



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE
BEGINNING OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR***

*To my Brothers in the Episcopate,
To Priests and to Religious Communities,
To the Sons and Daughters of the Church,
To those in Government,
To all people of good will,
Health and the Apostolic Blessing.*

The hour of darkness

1. “You have laid me in the depths of the tomb, in places that are dark, in the depths” (Ps 88 [87]:7). How many times this cry of suffering arose from the hearts of millions of men and women who, from 1 September 1939 to the end of the summer of 1945, were confronted with one of the most destructive and inhuman tragedies of our history!

While Europe was still in shock over the power tactics employed by the Reich in annexing Austria, breaking up Czechoslovakia and conquering Albania, on 1 September 1939 Poland was invaded by German troops from the West, and on 17 September by the Red Army from the East. The crushing of the Polish army and the martyrdom of a whole people was unfortunately only a prelude to the fate in store for many European peoples as well as for many others over most of the five continents.

From 1940 onwards, the Germans occupied Norway, Denmark, Holland, Belgium and half of France. During this time the Soviet Union, already enlarged by a part of Poland, annexed Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and took Bessarabia from Rumania as well as certain territories from Finland.

Furthermore, like a fire spreading destruction in its wake, the war and the human tragedies that accompanied it inexorably and rapidly expanded beyond the borders of the “old continent” and

became a “world” war. On one front, Germany and Italy carried the fighting beyond the Balkans and into North Africa; on another, the Reich suddenly invaded Russia. Finally, by destroying Pearl Harbor the Japanese brought the United States of America into the war on the side of England. This was the situation at the end of 1941.

It was necessary to wait until 1943 - with the success of the Russian counteroffensive that freed Stalingrad from the grip of Germany - for a turning point in the history of the war. The Allied forces on the one hand, and the Soviet troops on the other, succeeded in crushing Germany at the cost of fierce fighting, which from Egypt to Moscow inflicted unspeakable suffering upon millions of defenceless civilians. On 8 May 1945 Germany offered her unconditional surrender.

The struggle in the Pacific, however, continued. In order to hasten the end, two atomic bombs were dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the beginning of August, 1945. Following that appalling event, Japan in turn capitulated. It was 10 August 1945.

No war ever merited the name “world war” in the way that this one did. It was also a total war, because in addition to land operations there was air combat, as well as naval combat on all the world’s oceans. Whole cities were mercilessly destroyed, and their terrorized populations reduced to anguish and misery. Rome itself was threatened. The intervention of Pope Pius XII prevented the city from becoming a battleground.

This is a sober summary of the events which we remember today. They caused the death of fifty-five million people, left the victors divided and Europe in need of rebuilding.

To remember

2. Fifty years later, it is our duty before God to remember these tragic events in order to honour the dead and to share in the sorrow of all those whom this outbreak of cruelty wounded in body and soul, while at the same time forgiving the offences that were committed.

In my pastoral solicitude for the whole Church, and with concern for the good of all humanity, I could not let this anniversary pass by without inviting my brothers in the episcopate, priests and laity, and all people of good will to reflect on the process which brought this conflict to the very depths of inhumanity and suffering.

This is because we have the duty to learn from the past so that never again will there arise a set of factors capable of triggering a similar conflagration.

We now know from experience that the arbitrary dividing up of nations, the forced displacement of peoples, rearmament without limits, the uncontrolled use of sophisticated weapons, the violation of the fundamental rights of individuals and peoples, the non-observance of international rules of

conduct and the imposition of totalitarian ideologies can lead to nothing but the ruin of mankind.

The action of the Holy See

3. Pope Pius XII, from the beginning of his pontificate on 2 March 1939, did not fail to issue an appeal for that peace which everyone agreed was seriously threatened. A few days before the outbreak of hostilities, on 24 August 1939, he spoke prophetic words that still re-sound today: “Once again a grave hour is at hand for the whole hu-man family... The peril is imminent, but there is still time. Nothing is lost with peace. Everything can be lost with war”. (1)

Unfortunately the warning of this great Pontiff was not heeded and disaster struck. The Holy See, unable to prevent war, tried to stop it from spreading by using its limited means. The Pope and his advisers made relentless efforts to this end, both on the diplomatic level and in the humanitarian field, without letting themselves be drawn into taking sides in a conflict which pitted peoples of different ideologies and religions against one another.. In this task they were also preoc-cupied not to aggravate the situation or to compromise the safety of peoples subjected to extraordinary trials. With regard to what was happening in Poland, Pius XII declared: “We ought to speak words of fire against such things, and the only thing that dissuades us from doing so is the knowledge that if we should speak, we would be making the condition of these unfortunate

