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The Urgency for Peace in Teachings of John Paul II

Abstract

Peace has always been a topic of great importance. Its presence is desired by all nations and societies. It brings the world together in unity. John Paul II considered peace to be an integral part in creation of an independent and healthy society. Papal encyclicals and messages, intended to present the response of the teaching Church to problems that arise from time to time, often dwell on the principles that advocate peace. Since freedom and peace are in many cases a privilege for many nations, the mentioned pope commits himself to speak about the cruelty and evilness of wars and national conflicts. Pope John Paul II denounces intolerance as denial of freedom for many people, and consequently a great threat to peace. The pope teaches that peace has its roots in the family. Yet, in many societies, the family is deprived of the utmost importance that it certainly deserves. Without the adequate means for a decent livelihood, families can experience hardship in committing themselves to promote solidarity and a proper social fabric worthy of human dignity. For John Paul II, a nation's freedom and peace are safeguarded and promoted through particular attention and a much-devoted effort by strong and healthy families.

Keywords

Peace, freedom, peaceful societies, security, culture of war, culture of peace.

The modern world is in a constant state of tension accompanied by numerous threats to peace. Unresolved conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria are some of the examples that are sometimes mistaken for regional problems, especially by the people of highly industrialized countries. The elimination of war, which also includes the fight against terrorism, is a prerequisite for the development of a planetary civilization. “Never before in the history of mankind”, says John Paul II, “have people talked so much about peace, and peace has never been so much desired, as it is in our

day”¹. Since that statement more than thirty-two years have passed, and the “consolidation” of peace in spite of numerous projects and ongoing debates continues and still is extremely difficult. In fact, even the most intensive efforts towards peace do not extend beyond the merely theoretical dimension in the whole process. In this regard, the Pontiff says that “all too often, peace initiatives are ridiculously powerless against the course of events, except if they are derailed or distorted”².

There are many reasons for this. It seems that there is a contrast between a “desire” for peace and a proposed vision to ensure that peace can be realised through the correct means. There could be efforts for peace that prove to be ineffective since the methods used are harmful or devoid of meaning.

It is thus important to highlight the desire for peace but nonetheless replace any inefficient or even wrong action to acquire peace. It seems that the certain concepts of peace are the source of this mystification.

A subjectivist and a particularistic understanding of peace are often a cause not simply to misunderstandings, but also to unhealthy distortions.

In this light, what is of utmost importance is a proper understanding of peace, an ability to promote peace culture as well as to determine foundational principles upon which peace can be built. These are central ideas that if not taken seriously, the promotion and establishment of peace can be jeopardised. In this sense, peace can be either consolidated or weakened. This depends on the readiness and openness as well as the intention and the actions of the parties concerned.

Papal encyclicals and messages, intended to present the response of the teaching Church to problems that modernity gives rise to from time to time, identify and explain the principles on which peace should be built. Moreover, the Pope uses exhortations to encourage the whole people of God to understand and to commit themselves to promote peace as the proper foundation for a truly human society.

Peace cannot be understood independently of human beings or of a world order. It is inextricably linked to the formation of a human society. To ensure peace, laws should be passed in parliament and institutions are to be set up.

¹ John Paul II, *Homilia wygłoszona podczas Mszy Świętej w Drogheda*, in: *Jan Paweł II w Irlandii i Stanach Zjednoczonych*, Warszawa 1981, p. 34. This study selected the most representative speeches of John Paul II on the issue of peace in the world.

² Idem, *Orędzie na Światowy Dzień Pokoju 1979*, in: *Orędzia na Światowy Dzień Pokoju papieża Pawła VI i Jana Pawła II*, Warszawa, p. 123.

The issues of peace cannot be simply interpreted through the rule of the law. Peace is safeguarded once there is respect for the human persons and their dignity as well as the laws that protect them³. The social teaching of the Church understands the human person as the basic structural principle for peace, and not as a subordinate element of social life. The cornerstone for lasting peace must be a complete respect and reintegration of the human person in society. It should be made not through legal declarations, but through a real socio-political security exercise of its rights and obligations. Christian personalism is thus the starting point of the social teaching of the Roman Catholic Church regarding peace.

Ethics orders the pursuit of peace. It requires a full effort to eliminate international antagonisms, and thereby creating a climate of dialogue and cooperation between people.

