



# The Holy See

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## **MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II FOR THE XXIV WORLD DAY OF PEACE**

**"IF YOU WANT PEACE,  
RESPECT THE CONSCIENCE OF EVERY PERSON"**

*1 January 1991*

Today the many peoples who make up the one human family are increasingly concerned that freedom of conscience, which is essential for the freedom of every human being, be recognized in practice and safeguarded by law. I have already devoted two Messages for the World Day of Peace to various aspects of this freedom, which remains fundamental for peace in the world. In 1988 I proposed some reflections on religious freedom. It is essential that the right to express one's own religious convictions publicly and in all domains of civil life be ensured if human beings are to live together in peace. I noted on that occasion that "peace... puts down its roots in the freedom and openness of consciences to truth"<sup>1</sup>. The following year I continued this reflection by proposing some thoughts on the need to respect the rights of civil and religious minorities, "one of the most delicate questions affecting contemporary society... since it is related to the organization of social and civil life within each country, as well as to the life of the international community"<sup>2</sup>. This year I wish to consider specifically the importance of *respect for the conscience of every person*, as a necessary basis for peace in the world. *I. Freedom of Conscience and Peace* The need to take concrete steps towards ensuring full respect for freedom of conscience, both legally and in ordinary human relations, has become even more urgent in the light of the events of last year. The rapid changes which have taken place show very clearly that a person may not be treated as a kind of object governed solely by forces outside of his or her control. Rather, the individual person, despite human frailty, has the ability to seek and freely know the good, to recognize and reject evil, to choose truth and to oppose error. In creating the person, God wrote on the human heart a law which everyone can discover (cf. Rom 2:15). Conscience for its part is the ability to judge and act according to that law: "To obey it is the very dignity of man"<sup>3</sup>. No human authority has the right to interfere with a person's conscience. Conscience bears witness to the *transcendence of the person*, also in regard to society at large, and, as such, is inviolable. Conscience, however, is not an absolute placed above truth and error. Rather, by its very nature, it implies *a relation to objective truth*, a truth which is universal, the same for all, which all can and must seek. It is in this relation to objective truth that freedom of conscience finds its justification, inasmuch as it is a necessary condition for seeking the truth worthy of man, and for adhering to that truth once it is sufficiently known. This in turn necessarily requires that each individual's conscience be respected by everyone else; people must not attempt to impose their own "truth" on others. The right to profess the truth must always be upheld, but not in a way which involves contempt for those who may think differently. *Truth imposes itself solely by the*

*force of its own truth.* To deny an individual complete freedom of conscience — and in particular the freedom to seek the truth — or to attempt to impose a particular way of seeing the truth, constitutes a violation of that individual's most personal rights. This also aggravates animosities and tensions, which can easily lead to strained and hostile relations within society or even to open conflict. In the end, it is *on the level of conscience* that the difficult task of ensuring a firm and lasting peace is most effectively confronted.

**II. Absolute Truth is found only in God** The guarantee that objective truth exists is found in God, who is Absolute Truth; objectively speaking, the search for truth and the search for God are one and the same. This alone is enough to show the *intimate relationship between freedom of conscience and religious freedom.* It also explains why the systematic denial of God and the establishment of a regime which incorporates this denial in its very constitution are diametrically opposed to both freedom of conscience and freedom of religion. However, those who acknowledge the relationship between ultimate truth and God himself will also acknowledge the right, as well as the duty, of non-believers to seek the truth which can lead them to discover the Mystery of God and humbly accept it.