A few months after the Yalta Conference (4-11 February 1945), and with the war in Europe barely over, this same Pope, addressing the College of Cardinals on 2 June 1945, did not fail to look to the world’s future and to plead for the triumph of law: “Nations, especially those that are small or moderate-sized, demand that they be permitted to control their own destinies. They can be led to accept, of their own free will and in the interest of common progress, obligations which modify their sovereign rights. But having borne their share—their large share—of sacrifices in order to destroy a system of brutal violence, they are right in refusing to have imposed upon them a new political or cultural system which the great majority of their peoples resolutely reject... In the depths of their conscience, people feel that their leaders would discredit themselves if, caught up in the mad frenzy of the hegemony of power, they failed to bring about a triumph of law”. (3)

Man treated with contempt

4. This “triumph of law” remains the best guarantee of respect for persons. In returning to the history of those six terrible years, it is only right that one regard with horror the contempt in which man was held.

To the material ruins, to the annihilation of the agricultural and industrial resources of countries ravaged by fighting and destruction, including the nuclear holocaust of two Japanese cities, one must also add massacres and misery.

My thoughts turn in particular to the cruel fate inflicted on the peoples of the great plains of

Eastern Europe. At the side of the Archbishop of Krakow, Adam Stefan Sapieha, I personally witnessed this distressing reality. The inhuman demands of the occupier of the moment brutally oppressed opponents and suspected opponents, while women, children and the elderly were subjected to constant humiliation.

One can never forget the tragedy that resulted from the forced displacement of peoples who were thrown onto the roads of Europe, exposed to every peril in their search for a refuge and for the means to live.

Special mention must also be made of the prisoners of war, who in isolation, destitution and humiliation paid yet another heavy price after the harshness of battle.

Finally, one must remember that the creation of governments imposed by the occupier on the States of Central and Eastern Europe was accompanied by repressive measures and even by numerous executions in order to subjugate the resistant peoples.

The persecution of the Jews

5. Among all these anti-human measures, however, there is one which will forever remain a shame for humanity: the planned barbarism which was unleashed against the Jewish people.

As the object of the "final solution" .. devised by an erroneous ideology, the Jews were subjected to deprivations and brutalities that are almost indescribable. Persecuted at first through measures designed to harass and discriminate, they were ultimately to die by the millions in extermination camps.

The Jews of Poland, more than others, lived this immense suffering: the images of the Warsaw ghetto under siege, as well as what we have come to learn about the camps at Auschwitz, Maidanek and Tre-blikka, surpass in horror anything that can be humanly imagined.

One must also remember that this murderous madness was directed against many other groups whose crime was to be "different" or to have rebelled against the tyranny of the occupier.

On the occasion of this sorrowful anniversary, once again I issue an appeal to all people, inviting them to overcome their prejudices and to combat every form of racism by agreeing to recognize the fundamental dignity and the goodness that dwell within every human being, and to be ever more conscious that they belong to a single human family, willed and gathered together by God.

I wish to repeat here in the strongest possible way that hostility and hatred against Judaism are in complete contradiction to the Christian vision of human dignity.

The trials of the Catholic Church

6. The new paganism and the systems related to it were certainly directed against the Jews, but they were likewise aimed at Christianity, whose teaching had shaped the soul of Europe. In the people of whose race “according to the flesh, is the Christ” (Rom 9:5), the Gospel message of the equal dignity of all God’s children was being held up to ridicule.

In his Encyclical *Mit Brennender Sorge*, my predecessor Pope Pius XI clearly stated: “He who takes race, or the people or the State, or the form of Government, the bearers of the power of the State, or other fundamental elements of human society... and makes them the ultimate norm of all, even of religious values, and deifies them with an idolatrous worship, perverts and falsifies the order of things created and commanded by God”. (4)

This pretension on the part of the ideology of the National Socialist system did not spare the Churches,-in particular the Catholic Church, which before and during the conflict experienced her own “passion». Her fate was certainly no better in the lands where the Marxist ideology of dialectical materialism was imposed.

