look that recognizes a person in the face of the other, whatever the colour of his skin, whatever his nationality, language or religion. But who, other than God, can guarantee, so to speak, the "depth" of the human face? In fact, only if we have God in our hearts are we able to perceive in the face of the other a brother in humanity, not a means but an end, not a rival or enemy but another self, another facet of the infinite mystery of the human being. Our perception of the world and, in particular, of our fellows, depends essentially on the presence within us of God's Spirit. It is a sort of "resonance": those whose hearts are empty only perceive flat images lacking in depth. On the other hand, the more we are inhabited by God the more we

are sensitive to his presence in our surroundings: in all creatures and especially in other human beings, although the human face, in turn marked by the trials of life and by evil, may be difficult to appreciate and accept as an epiphany of God. With all the more reason then, to recognize and respect each other as we really are, in other words as brothers and sisters, we need to refer to the Face of a common Father who loves us all despite our limitations and failings.

It is important to be taught respect for others, even when they are different from us, from an early age. Increasingly today classes in schools consist of children of various nationalities but even when this is not the case their faces are a prophecy of the humanity we are called to form: a family of families and peoples. The smaller these children are, the more they awaken in us tenderness and joy at an innocence and brotherhood that seem obvious to us despite their differences, they cry and laugh in the same way, they have the same needs, they communicate spontaneously, they play together.... Children's faces are like a reflection of God's gaze on the world. So why extinguish their smiles? Why poison their hearts? Unfortunately the icon of the Mother of the God of Tenderness finds its tragic opposite in the sorrowful images of so many children and their mothers at the mercy of war and violence, refugees, asylum seekers and forced migrants. Faces hollowed by hunger and disease, faces disfigured by suffering and desperation and the faces of little innocents are a silent appeal to our responsibility: before their helpless plight, all the false justifications of war and violence fall away. We must simply convert to projects of peace, lay down every kind of weapon and strive all together to build a world that is worthier of the human being.

My *Message for today's 43rd World Day of Peace*, "If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation", fits within the perspective of God's Face and of human faces. Indeed, we can say that the human being is capable of respecting creatures insofar as he bears in his mind a full sense of life, otherwise he will be inclined to despise himself and all that surrounds him, to have no respect for the environment in which he lives and no respect for Creation. Those who can recognize in the cosmos the reflections of the Creator's invisible face, tend to have greater love for creatures and greater sensitivity to their symbolic value. The Book of Psalms is especially rich in testimonies of this truly human way of relating to nature: to the sky, the sea, mountains, hills, rivers, animals.... "O Lord, how manifold are your works!", the Psalmist explains: "In wisdom have you made them all; / the earth is full of your creatures" (Ps 104[103]: 24).

The perspective of the "face" in particular invites us to reflect on what, also in this *Message*, I have called "human ecology". In fact there is a very close connection between respect for the human being and the safeguard of creation. "Our duties towards the environment flow from our duties towards the person, considered both individually and in relation to others" (n. 12). If the person becomes degenerate the environment in which he lives deteriorates; if culture is inclined to nihilism if not theoretical practical nature cannot but pay the consequences. In fact, it is possible to note a reciprocal influence between the human face and the "face" of the environment: "when 'human ecology' is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits" (Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, n. 51). I therefore renew my appeal to invest in education, proposing as an

objective, in addition to the necessary transmission of technical and scientific notions, a broader and deeper "ecological responsibility", based on respect for human beings and their fundamental rights and duties. Only in this way can the commitment to the environment truly become an education in peace and in building peace.

Dear brothers and sisters, a Psalm recurs in the Christmas Season that contains, amongst other things, a wonderful example of how God's coming will transfigure the creation and give rise to a sort of cosmic celebration. This hymn begins with an invitation to all peoples to praise: "Sing to the Lord a new song; / sing to the Lord, all the earth! / Sing to the Lord, bless his Name" (Ps 96[95]: 1). Yet at a certain point this appeal for exultation is extended to the whole of creation: "Let the Heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; / let the sea roar, and all that fills it; / let the field exalt, and everything in it! / Then shall all the trees of the wood sing for joy" (vv. 11-12). The celebration of faith becomes a celebration of the human being and of creation: that celebration which is also expressed at Christmas in decorations on trees, in streets and in houses. Everything flourishes anew because God has appeared in our midst. The Virgin Mother shows the Infant Jesus to the shepherds of Bethlehem, who rejoice and praise the Lord (cf. Lk 2: 20). The Church renews the mystery for people of every generation, she shows them God's Face so that, with his Blessing, they may walk on the path of peace.

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