**III. The Formation of Conscience** Every individual has the grave duty to form his or her own conscience in the light of that objective truth which everyone can come to know, and which no one may be prevented from knowing. To claim that one has a right to act according to conscience, but without at the same time acknowledging the duty to conform one's conscience to the truth and to the law which God himself has written on our hearts, in the end means nothing more than imposing one's limited personal opinion. This hardly contributes in any useful way to the cause of world peace. On the contrary, the truth must be passionately pursued and lived to the best of one's ability. This sincere search for the truth will lead not only to respect for the search that others are making, but also to a desire to seek the truth together. *The family* plays a primary role in the important task of forming consciences. Parents have a grave duty to help their children to seek the truth from their earliest years and to live in conformity with the truth, to seek the good and to promote it. *The school* is also fundamental to the formation of conscience. It is there that children and young people come into contact with a world which is larger and often unlike the family environment. Education is in fact never morally indifferent, even when it claims to be neutral with regard to ethical and religious values. The way in which children and young people are brought up and educated will necessarily reflect certain values which in turn influence their understanding of others and of society as a whole. Hence, in a way consonant with the nature and dignity of the human person and with the law of God, young people should be helped during their years of schooling to discern and to seek the truth, to accept its demands and the limits of authentic freedom, and to respect the right of others to do the same. The formation of conscience is compromised if a thorough *religious education* is lacking. How can a young person fully understand the demands of human dignity if no reference is made to the source of that dignity, namely, God the Creator? In this regard, the role of the family, the Catholic Church, Christian communities and other religious institutions remains essential. The State, in compliance with international norms and Declarations,<sup>4</sup> must guarantee their rights in this field and make it possible for them to exercise those rights. For their part, families and communities of believers ought to appreciate and ever deepen their commitment to the human person and to the objective values of the person. Among the many other institutions and bodies which play a specific role in forming consciences, *the means of social communication* must also be mentioned. In today's world of rapid communication, the mass media can play an extremely important and indeed essential role in furthering the search for the truth, provided that they avoid presenting merely the limited interests of certain individuals, groups or ideologies. For more and more people the media are often their only source of information. How important, then, that the media be used responsibly in the service of the truth!

**IV. Intolerance: A Serious Threat to Peace** A serious threat to peace is posed by intolerance, which manifests itself in the denial of freedom of conscience to others. The excesses to which intolerance can lead has been one of history's most painful lessons. Intolerance can creep into every aspect of social life. It becomes evident when individuals or minorities who seek to follow their conscience in regard to legitimate expressions of their own

way of life are oppressed or relegated to the margins of society. In public life, intolerance leaves no room for a plurality of political or social options, and thus imposes a monolithic vision of civil and cultural life. As for religious intolerance, it cannot be denied that, despite the firm teaching of the Catholic Church according to which no one ought to be compelled to believe,<sup>5</sup> throughout the centuries not a few misunderstandings and even conflicts have occurred between Christians and members of other religions<sup>6</sup>. This fact was formally acknowledged by the Second Vatican Council, which stated that "in the life of the People of God as it has made its pilgrim way through the vicissitudes of human history, there have at times appeared ways of acting which were less in accord with the ways of the Gospel"<sup>7</sup>. Even today much remains to be done to overcome religious intolerance, which in different parts of the world is closely connected with the oppression of minorities. Unfortunately, we are still witnessing attempts to impose a particular religious idea on others, either directly, by a proselytism which relies on means which are truly coercive, or indirectly, by the denial of certain civil or political rights. Extremely sensitive situations arise when a specifically religious norm becomes, or tends to become, the law of the State, without due consideration for the distinction between the domains proper to religion and to political society. In practice, the identification of religious law with civil law can stifle religious freedom, even going so far as to restrict or deny other inalienable human rights. In this regard, I wish to repeat what I stated in the Message for the 1988 World Day of Peace: "Even in cases where the State grants a special juridical position to a particular religion, there is a duty to ensure that the right to freedom of conscience is legally recognized and effectively respected for all citizens, and also for foreigners living in the country even temporarily for reasons of employment and the like"<sup>8</sup>. This holds true also for the civil and political rights of minorities, and for those situations in which an extreme and uncompromising separation of religion and political life, in the name of respect for conscience, effectively hinders believers from exercising their right to give public expression to their faith. Intolerance can also result from the recurring temptation to fundamentalism, which easily leads to serious abuses such as the radical suppression of all public manifestations of diversity, or even the outright denial of freedom of expression. Fundamentalism can also lead to the exclusion of others from civil society; where religion is concerned, it can lead to forced "conversions". However much one may remain convinced of the truth of one's own religion, no person or group has the right to attempt to repress the freedom of conscience of those who have other religious convictions, or to induce them to betray their consciences by the offer or denial of certain social privileges and rights, should they change their religion. There are cases in which individuals are prevented — even through the imposition of severe penalties — from freely choosing a religion different from the one to which they presently belong. Manifestations of intolerance such as these clearly do not advance the cause of world peace. To eliminate the effects of intolerance, it is not sufficient for ethnic or religious minorities to be "protected", and thus reduced to the category of legal minors or wards of the State. This could result in a form of discrimination which hinders or even prevents the development of a harmonious and peaceful society. Rather, *the inalienable right to follow one's conscience and to profess and practise one's own faith*, individually or within a community, is to be acknowledged and guaranteed, always provided that the demands of public order are not violated. Paradoxically, those who were once victims of various forms of intolerance can in their turn be in danger of creating new situations of intolerance. In certain parts of the world, the end of long years of repression — years when the conscience of individuals was not respected and everything that was most precious to the person was stifled — must not prove an occasion for new forms of intolerance, no matter how difficult reconciliation with the former oppressor may be. *Freedom of conscience*, rightly understood, is by its very nature *always ordered to the truth*. As a result, it does not lead to intolerance, but to tolerance and reconciliation. This tolerance is not a passive virtue, but is rooted in active love and is meant to be transformed into a positive commitment to ensuring freedom and peace for all.