We must give thanks to God, however, for the many witnesses, known and unknown, who in those hours of tribulation had the courage to profess their faith steadfastly, who knew how to rise above the atheist’s arbitrariness and who did not give in to force.

Totalitarianism and religion

7. Nazi paganism and Marxist dogma are both basically totalitarian ideologies, and tend to become substitute religions.

Long before 1939, there appeared within certain sectors of European culture a desire to erase God and his image from man’s horizon. It began by indoctrinating children along these lines, from their earliest years.

Experience has unhappily shown that once man is abandoned to human power alone and crippled in his religious aspirations, he is quickly reduced, to a number or an object. Moreover, no age of humanity has escaped the risk of man closing upon himself in an attitude of proud, self-sufficiency. But such a risk is accentuated in this century in so far as armed force, science and technology have given contemporary man the illusion of becoming the sole master of nature and history. This is the specious claim that lies at the root of the excesses we deplore.

The moral abyss into which contempt for God and thus for man plunged the world fifty years ago made us touch with our very fingers, as it were, the power of “the ruler of this world” (In 14:30), who, can seduce consciences through falsehood, through scorn for man and lot law, and through

the cult of power and force.

Today we remember all these things and meditate on the extremes to which the abandonment of all reference to God and to all tran-scendent moral law can lead.

Respecting the rights of peoples

8. What is true for the individual is also true for peoples. In recalling the events of 1939 we are reminded that the cause of the last world conflict was the crushing of the rights of whole peoples as much as those of individuals. I recalled this fact yesterday, in my letter to the Polish Episcopal Conference.

There can be no peace if the rights of all peoples—particularly the most vulnerable—are not respected! The entire edifice of international law rests upon the principle of equal respect for States, for each people's right to self-determination and for their free cooperation in view of the higher common good of humanity.

It is essential that there never again occur situations like that of Poland in 1939, in which a country was ravaged and divided up at the pleasure of unscrupulous invaders. In, this regard, one can hardly help but think of those countries which have not yet obtained their full independence, as well as those which face the threat of losing it. In this context and in these days, we must call to mind the case of Lebanon, where united forces, pursuing their own interests, have not hesitated to imperil the very existence of a nation.

Let us not forget that the United Nations Organization was born after the Second World War as an instrument of dialogue and of peace, based upon the recognition of the equal rights of peoples.

Disarmament

9. One of the essential conditions for "living together" is disarmament.

The terrible trials undergone by both combatants and civilian populations at the time of the Second World War must move the leaders of nations to make every effort at hastening the development of a process of cooperation, control and disarmament which will make war unthinkable. Who would dare still justify the use of horrendous weapons which kill people and destroy the work of their hands in order to resolve differences between States? As I once stated: "War is in itself irrational and..., the ethical principle of the peaceful settlement of conflicts is the only way worthy of man". (5)

For this reason, we must give a favourable reception to the negotiations now taking place for nuclear and conventional disarmament, as well as those aimed at a total ban on chemical and

other weapons. The Holy See has repeatedly declared that the parties involved must at least arrive at the lowest armament level possible, commensurate with the demands of their security and defence.

These promising developments, however, will only have a chance to bear fruit if they are supported and accompanied by the will to intensify cooperation equally in other areas, notably in the areas of economics and culture. The last meeting of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, held recently in Paris on the theme "The Human Dimension", expressed a desire by the countries of both parts of Europe to see established everywhere the rule of the State governed by law. This form of State would appear, in fact, to be the best guarantor of the rights of the individual, including the right to religious freedom, respect for which is indispensable for social and - inter--national peace.

Educating younger generations

10. Having learnt from the mistakes and moral failures of the past, Europeans today have a duty to pass on to younger generations a lifestyle and culture inspired by solidarity with others and esteem for them. In this regard, Christian faith, which has so deeply moulded this continent's spiritual values, ought to be a source of constant inspiration. Its doctrine of the person created in the image of God can only contribute to the thrust towards a renewed humanity.

In the social debate which is inevitable whenever different conceptions of society meet, adults must give an example of respect for others, always being able to recognize the part of the truth which the other person possesses, On a continent with such 'marked contrasts, we must continually learn anew to accept one another, as individuals, as ethnic groups and as countries, with all our differing cultures, beliefs and social systems.

Educators and the media have a fundamental role to play in this re-gard. Unfortunately, it must be said that education in the dignity of the person created in the image of God is certainly not favoured by the portrayals of violence and depravity which the social communications media all too often disseminate. Young consciences in the process of formation are troubled by these. and the moral sense of adults is dulled.

