

PRESENCE OF THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD FOR PEACE AND PROGRESS OF MANKIND

On 20 December, in answer to the Christmas greetings read on behalf of the Sacred College by the Sub-Dean, Cardinal Carlo Confalonieri, Paul VI delivered the following address.

After the celebration of the Consistory, there is renewed for us the comfort of the annual meeting with Members of the Sacred College and with the Roman Prelates. Thank you, venerated Brothers and beloved Sons, for your presence here, the significance and intention of which has been so well expressed by Cardinal Carlo Confalonieri.

Significance of greetings

It is certainly not an outward formality, far less a custom based on secular models, that unites us here: it is the now imminent proximity of the solemnity of the Birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ that calls us. It is the celebration of his coming among us, clad in our frail human poverty in order to raise it to the very level of his divinity and to endow it with his riches (cf. 2 Cor. 8, 9). It is the memory of the Holy Night of Bethlehem, whose miracle of light and grace will be renewed and will present itself again in its mysterious reality in the divine mysteries of the Liturgy of Christmas. All this calls us, as every year, to exchange greetings, and to express also externally, however inadequately, in the usual form permitted to our human limitations, that fullness of joy and life brought to us by the birth on earth of Christ, the Son of God and the Son of Mary.

He is sent by the Father, the gift of his love *par excellence* (cf. Jn. 3, 16), the Lamb who came to sacrifice himself for the sin of the world (cf. Jn. 1, 29, 36), the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end, the first and last (cf. Ap. 1, 8; 21, 6; 22, 13), the key of David (cf. Is. 22, 22; Op. 3, 7), which opens and seals the secrets of the economy of the salvation that has sprung from the bosom of the Father, the Centre and Foundation of world history. If spiritual joy pervades us, if custom requires that we should express to one another the good wishes that mutual affection brings forth

In our hearts, it is because He came to save us, to prepare the Messianic banquet of the supreme goods for the multitude of the poor of Yahweh — and it is all of us who implore him "In expectation of his coming".

This wish extends spontaneously also to the whole span, still unknown and mysterious, of the events of civil life, for the year that is about to begin. In the light of the Word, in the power of his Hand which sustains everything, also the course of these events cannot but enclose a secret of his Providence, which with the collaboration of men of goodwill, will guide us to the achievement of peace and progress, for the good of the human family. And for all this, too, the wish springs up from the heart, in the light of the Word Incarnate.

In this light we are accustomed to look back on the year that is about to end, to draw up a balance-sheet, as it were, of the life of the Church, considered both in her relations with the world and in the unfolding of her life among the vicissitudes of the earthly city, and in her intimate and autonomous fullness. With you, venerated Brothers and beloved sons, we wish to traverse together briefly this common path of examination and inspection.

I

The Church in herself

The preference we wish to give to the problems of the internal life of the Church, certainly does not make us forget, in the first place, those that vast parts of the ecclesial community, in Europe and in Asia, as also in some countries of America and Africa, continue — or are beginning — to have to face owing to the limitations, the pressure and sometimes the oppression of which the ecclesial institution and individual faithful are victims.

Once more, in the imminence of the annual commemoration of the coming of Him who is the strength and hope of all those who believe in Him, we wish to tell these beloved sons of ours of our constant memory of them, to assure them of our special affection and prayer, to animate them to faithfulness and confidence, while we again manifest our firm determination to do everything in the possibility of this Apostolic See in support of their genuine right and in protection of the fundamental rights of every people and every human person.

Anxieties and hopes

If we go on to consider the panorama offered by the world at the end of this year and the forecasts for the one that is about to begin, we cannot hide our concern at certain disquieting situations which exist here and there and which might endanger the tranquillity of some territories, if not general tranquillity.

We wish in any case, to trust in the goodwill and wisdom of those who preside over the destinies of peoples, and in particular those upon whom the major responsibilities weigh in avoiding conflicts and safeguarding peace. We confirm, for our part, our commitment in the service of such a noble and necessary aim. And we confirm our determination to continue to offer all the collaboration in our power to those who sincerely share thoughts of peace with us and wish for an active, beneficial solidarity among peoples.

With a deep feeling of relief and satisfaction — although overshadowed by fears not yet sufficiently assuaged — we have seen draw to an end the fighting that has caused bloodshed in Lebanon for such a long time. Our thought goes to all the victims of this fighting and to all those who still feel its painful consequences in the flesh and in spirit. The efforts of goodwill on the part of all those in positions of responsibility must now be aimed at solving the problems that gave rise to the conflict and at the work of reconstruction. The Holy See, which has already tried to do its utmost for this purpose, will gladly continue to give all its willing collaboration.