In 1983, Pope John Paul II hit the nail on its head with the very title he gave for a message marking the XVI World Day of Peace: “Dialogue for peace. A challenge for our time”. He said: “Who would dare to envisage, without trembling, yet more extensive and much more terrible wars, which still threaten? Is it not necessary to give everything in order to avoid war, even the ‘limited war’ thus euphemistically called by those who are not directly concerned in it, given the evil that every war represents its price that has to be paid in human lives, in suffering, in the devastation of what would be necessary for human life and development, without counting the upset of necessary tranquillity, the deterioration of the social fabric, the hardening of mistrust and hatred which wars maintain towards one’s neighbour? And today when even conventional wars become so murderous, when one knows the tragic consequences that nuclear war would have, the need to stop war or to turn aside its threat is all the more imperious. And thus we see as more fundamental the need to have recourse to dialogue, to its political strength, which must avoid recourse to arms”⁴.

Undoubtedly, for John Paul II, dialogue for peace proves to be a very important challenge of all times. This is even more so in the dreadful possibility of certain governments opting for nuclear defence. In his message of 11 June 1982 addressed to the second special session of the General

³ John Paul II, *Encyclical Redemptor hominis*, No. 1, 17, idem, *Address to Representatives of the Organization of American States in Washington, DC*, The Life and Thought, 1980, No. 2, p. 77.

⁴ John Paul II, *Dialogue for peace—a challenge for our time*, Vatican, 8 December 1982.

Assembly of the United Nations, Pope John Paul deliberately spoke on the urgency and importance of disarmament. One cannot fail to notice the delicate context in which he was delivering his message. For John Paul II, the teaching of the Catholic Church on the tolerance of the use of arms is clear and consistent. The Pope makes continuous appeals to refrain from using weapons of destruction and to resist the temptation of using nuclear arms because of their devastating effects. There are indeed times when the Church demands each nation to strive for independence, freedom and the right sense of security⁵.

This message is the Pope's assurance of a "constant concern and efforts of the Catholic Church, which will not cease to be developed as long as the reinforcement will not be completely controlled, guaranteeing the security of nations, and the hearts of all men gained for such moral choices that provide peace⁶. With regard to nuclear weapons Pope believed that [...] "deterrence" based on balance, certainly not treated as a goal itself but as a step towards the progressive disarmament, may still be considered to be morally acceptable. However, to ensure peace we absolutely cannot be satisfied with the minimum, which is always encumbered with a real danger of explosion"⁷.

This papal message considered the strategy of "deterrence" as "morally acceptable" in the sense of "morally tolerable". John Paul II's statement is, on the one hand, the rejection of requests, which are raised from various parts so the Church could strongly reprove the reinforcement of the nuclear "deterrent". On the other hand, it is, as the Second Vatican Council, far from seeing the strategy deterrent as an actually safe, and in the long run, effective measure, which is ethically unquestionable in preservation of peace"⁸.

The Pope also answered the question concerning the mass media and its involvement in the matter of peace. "First of all, through the establishment on the institutional plane of an order of communication that guarantees a correct, just and constructive use of information, free from oppression, abuses and

⁵ J. Kowalski, *Strategia nuklearnego odstraszenia jako środek zachowania pokoju*, „Chrześcijanin w świecie” 19 (1987), p. 11–12.

⁶ John Paul II, *Rozbrojenie. Orędzie [...] do uczestników II sesji specjalnej Zgromadzenia Ogólnego ONZ poświęconej sprawom rozbrojenia*, odczytane 11 czerwca 1982 roku przez Kardynała Sekretarza Stanu Agostino Casaroli, „L'Osservatore Romano” (1982) nr 6 (30), p. 25.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ J. Kowalski, *Strategia nuklearnego odstraszenia jako środek zachowania pokoju*, „Chrześcijanin w świecie” 19 (1987), p. 12–13.

discriminations based on political, economic or ideological power”⁹. The Pope emphasized that information given in one direction, imposed from above in an arbitrary way or dictated by the laws of the market and advertising, monopolistic concentration and manipulation, are not only an attack on the good order of social media, but it actually threatens peace and violate the right to information.

According to John Paul II, communication media can be used by the international security to educate in the spirit of peace. The ways in which events and problems are presented as the development of human rights, ideological conflicts, social and political, national reclaim, the arms race, to give just a few examples, indirectly or directly influence the formation of public opinion and the formation of peace-oriented thinking or are directed to solve problems by force.

In order to be the real instrument of peace, social communication must refrain from unilateral and particular statements, reject prejudice, and introduce a spirit of mutual understanding and solidarity. For John Paul II, peace is the value which eliminates all divisions. The Pope also said that “the proper way to the world community, in which the rules will be justice and peace, without divisions between nations on all continents, is the way of solidarity”¹⁰. It is very important to emphasize that the social message of peace is also imperative where professional workers become its advocates. On the other hand, the social media should eliminate any framework of a purely individualistic ethic¹¹.