**V. Religious Freedom: A Force for Peace** The importance of religious freedom leads me to stress once more that the right to religious freedom is not merely one human right among many others; "rather, (it) is the most

fundamental, since the dignity of every person has its first source in his essential relationship with God the Creator and Father, in whose image and likeness he was created, since he is endowed with intelligence and freedom"<sup>9</sup>. "Religious freedom, an essential requirement of the dignity of every person, is a cornerstone of the structure of human rights"<sup>10</sup>. It is thus the most profound expression of freedom of conscience. It cannot be denied that the right to religious freedom has a bearing on a person's very identity. One of the most significant aspects of today's world is the role that religion has played in the awakening of peoples and in the search for freedom. In many cases it was religious faith that preserved intact and even strengthened the identity of entire peoples. In nations where religion was hindered or even persecuted in an attempt to treat it as a relic of the past, it has once more proved to be a powerful force for liberation. Religious faith is so important for individuals and peoples that in many cases a person is ready to make any sacrifice in order to preserve it. In the end, every attempt to ban or crush what a person holds most dear risks fuelling open or latent rebellion.

**VI. The Need for a Just Legal Order** Despite the various national and international Declarations which proclaim the right to freedom of conscience and religion, we still find too many attempts at religious repression. In the absence of corresponding legal guarantees expressed in appropriate forms, these Declarations are all too frequently doomed to remain a dead letter. Valuable indeed are the renewed efforts being made to confirm the existing legal order<sup>11</sup> by creating new and effective agreements aimed at strengthening religious freedom. This sort of full legal protection must exclude the practice of any religious coercion as being a serious obstacle to peace. For "this freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that in matters religious no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his beliefs. Nor is anyone to be restrained from acting in accordance with his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits"<sup>12</sup>. It is urgently necessary at this moment of history to strengthen juridical instruments capable of promoting freedom of conscience in the areas of political and social life. The gradual and constant development of an internationally recognized legal order could well provide one of the surest bases for the peace and orderly progress of the human family. It is likewise essential that comparable efforts be undertaken nationally and regionally to ensure that all individuals, wherever they live, enjoy the protection of internationally recognized legal norms. The State is obliged not only to recognize the basic freedom of conscience, but also to foster it, always with a view to the natural moral law and the requirements of the common good, and with respect for the dignity of every human being. It should be noted that freedom of conscience does not confer a right to indiscriminate recourse to conscientious objection. When an asserted freedom turns into licence or becomes an excuse for limiting the rights of others, the State is obliged to protect, also by legal means, the inalienable rights of its citizens against such abuses. I wish to address a special and urgent appeal to all who are in positions of public responsibility — Heads of State or of government, legislators, magistrates and others — to ensure by every means necessary the *authentic freedom of conscience* of all those who live within the limits of their jurisdictions, and pay special attention to the rights of minorities. Besides being an issue of justice, this serves to promote the development of a peaceful and harmonious society. Finally, it goes without saying that States are bound by a strict moral and legal obligation to observe international agreements which they have signed.