It is our wish that the material reconstruction and the resumption of normal life in the country should be accompanied by a no less intense revival on the spiritual and moral plane: so that the image of Lebanon may shine forth once more as an example of respectful and fruitful coexistence between communities differing in their religion, but united in love of their common country and of its noble traditions.

The Lebanese crisis has emphasized even more the urgency of solving the long standing problem of the Middle East, in order that the situation of dangerous tension which remains in the region may at last be overcome, in a spirit of justice and equity. Authoritatively expressed opinions have judged the present as a very suitable time to search for a negotiated settlement. We hope this corresponds to reality and, above all, that all those responsible are willing and able to avail themselves of it. In this perspective, we cannot but repeat the wish and recall once more the necessity that — out of respect for what is right, and for the very solidity of peace —

an adequate solution should be found for the problem of the Christian Holy Places, as well as Jewish and Moslem ones, and in the first place for the problem of Jerusalem.

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We do not wish to pass over in silence the question of **Rhodesia**. Recent events, which have brought to the forefront the figure of a Prelate — Bishop Donald Raymond Lamont of Umtali — committed to the point of sacrifice to vindicating the rights of the native population, urge us to do so. But we are moved, above all, by the hope that the Conference convened to solve the Rhodesian problem may lead, with the necessary promptness, to positive results, so as to ensure real conditions of justice, peaceful co-existence and good collaboration among all the populations of the country. This is the wish we fervently formulate, out of the affection we bear for Africa.

This very rapid glance at the world surrounding us would be too incomplete if we said nothing about Italy, so close to us, and for so many reasons. We are not going to refer here to the problems of its national life, although we follow them with particular interest and not without trepidation. We wish, on the contrary, to allude to the work, to which the Holy See on its side consented willingly, for a revision of the Lateran Concordat which will make this historic act of reconciliation an instrument better suited to guarantee, under the present circumstances, the correct and friendly relationship between the State and the Church. This is even more necessary than elsewhere in a country in which history and present reality demand that both should be able not only to recognize loyalty their respective spheres of competence, but also to maintain — without detriment to their mutual autonomy and independence — the way of harmony and good cooperation, for religious peace and for the spiritual and moral advantage of the people. Such is the spirit and intention with which the Holy See — giving a concrete proof with its attitude — has set about the work of the revision of the Pact by mutual consent: and not the intention of claiming privileges, or the thirst for supremacy, as has been insinuated in some quarters with manifest injustice. Let us hope that the initiative, which is of really historic significance, may soon reach a successful conclusion.

II

The Church and major social problems

And now, looking back at the life of the Church in herself, we cannot fail to mention briefly the events that have characterized the year about to end.

Outstanding events of the year

And in the first place we cannot but go back in thought to the irradiance of holiness that, in ideal continuation of the Holy Year, which was indeed a great movement of prayer, was poured out, as it were, on the world in the models of heroic Christian life, which we proposed to all our sons, in fact to all men: the new Saints, Beatrice da Silva Menses, Virgin, the Foundress of the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, and John Ogilvie, Martyr, of the Society of Jesus, who were canonized respectively on 3 and 17 October; and the new Blesseds, Leopoldo da Castelnuovo, Confessor, of the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin, on 2 May last, and the Discalced Carmelite, Mary of Jesus Lopez de Rivas, Virgin, the contemporary and fellow Sister of St. Teresa of Avila, on 14 November. They are rays that reach us from remote ages as well as from modern times to comfort us in the pre-eminent search for God, and in that love of our brothers, which have characterized the life of the Church following the "new commandment" (Jn. 13, 34), received ineffably from her divine Founder.

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We recall also the days of eucharistic faith, which we lived with the celebration of the International Eucharistic Congress of Philadelphia, which culminated, on Sunday 8 August, in a deep union of prayer round the altar of the Mass which united us from the city of miracle, Bolsena, with the crowds gathered in the USA city for the conclusion of the Congress. If holiness is the heart of the Church, it finds its continual nourishment in the eucharistic renewal of the Sacrifice of Calvary: here is the climax of Christian existence, here is the fullness of communion in the one faith, here is the visible apotheosis of the community life of the Church, as the inexhaustible source of interior renewal, which must continually operate in the conscience of each of the faithful.

We would also like at least to mention outstanding and significant events, of the year now drawing to a close: the calls of twenty new Members, we can well say from all over the world, to membership of the College of Cardinals as the visible and culminating expression, we said on 24 May, of the experience of faith lived during the Holy Year, of the collegiality on which new light was shed by the Second Vatican Council, and of faithfulness to the Church (cf. AAS 68, 1976, pp. 837 f.). And the memory of this accession of new Cardinals does not make us forget the painful gaps left in your venerated and representative College of Cardinals in the course of the year.