Thoughts and values shown by the Pope should create a *credo* for the informational system of the third millennium. John Paul II spoke about it on the 1950th anniversary of the Redemption accomplished by Jesus Christ, the “Prince of Peace”¹², the one who came and “preached peace”¹³. The content of the message is timeless and universal. Pope John Paul II taught that peace is born from a new heart. In the biblical sense, the “heart” is the deepest part of the human person, specifying its relationship to good, to others, and to God.

⁹ John Paul II, *Message of the Holy father John Paul II for the 17th World Communications Day*, Vatican, 25 March 1983.

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Pokój jest wartością, która nie zna podziałów*, Vatican, 8 December 1985.

¹¹ John Paul II, *Środki społecznego przekazu...*

¹² See Is 9, 6.

¹³ Eph 2: 14–17.

It is not so much about fairness, but rather the conscience of the beliefs, different ways of thinking, which guide humankind, as well as the passions that condition it. Attention to the heart implies the sensitivity with which any human manifests towards the absolute value of good, justice, peace and brotherhood. “War, as John Paul II claimed, is born from the sinful heart of man, ever since the jealousy and violence that filled the heart of Cain when he met his brother Abel, according to the ancient biblical narrative. Is it not a question really of an even more profound rupture, when people become incapable of agreeing on what is good and evil, on the values of life of which God is the source and guarantor?”¹⁴

It should be noted that peace will always be short-lived and illusory when there is no real change of heart. John Paul II’s teaching about peace also drew attention to the fact that even in the Bible, the prophets acted against liberation without a change of heart, that is, without “conversion”¹⁵. Generally speaking, it is about recovering a clear view and impartiality, as well as the value of the spirit, a sense of justice, equality, world solidarity of rich and poor, mutual trust and brotherly love. One might ask if this is already a utopia. Helplessness and danger in which the modern man has found himself, urges not to wait until later to return to the truth. Peace is authentic if it is a fruit of justice: *opus iustitiae pax*, spoke the prophet Isaiah¹⁶.

The “new heart” strives for the eliminations of fear and psychosis of war.

To say that peace is based on a balance of armaments, one would be replacing the principle that true peace can be built on mutual trust.

By studying the encyclicals, messages, papal letters, it becomes clear that for John Paul II, peace is always a current challenge. Recognition of the deepest causes of conflicts – which makes peace uncertain and fragile – is still a matter of great importance. The roots of violence and injustice lie deep in the heart of every man, every one of us, in our daily way of thinking and acting. Examples are the conflicts and divisions within families, between couples, between parents and children, in school, in relationships between generations by undermining the fundamental right to life of the weakest and the most defenceless of human beings.

¹⁴ John Paul II, *From a new heart peace is born*, Vatican, 8 December 1983.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ See Is 32, 17.

Christians certainly find meaning in the words of the Pope who says that “the current difficulties are really a test of our humanity. They can cause a decisive breakthrough on the way to lasting peace, because they awake dreams and liberate all; hope is a common good of liberating the best energies of mind and heart”¹⁷.

Difficulties are a challenge for everyone, hope for peace reflects everyone’s desire. Pope John Paul II rightly pointed out that the efforts for peace in the world largely depend on young people. He emphasized that “we need to be aware that the future of peace, and therefore the future of mankind depends in a particular way on the basic moral choices that people of the younger generation have to make. In a few years the young people of today will take responsibility for family life and the life of nations, the common good and for peace. Already, young people all over the world ask themselves questions: what can I do? What can we do? Where does our path lead?”¹⁸.

The Polish Pope taught that longing for peace is a constant and undoubtedly the unavoidable challenge of our time. It helps people discover who they truly are and the values they cherish. Among many temptations for being selfishness, a man of peace must learn to develop, first the values of life, then the confidence to carry it out. The call to become peacemakers reflects a call to the conversion of hearts. This call will enhance the building of peace. This happens not through the positive involvement of any human being and certainly not through the use of slogans which many a time lead to divisions and misunderstanding. In this light, the good of all human kind is reached through confidence, mutual understanding and a full commitment to strengthen the presence of peace.

The good of humankind, says John Paul II, is the ultimate reason for peace to be treated on its own right. The issues of peace and development are interrelated. The Pope says that “the world of justice and peace cannot be built only on words, nor can they make them internal forces: you have to want it; it has to be the result of the contribution of all people”¹⁹. In teachings of John Paul II, therefore, participation is the cornerstone in building a world of peace.