**VII. A Pluralistic Society and World** The existence of recognized international norms does not preclude the existence of regimes or systems of government which correspond to certain socio-cultural situations. Such regimes, however, must ensure complete freedom of conscience for every citizen, and may in no way be used as an excuse for denying or restricting universally recognized rights. This is especially true when one considers that in today's world it is rare for the entire population of a country to have the same religious beliefs and to belong to the same ethnic group or culture. Mass migration and population shifts are resulting in the growth of multi-cultural and multi-religious societies in various parts of the world. In this context, respect for the conscience of everyone takes on added urgency and presents new challenges to every

sector and structure within society, as well as to legislators and government leaders. How can a country show respect for different traditions, customs, ways of life, and religious obligations, and yet maintain the integrity of its own culture? How can the culture which is predominant in a given society accept and integrate new elements without losing its own identity and without creating conflicts? The answer to these difficult questions can be found in a *thorough education with regard to the respect due to the conscience of others*; for example, through greater knowledge of other cultures and religions, and through a balanced understanding of such diversity as already exists. What better means is there of building unity within diversity than a commitment on the part of all to a common search for peace and a common affirmation of freedom which enlightens and esteems the conscience of everyone? For the sake of an orderly society, it is also to be hoped that the various cultures existing in a given area will show mutual respect and experience mutual enrichment. A genuine commitment to inculturation also serves to increase understanding between religions. In recent years much has been accomplished in the realm of inter-religious understanding to promote an active cooperation in the common tasks facing humanity, on the basis of the many values shared by the great religions. I wish to encourage this cooperation wherever it is possible, as well as the official dialogues currently underway between representatives of the major religious groups. In this regard, the Holy See has an Office — the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue — the specific purpose of which is to promote dialogue and cooperation with other religions, maintaining absolute fidelity to its own Catholic identity while fully respecting the identity of others. When undertaken in a spirit of trust, and with respect and sincerity, interreligious cooperation and dialogue make a real contribution to peace. "Man needs to develop *his spirit and his conscience*. This is often the very thing which is missing in people's lives these days. The lack of concern for values and the overall identity crisis which our world is now experiencing demand that we move beyond our present situation and make renewed efforts to ask important questions and to seek understanding. An inner light will then start to shine in our conscience and will enable us to understand development in a meaningful way, directing it towards the good of each person and of all mankind, in accordance with God's plan"<sup>13</sup>. This common search — carried out in the light of the law of conscience and of the precepts of one's own religion, and confronting the causes of present-day social injustices and wars — will lay a solid foundation for cooperation in the search for needed solutions. The Catholic Church has willingly sought to encourage every form of honest cooperation for the sake of promoting peace. She will continue to make her own contribution towards this cooperation by forming the consciences of her members in openness towards others and respect for them, in that tolerance which accompanies the search for truth, and in a spirit of solidarity<sup>14</sup>.