Bringing moral awareness to public life

11. The fact is that public life cannot bypass ethical criteria. Peace is achieved first of all on the terrain of human values, values that are lived and transmitted by citizens and by peoples. Whenever the moral fibre of a nation begins to wear away, the Worst is to be feared.

Vigilant remembrance of the past ought to make our contemporaries attentive to potential abuses in exercising the freedom which the war generation sacrificed so much to attain. The fragile

balance of peace could easily be compromised if evils such as racial hatred, contempt for foreigners, segregation of the sick and the elderly, exclusion of the poor, recourse to private and collective violence were revived in people's consciences.

It is the responsibility of citizens to distinguish, among various political proposals, those that are inspired by reason and moral values. It falls to States to be vigilant in baiting anything that would lead to exasperation or impatience on the part of any disadvantaged group within society.

12. To you, statesmen and leaders of nations, I repeat once again my profound conviction that respect for God and respect for man go hand in hand. They make up the absolute principle which allows States and political blocs to overcome their hostilities.

In particular, we cannot forget Europe, where this terrible conflict first sprang up, and which experienced a genuine "passion" which left it ruined and drained of its life's blood. Since 1945 we have been witnesses to and active participants in praiseworthy efforts aimed at the material and spiritual re-building of Europe.

Yesterday, this continent exported war. Today, its role is to be a "peacemaker." I am confident that the message of humanism and liberation, which is the heritage of Europe's Christian history, will once again energize its people and continue to shine forth in the world.

Yes, Europe, all eyes are upon you, because people are aware that you still have something to say after the catastrophe of those years of fire: namely, that true civilization is not to be found in force, but rather is the fruit of a victory over ourselves, over the powers of injustice, selfishness and hatred which can go so far as to disfigure man himself!

13. In conclusion, I wish to address in a special way the pastors and faithful of the Catholic Church.

We have just recalled one of the bloodiest wars in history, a war which broke out on a continent with a Christian tradition.

Acknowledgement of this fact compels us to make an examination of conscience about the quality of Europe's evangelization. The collapse of Christian values that led to yesterday's moral failures must make us vigilant as to the way the Gospel is proclaimed and lived out today.

Unfortunately, we must observe that in many areas of existence modern man thinks, lives and acts as if God did not even exist. In this, we find lurking the same danger that was present yesterday: that man will be handed over to the power of man.

While Europe prepares to put on a new face, while positive developments are happening in certain

places in its central and eastern parts, and the leaders of nations collaborate to an ever greater degree in solving the great problems of humanity, God is calling his Church to make her own contribution to the coming of a more fraternal world.

Together with other Christian churches, and despite our imperfect unity, we wish to say once again to humanity today that man is only authentically himself when he accents that he is a creature of God; that man is only aware of his dignity when he recognizes in himself and in others the imprint of the God in whose image he was created; that man only achieves greatness to the extent that he makes his life a response to God's love and puts himself at the service of his brothers and sisters.

God does not despair of man. As Christians, neither may we despair of man, for we know that he is always greater than his mistakes and his faults.

Recalling the Beatitude once spoken by the Lord, "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Mt 5:9), we wish to invite all people to pardon each other and to put themselves at each other's service, for the sake of him who, in his flesh, "put an end to hostility" once and for all (Eph 2:16).

It is to Mary, the Queen of Peace, that I entrust all mankind, confiding to her maternal intercession this history in which we all have a part to play.

In order that the world may never again know the inhumanity and barbarism which ravaged it fifty years ago, let us tirelessly proclaim "our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received our reconciliation" (Rom 5:11). It is Christ who is the pledge of our own reconciliation with each other!

May Christ's Peace and Blessing be with all of you!

From the Vatican, 27 August 1989, the eleventh of my Pontificate.

1) *Radio Message, 24 August 1939: AAS 31 (1939), p. 334.*

2) *Actes et Documents du Saint-Siège relatifs à la seconde guerre mondiale, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1970, vol. 1, p. 455.*

3) *AAS 37 (1945), p. 146.*

4) *14 March 1937: AAS 29 (1937), p. 149 and p. 171.*

5) *Message for World Day of Peace, 8 December 1983, a. 4: AAS 76 (1984), p. 295.*

**L'Osservatore Romano. Weekly Edition in English n. 36 pp.1-3.*

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