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Let us also mention the passing of the Churches of a whole Continent, we mean young and dynamic Australia, to the common law; the meeting of CELAM at Portorico; the incessant acts of the Holy See, among which we are happy to recall the recent reorganization, which gives the definitive character due to them, of two organisms of the Roman Curia, instituted after the Council: "Pontificium pro Laicis", united with the Committee for the Family, which depends on it, and the Pontifical Commission "Iustitia et Pax".

Vitality of the Church

But our glance extends to the whole Church, at this particular moment. She is the sign of hope and a sure point of reference, today especially, when there are multiplying disquieting and frightening signs of a society which seems to be using the stupendous and fragile gift of freedom to become the slave of perverting ideologies, to which it succumbs without a struggle. Terrorism, coldly organized by dark forces which hide in a cowardly way in the shadow, sows death. It dismays the defenceless and confused conscience of most people, in so many nations of the world. In not a few countries prisons have become a school of delinquency. Yet, in the face of all these recurrent threats, of thought or of action, which seem to wish to disintegrate orderly public life and the forms of its peaceful society which promote the good of all, the Church does not cease to be the "signum elevatum in nationibus procul" (c. Is. 5, 26; 11, 12).

Her vitality is peaceful and majestic like the flowing of a great river of Messianic peace, poured forth by the Lord (cf. Is. 66, 12). This vitality is manifested in the defence of the heritage of faith,

which the Church guards intact with jealous care, like the apple of her eye, from corrosive criticisms and from interpretations that reduce it in any way. And she guards her heritage from prejudices and preconceived refusals, which lead in both cases always and only to disobedience to the legitimate Pastors of the episcopal body and to the humble successor of Peter who is at their head.

This vitality is manifested in fearless and irreproachable protection of the moral Law, inscribed in the heart of man and guaranteed by the Revelation of the Old and New Testament. This takes place by means of the teaching of this Apostolic See — which does not fear either the clamour or the hostility, far less the humiliation and the irony of that world for which Christ did not pray as he did for his disciples (cf. Jn. 17, 9) but which he loved to the extent of giving his life for it (cf. Jn. 3, 17; 6, 51; 14, 31). It is a teaching that proclaims the right to life, the indissolubility of marriage, the wholesome, ascetic and liberating norms of sexual life.

This vitality is also manifested in the evangelizing impulse that supports the Church in her mission, and which she in her turn sustains with an immense effort in order to be a witness among the peoples to God's truth and holiness. It is manifested in the various forms of ecclesial and religious life; in the faithfulness of families to the daily commitments in which the sacramental grace of marriage is unfolded; in the spiritual fruitfulness of consecrated souls; in the fervour that permeates particularly young people with happy symptoms of encouraging goodness, constructive thoughtfulness and a community consciousness; in the happy awakening of priestly and religious vocations, particularly for the missionary apostolate and for contemplative life.

Immutability of the deposit and living development in the Church

This vitality of the Church, of which we have tacit but significant and extremely consoling proofs every day, can be compared to the organic life that pulsates in the universe. Like a large tree, the roots of which are deeply embedded in the soil that has been nourishing it for centuries, the Church, too, has roots bedded in the past, going as far back as Christ and the apostles. In this sense the immutability of the deposit which the Church guards in proposing dogma, morality and the liturgy itself in the luminous principle of "lex orandi, lex credendi", is unquestionable — and it is unreasonable to contest it. The life of the Church, stable and solid, remains one, because "unum corpus et unus Spiritus . . . Unus Dominus, una fides, unum baptisma. Unus Deus et Pater omnium, qui est super

omnes et per omnia et in omnibus nobis" (Eph. 4, 4 f). In this line we have been, we are and we always will be, in Paul's words: "Solliciti servare unitatem Spiritus in vinculo pacis" (ib. 4, 3).

But as this immutability springs from the very roots of the Church which draw their sap from the past, by means of Christ reaching the very bosom of God, so there is absolutely no conflict between it and the life that buds and blooms from those roots. There is no contrast between life and immutability; on the contrary, it is life that ensures the essential immutability of a living being. The immutability of stone, of insensitive matter, is quite different from the immutability that ensures the continuous identity of the living being through his physical and intellectual growth, and in his confrontation of the circumstances of existence. A plant, an organic body, remain substantially the same in proportion as they grow. It is the ancient and still appropriate comparison of Vincenzo di Lérin, known to everyone (*Commonitorium Primum*, 23; PL 50, 667f); it is the idea that had already been illustrated by Cyprian with inspiring images: "Ecclesia Domini . . . ramos suos in universam terram copia ubertatis extendit, profluentes largiter rivos latius pandit: unum tamen caput est et origo una et una mater recunditatis successibus copiosa" (*De unitate Ecclesiae*, 5; PL 4, 518). From the deep roots are developed the branches, always old and always new, of the same trunk: from the saps of the past they strain towards the future, forward, to gather the flocks of birds that seek shade and rest there (cf. Mk. 4, 32). Development is essential in the life of the Church.

