



World Day of Peace Message 2007 A Discussion Guide

SUMMARY

The full text of the 2007 Message for the World Day of Peace *The Human Person, The Heart of Peace*, can be downloaded from http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20061208_xl-world-day-peace_en.html

Dignity of the Human Person

Inalienable human rights originate from the fact that we are created in the image and likeness of God. Our dignity as human persons and the rights that this implies are a gift from God but also a task (n 2 – 3). Rights and duties are inseparable.

A person is not a thing. Persons are capable of self-knowledge, self-possession, free self-giving and entering into communion with others. We are called by grace to offer God a response of love and faith (n 2).

Peace is a Gift & Task

Peace is based on respect for the rights of all. It too is a gift from God and a task for us all. Living together and building relationships of justice and solidarity calls for commitment on the part of each person and community.

Pope Benedict XVI says:

“Those with greater political, technical, or economic power may not use that power to violate the rights of others who are less fortunate ... Conscious of this, the Church champions the fundamental rights of each person. In particular she promotes and defends respect for the life and the religious freedom of everyone.” (n 4)

The Right to Life & Religious Freedom

The violation of the right to life is an attack on peace. As well as the victims of armed conflicts, terrorism and different forms of violence, the Pope notes the ‘silent deaths’ caused by hunger, abortion and experimentation on human embryos and euthanasia (n 5). The gift of life is not completely at our disposal.

The right to religious freedom acknowledges our relationship with the transcendent. The right to free expression of personal faith in God is not subject to

human power (n 5).

The prevention of the free expression of personal faith or its persecution, the imposition of a single religion on everyone, and the cultural denigration of religious beliefs, all have serious repercussions for peaceful coexistence (n 5).

Inequality Threatens Peace

Unjust inequalities cause many of the tensions that threaten peace (n 6).

Benedict stresses especially inequality in access to essential goods like food, water, shelter, and health, (n 6) and the “persistent inequalities between men and women in the exercise of basic human rights” (n 6-7).

A Human Ecology for the Tree of Peace

Noting the connection between the ‘ecology of nature’ and ‘human ecology’, Benedict says: “... disregard for the environment always harms human coexistence, and vice versa” (n 8). He goes on to reflect on increasing demands for energy and competition over its sources:

“The destruction of the environment, its improper or selfish use, and the violent hoarding of the earth’s resources cause grievances, conflicts and wars, precisely because they are the consequences of an inhumane concept of development.” (n 9)

A human ecology that will foster the growth of the ‘tree of peace’ requires a vision of the person that isn’t tainted by ideological or cultural prejudices, or by political or economic interests (n 10).

The Basis of Rights

How we understand human nature and the basis of human rights has important implications for peace. A relativistic concept of the human person makes it hard to defend human rights when rights claims are ‘inconvenient’ to another person or group. Benedict affirms that the human person is marked by permanent dignity, and rights that are valid always, everywhere and for everyone (n 12) – they are not relative to particular cultures, times or places.

The Pope affirms the work of international organizations, particularly the United Nations

Organization, and the role of the Declaration of Human Rights in protecting human rights, but notes that rights are not based on the decisions of such bodies (n 13). Rights come from the nature of the person and the inalienable dignity of the person created by God.

International Humanitarian Law

Benedict laments the failure to respect international humanitarian law in times of armed conflict. He notes especially the failure in southern Lebanon in recent times to respect the duty to protect and help innocent victims and to avoid involving the civilian populations (n 14). He says:

“The heart-rending situation in Lebanon and the new shape of conflicts, especially since the terrorist threat unleashed completely new forms of violence, demand that the international community reaffirm international humanitarian law, and apply it to all present-day situations of armed conflict, including those not currently provided for by international law. Moreover, the scourge of terrorism demands a profound reflection on the ethical limits restricting the use of modern methods of guaranteeing internal security.” (n 14)

When war breaks out, the essential principles of humanity and the basic values of civil coexistence must be safeguarded – norms of conduct limiting the damage as far as possible are needed and help should be provided to civilians and all victims of conflicts (n 14).

Nuclear Weapons

At the end of the Cold War it was hoped that the atomic peril had been overcome, but the desire of some states to acquire nuclear weapons has raised this threat again (n 15).

Benedict reaffirms the teaching of Vatican II that: “... every act of war directed to the indiscriminate destruction of whole cities or vast areas with their inhabitants is a crime against God and humanity, which merits firm and unequivocal condemnation” (*Gaudium et Spes* n 80).

He adds that peace requires not only international agreements for the non proliferation of nuclear weapons, but also their reduction and definitive dismantling (n 15).

Work for Peace & True Humanism

Benedict ends with a call to all Christians to work for peace, human dignity and human rights, and for the advancement of a true integral humanism in accordance with the encyclical letters *Populorum Progressio* and *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*. These important documents will celebrate their fortieth and twentieth anniversaries respectively in 2007.

For Discussion

- Can you think of examples of how gifts and tasks, rights and duties are connected in your life?
- Have you ever thought of abortion and euthanasia as peace issues before? In what ways are attacks on the right to life a threat to peace?
- Where in the world are attacks on religious liberty undermining peace today? How can you support the affected communities?
- Are religious beliefs denigrated in Australian culture? How might this undermine our capacity to live together in relationships of justice and solidarity?
- The Millennium Development Goals recognize the role of peace efforts in addressing poverty. How might making poverty history contribute to peace?
- Benedict notes persistent inequalities between women and men in the exercise of basic human rights. How can greater respect for the dignity and rights of women promote peace?
- Imagine that women were not ‘subordinated to the arbitrary decisions of men’ (n 7) in any culture. What impact would this have on conflict resolution efforts?
- Our relationships with creation, with each other, and with God are linked. How might a model of integral human development promote peace in each of these relationships? What might be some of the implications for our lifestyles?
- Are human rights created by the United Nations? If not, where do they come from? Are they the same for everyone everywhere?
- Can we respect cultural differences without compromising on inalienable human rights? Can you give some examples?
- Some people believe that armed conflict or a threat to national security can justify the restriction of human rights. What does the Pope say about this? What have the Australian Bishops said on these questions? Do you agree?
- Benedict speaks strongly against the proliferation of nuclear weapons and calls for their reduction and dismantling. Is the existence of nuclear weapons a threat to peace? How can we work towards the reduction of nuclear weapons?