**VIII. Conscience and the Christian** Faced with the obligation of following their own consciences in the search for the truth, the disciples of Jesus Christ know that they may not trust only in their personal capacity for moral discernment. Revelation enlightens their consciences and enables them to know that freedom which is God's great gift to mankind<sup>15</sup>. Not only has he inscribed the natural law within the heart of each individual, in that "most secret core and sanctuary of a man (where) he is alone with God",<sup>16</sup> but he has also revealed his own law in the Scriptures. Here we find the call, or rather the command, to love God and to observe his law. God has enabled us to know his will. He has revealed his commandments to us, and has set before us "life and good, death and evil"; he calls us to "choose life... loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you and length of days..."<sup>17</sup>. In *the fullness of his love*, God respects a person's free choice regarding the highest values he or she seeks, and he thus reveals *his full respect* for the precious gift of freedom of conscience. God's laws bear witness to this, since they seek to assist and not hinder our use of freedom. In themselves, God's laws remain the perfect expression of his will and his absolute opposition to moral evil, and it is through them that he wishes to guide us in the search for our final end. Yet it was not enough for God to demonstrate his great love in the created world and in man. God "so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life... He who does what is true comes to the light, that it may

be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God"<sup>18</sup>. The Son did not hesitate to proclaim that he is the Truth,<sup>19</sup> and to assure us that this Truth would make us free<sup>20</sup>. In searching for the truth the Christian has recourse to divine revelation, which in Christ is present in all its fullness. Christ has entrusted the Church with the mission of proclaiming this truth, and the whole Church has the duty of remaining faithful to that truth. My most serious responsibility as the Successor of Peter is precisely this: to ensure this constant fidelity by confirming my brothers and sisters in their faith<sup>21</sup>. More than anyone else, the Christian ought to feel the obligation *to conform his conscience to the truth*. Before the splendour of the free gift of God's revelation in Christ, how humbly and attentively must he listen to the voice of conscience! How modest must he be in regard to his own limited insight! How quick must he be to learn, and how slow to condemn! One of the constant temptations in every age, even among Christians, is to make oneself the norm of truth. In an age of pervasive individualism, this temptation takes a variety of forms. But the mark of those who are "in the truth" is the ability to love humbly. This is what God's word teaches us: truth is expressed in love<sup>22</sup>. The very truth that we profess calls us to promote unity rather than division; reconciliation rather than hatred and intolerance. The free gift of our coming to know the truth places upon us the serious responsibility of proclaiming only that truth which leads to freedom and peace for all: the Truth which became flesh in Jesus Christ. At the conclusion of this Message, I invite all people, within their own situation and in the light of their specific responsibilities, to reflect well on the need to respect the conscience of each individual. In every sphere of social, cultural and political life, *respect for freedom of conscience*, ordered to the truth, has many important and immediate applications. As we seek the truth together, with respect for the conscience of others, we will be able to go forward along the paths of freedom which lead to peace, in accordance with the will of God. *From the Vatican, 8 December*

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1990.

**NOTES**<sup>1</sup> *Message for the 1988 World Day of Peace*, Introduction.<sup>2</sup> *Message for the 1989 World Day of Peace*, 1.3 Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 16.4 For the most recent recognition of this right, see the 1981 Declaration of the United Nations on Eliminating all Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Beliefs, art. 1.5 Cf. for example, the Declaration *Dignitatis humanae*, 12.6 Cf. for example, the Declaration *Nostra aetate*, 3.7 Declaration *Dignitatis humanae*, 12.8 No. 1.9 *Address to the participants in the Fifth International Colloquium of Juridical Studies*, 10 March 1984, 5.10 *Message for the 1988 World Day of Peace*, Introduction.<sup>11</sup> Cf., among other documents, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 18; Helsinki Final Act, 1, a) VII; Convention on the Rights of the Child, art. 14.<sup>12</sup> (Declaration *Dignitatis humanae*, 2.13 *Address to Muslim Youth, Casablanca*, 19 August 1985, 9: AAS 78 (1986) 101-102.<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Address to the Diplomatic Corps*, 11 January 1986, 12.15 Cf. Sir 17:6.<sup>16</sup> Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 16.17 Cf. Dt 30:15-20.<sup>18</sup> Jn 3:16, 21.<sup>19</sup> Cf. Jn 14:6.<sup>20</sup> Cf. Jn 8:32.<sup>21</sup> Cf. Lk 22:32.<sup>22</sup> Cf. Eph 4:15.