¹⁷ John Paul II, *From a new heart peace is born*, Vatican, 8 December 1983.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

The process of Reconciliation

Wars, said John Paul II, “even when they “solve” the problems which cause them, do so only by leaving a wake of victims and destruction which weighs heavily upon ensuing peace negotiations. Awareness of this should encourage peoples, nations and States once and for all to rise above the “culture of war”, not only in its most detestable form, namely, the power to wage war used as an instrument of supremacy, but also in the less odious but no less destructive form of recourse to arms as an expeditious way to solve a problem. Precisely in a time such as ours, which is familiar with the most sophisticated technologies of destruction, it is urgently necessary to develop a consistent ‘culture of peace’, which will forestall and counter the seemingly inevitable outbreaks of armed violence, including taking steps to stop the growth of the arms industry and of arms trafficking”²⁰.

How to build a “culture of peace”? John Paul II taught that the foundation of lasting peace is above all a way of life characterized by mutual acceptance and genuine ability to forgive. He says: “We all need forgiveness from God and from our neighbour. Therefore we must all be ready to forgive and to ask for forgiveness”.

“Asking and granting forgiveness is something profoundly worthy of man; sometimes it is the only way out of situations marked by age-old and violent hatred”²¹.

Pope called to all who believe in Christ, to faithfully follow the path of forgiveness and reconciliation, uniting with Him in prayer to the Father, that all may be one²².

Respect of minorities as a condition for peace

As stated by the Second Vatican Council, “peace is not merely the absence of war, nor does it merely come down to the balance of opposing forces”, but it is a dynamic process that should take into account all the factors favouring the peace or causing its absence.

²⁰ John Paul II, *Offer forgiveness and receive peace*, Vatican, 8 December 1996.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² See J 17: 21.

Therefore, besides the mentioned issues in this article, there is a need for reflection on the point of view of John Paul II concerning minorities and intolerance.

In almost all societies, there are ethnic minorities, existing as communities originating from different cultural traditions, different racial and ethnic affiliation, religious beliefs or historical experience. On one hand, there are very small groups able to maintain and confirm their identity, characterized by a high degree of integration into societies to which they belong. In some cases, these minority groups are even able to impose the larger part of society their advantages in public life. On the other hand, there are minorities who live in suffering and deprivation. This can cause them to vent their frustration and even to rebel. But as Pope John Paul II taught, passivity or violence are not an appropriate way leading to true peace. He says: "In a nation made up of various groups of people there are two general principles which can never be abrogated and which constitute the basis of all social organization"²³.

The first of these principles is the inalienable dignity of every human person, irrespective of racial, ethnic, cultural or national origin or of religious belief. The members of minority groups nonetheless have the duty to treat others with the same respect and sense of dignity.

The second principle concerns the fundamental unity of the human race, which takes its origin from the one God, the Creator, who, in the language of Sacred Scripture, "made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth"²⁴. The Pope said that "peace within the one human family requires a constructive development of what distinguishes us as individuals and peoples, and of what constitutes our identity. Furthermore, on the part of all social groups, whether constituted as States or not, peace requires a readiness to contribute to the building of a peaceful world. The micro-community and the macro-community are bound by reciprocal rights and duties, the observance of which serves to consolidate peace"²⁵.

The mentioned considerations show that the pursuit of peaceful coexistence finds its fulfilling power in fraternal respect involving all nations. Such equal treatment can be expressed in numerous forms of particular services to the rich diversity of human race, which is both in terms of origin and destination.

²³ John Paul II, *To build peace, respect minorities*, Vatican 24 January 1988.

²⁴ See Acts 17, 26.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

Intolerance: A threat to peace

Pope John Paul II warned that intolerance manifested in the denial of conscious freedom of others is a serious threat to peace. “Intolerance can sneak into every aspect of social life, it is a manifestation of marginalization or persecution of individuals and minorities, who are trying to follow their conscience in choosing decent roads of life”²⁶. It should be noted that intolerance can also be a result of fundamentalist tendencies. They can suppress public disclosure of diversity, or even abolish freedom of speech.

“Fundamentalism can also lead to the exclusion of others from social life, or – in the field of religion – the use of forced ‘conversions’”²⁷. Referring to Pope Paul VI, who urged all “true friends of peace” to reflect on the “basic goodness” of humanity, Pope John Paul II believed that the pursuit of peace is inherent to human nature and is reflected in all religions. It is expressed in the desire for order and peace, in an attitude of willingness to serve our neighbour. Bearing witness, action for peace and prayer for peace are all fundamental to form the religious character.