Opposing deviations after the Council

The Church remains immovably faithful to herself; but at the same time she is continually enriching herself. This shows the fruitfulness, the necessity, the role of the Second Vatican Council, which, no less than all the other ecumenical assemblies, gave a clear answer, unexceptionable on the dogmatic plane, prudent and renewing on the pastoral plane, to the requirements of the men of our time. Its positive results could not reasonably be questioned, even if, as has always happened in the life of the Church, there have been and there are painful deviations which, though perhaps proceeding from noble sentiments, cause very serious consequences in the Church. On the one hand, the development of the Church is understood in such a sense that her bounds can no longer be seen to such an extent that the very notion of her has been lost.

On the other hand, a mistaken motive of faithfulness leads to denying and rejecting all development, contrary to the evidence of

the living tradition of the Church. In both cases the evil arises fundamentally, as well as from a real lack of humility and obedience, from ignoring in actual fact the guarantee ensured for development, in continuity, by the very Author of the Church: people claim to set themselves up as the sole judges of what seems to be in the authentic line of tradition or not.

Tradition

Certainly, the immutability of the faith is endangered today by the relativism into which some authors have fallen. But, in opposition to this attitude, we have firmly recalled that divine revelation has a precise and determined sense, an immutable truth, which is proposed for us to believe by Christ, the apostolic tradition and the documents of the Magisterium. We have warned that no hermeneutics has the right — with the intention of adapting the Good News to mentalities that differ according to periods and environments — to replace this meaning with other meanings which are alleged to be equivalent, though they are contrary in certain parts or are fatally reduced.

Yet the objection is put forward — and we say so with great sorrow — that various doctrines or directives of the Second Vatican Council, which we had confirmed and taken up again, depart from the traditional faith. We cannot linger on the various points, all the more so since we have not failed to do so on other occasions. But we wish at least to mention that of the right religious freedom. It is a question of a right with regard to human authorities in particular, that of the State; and of a right — which is at the same time, even more, a serious moral duty — which has as its object the search for the true religion, as well as the choice and the commitment to which this search is addressed. The Council does not in any way base this right on the claim that all religions, and all doctrines, even erroneous ones, involved in this field, have a more or less equal value. It bases it, on the contrary, on the dignity of the human person. This dignity demands that it should not be subjected to exterior coercion which aims at oppressing conscience in the search for the true religion and in supporting it.

CONCLUSION

Venerated Brothers and beloved Sons!

This is what we wished to confide to you as we anxiously await the feast of the Word who comes to save us. In these days our

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heart is in the sacred grotto of the Nativity, thought and prayer spring forth round the crib: Jesus descended into that nakedness to found the Church, the sacrament of salvation; for the Father, as the Council said, "sent his Son . . . to dwell among men and to tell them about the inner life of God (cf. Jn. 1, 1-18). Hence, Jesus Christ, sent as "a man among men" (Ep. to Diognetus, 7, 4). "speaks the words of God" (Jn. 3, 34) and accomplishes the saving work which the Father gave him to do (cf. Jn. 5, 36; 17, 4)" (Dei Verbum, 4). From there, from that crib there began to spring up the seed which now, a full grown tree, spreads over the whole earth; from there came the beginning, from there the driving impulse, from there the explanation of the whole history of the Church and the world, in the movement of holiness and grace that originated in his coming.

So we wait for him, so we will see him, so we will pray beside the holy Cradle: and we will find him there, smiling at us and encouraging us from the arms of his Immaculate Mother Mary. To her, the Mother of Christ and Mother of the Church, we entrust with indomitable hope the future of the Church herself, in fact of the whole of mankind, for which Christ was form. We ask her to be able to love the Church as she loved her, and to imitate her motherly mission in the apostolate. Yes, venerated Brothers, as the Council stressed, "the Church, therefore, in her apostolic work too, rightly looks to her who gave birth to Christ, who was thus conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin, in order that through the Church he could be born and increase in the hearts of the faithful . . . The Virgin has been a model of that motherly love with which all who join in the Church's apostolic mission for the regeneration of mankind should be animated" (Lumen Gentium, 65).

We will all have to give account of the intensity and sincerity of this love to Him who will come to judge us in the majesty of the Father's glory, as he comes now to redeem us in the incomprehensible humility of his abasement. In this watchful and prayerful expectation, may the Son of God made Man bless us all from the arms of the Virgin Mary. In his holy Name we now bless you, in our turn, wishing you a "Happy Christmas!".