This explains why holy books of different religions devote to peace a special place in the description of the life of man and his relationship with God. For example, for us Christians, Jesus Christ, the Son of the One who has “plans for peace and not evil”²⁸, “is our peace”²⁹. In this light, religious life, if it is truly authentic, it must bear fruits of peace and brotherhood.

The “Spirit of Assisi”

When discussing the issue of peace in the teachings of John Paul II, it is impossible not to mention the initiative of the popes to have the heads of Christian Churches and those of the great religions of the world assembled at Assisi to discuss and to pray for peace.

Assisi provided the right location wherein the chief ministers of the world’s major religions could learn from St Francis and imitate his commitment to

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ See Jer 29, 11.

²⁹ See Eph 2, 14.

promote and safeguard peace. Although the representatives were coming from different continents, nonetheless they were united by the same zeal for peace. This meeting was a testimony pointing to the universal dimension of peace, confirming that peace is not merely the result of politico-diplomatic negotiations and economic systems, but mainly depends on the One who knows the hearts of people and guide their steps.

For many years of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II made a constant appeal for peace. He exhorted the faithful to join the whole of the human race in celebrating the Day of Peace as an expression of the universal desire of all nations around the world.

The Family

In this study, the issue of peace in the world pointed to a variety of threats to peace: the threat of war, lack of reconciliation, love of neighbor and respect for minorities, as well as the suggestion of Pope John Paul II, according to which these risks can be minimized to their eventual abolishment. These considerations about peace, however, would be incomplete without taking into account the problem of the risk of peace which destroys the roots of every society, which is a serious family crisis. In the teachings of John Paul II family is the first place that determines the development or lack of development. If the family is healthy and integrated, then it creates conditions for the development of the whole society³⁰.

Pope noticed that in many societies, the family is of a secondary importance. Often without adequate means of livelihood, to which it has the right, necessary for growth and the creation of a climate that favors the development of its members. (On Sunday, the first day of February, 2004, Pope John Paul II made an appeal to the Italians, echoed the concern about the low number of births of children for economic reasons, and the lack of prospects for family planning). The occurrence of broken homes, forced separations of family members in order to survive, or the inability to find shelter to start a family life or to maintain itself as a community family-were for the Pope signs of moral underdevelopment and loss of self-esteem

³⁰ See C. Smuniewski, *Zagadnienie pokoju w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II*, „Zeszyty Naukowe AON” (2012) nr 1 (86), p. 302–303.

by society. Pope assumed that the basic measure of a community or nation is the importance, which he attaches to the conditions of the development of the family. According to John Paul II, favorable living conditions lead to the consent of the family in society and the nation, and this in turn promotes peace within the country and the world.

An abnormal image of children without any care forced to look for jobs to survive becomes a normal occurrence. A “marginalized” problem is the children and young people in the depersonalized cities barracks, where there is little or no hope for the future. The destruction of the family structure, dispersal of its members, and the evil that affects them – drugs, alcoholism, banal sex contacts, exploitation by others—are an obstacle to the development of the whole person. This means that in addition to the positive experience of human life there are pathological situations.

Pope John Paul II has always expressed interest in these issues through the issue of talks at symposia organized by the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Health Care. To some extent, world peace depends on a better self-knowledge people, both individuals and societies. This knowledge of self is by nature subordinate to the information and its quality. Distortion is inevitable for political and economic agenda of social media. It should be noted that the peace is made by those who endure through the barriers of distance information so that one can feel the fate of those who are victims of war and injustice. Certainly, the accumulation of such information, particularly when dealing with emergencies, may lead to indifference of those who remain only as receivers of information. In teachings of Pope John Paul II, the media play a positive role, however: every person regardless of religious denomination today is called to ensure that all fellow brothers and sisters grow together in humanity³¹.

Christian optimism, which was represented by the Holy Father John Paul II, based on the cross of Christ and Pentecost, does not justify any illusions. Peace on Earth for the Christians is always a challenge because of sin in the human heart. Christians filled with faith and hope, engaged in the work of building a more just society who are often struggling with poverty and diseases are sensitive to the plight of immigrants and prisoners.

³¹ See Lk 10, 29–37.

There is, however, an awareness that all these initiatives are in a way an expression of God's gratefulness and mercy. Their reach is always limited, the results uncertain, motives questionable.

John Paul II taught us that only God, the giver of life, who will unite everything in the Son³², will fulfill all the reasonable expectations of people who kept bringing fulfillment to life undertaken with His Spirit for justice and peace.

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³² See 1 Eph 10.