

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE BENEDICT XVI
FOR THE CELEBRATION OF THE
WORLD DAY OF PEACE

1 JANUARY 2009

FIGHTING POVERTY TO BUILD PEACE

1. Once again, as the new year begins, I want to extend good wishes for peace to people everywhere. With this Message I would like to propose a reflection on the theme: *Fighting Poverty to Build Peace*. Back in 1993, my venerable Predecessor Pope John Paul II, in his [Message for the World Day of Peace that year](#), drew attention to the negative repercussions for peace when entire populations live in poverty. Poverty is often a contributory factor or a compounding element in conflicts, including armed ones. In turn, these conflicts fuel further tragic situations of poverty. “Our world”, he wrote, “shows increasing evidence of another grave threat to peace: many individuals and indeed whole peoples are living today in conditions of extreme poverty. The gap between rich and poor has become more marked, even in the most economically developed nations. This is a problem which the conscience of humanity cannot ignore, since the conditions in which a great number of people are living are an insult to their innate dignity and as a result are a threat to the authentic and harmonious progress of the world community” [\[1\]](#).

2. In this context, fighting poverty requires *attentive consideration of the complex phenomenon of globalization*. This is important from a methodological standpoint, because it suggests drawing upon the fruits of economic and sociological research into the many different aspects of poverty. Yet the reference to globalization should also alert us to the spiritual and moral implications of the question, urging us, in our dealings with the poor, to set out from the clear recognition that we all share in a single divine plan: we are called to form one family in which all – individuals, peoples and nations – model their behaviour according to the principles of fraternity and responsibility.

This perspective requires an understanding of poverty that is wide-ranging and well articulated. If it were a question of material poverty alone, then the social sciences, which enable us to measure phenomena on the basis of mainly quantitative data, would be sufficient to illustrate its principal characteristics. Yet we know that other, non-material forms of poverty exist which are not the direct and automatic consequence of material deprivation. For example, in advanced wealthy societies, there is evidence of *marginalization*, as well as *affective, moral and spiritual poverty*, seen in people whose interior lives are disoriented and who experience various forms of malaise despite their economic prosperity. On the one hand, I have in mind what is known as “moral underdevelopment”[\[2\]](#), and on the other hand the negative consequences of “superdevelopment”[\[3\]](#). Nor can I forget that, in so-called “poor” societies, economic growth is often hampered by *cultural impediments* which lead to

inefficient use of available resources. It remains true, however, that every form of externally imposed poverty has at its root a lack of respect for the transcendent dignity of the human person. When man is not considered within the total context of his vocation, and when the demands of a true “human ecology” [4] are not respected, the cruel forces of poverty are unleashed, as is evident in certain specific areas that I shall now consider briefly one by one.

Poverty and moral implications

3. Poverty is often considered a consequence of *demographic change*. For this reason, there are international campaigns afoot to reduce birth-rates, sometimes using methods that respect neither the dignity of the woman, nor the right of parents to choose responsibly how many children to have [5]; graver still, these methods often fail to respect even the right to life. The extermination of millions of unborn children, in the name of the fight against poverty, actually constitutes the destruction of the poorest of all human beings. And yet it remains the case that in 1981, around 40% of the world's population was below the threshold of absolute poverty, while today that percentage has been reduced by as much as a half, and whole peoples have escaped from poverty despite experiencing substantial demographic growth. This goes to show that resources to solve the problem of poverty do exist, even in the face of an increasing population. Nor must it be forgotten that, since the end of the Second World War, the world's population has grown by four billion, largely because of certain countries that have recently emerged on the international scene as new economic powers, and have experienced rapid development specifically because of the large number of their inhabitants. Moreover, among the most developed nations, those with higher birth-rates enjoy better opportunities for development. In other words, population is proving to be an asset, not a factor that contributes to poverty.

4. Another area of concern has to do with *pandemic diseases*, such as malaria, tuberculosis and AIDS. Insofar as they affect the wealth-producing sectors of the population, they are a significant factor in the overall deterioration of conditions in the country concerned. Efforts to rein in the consequences of these diseases on the population do not always achieve significant results. It also happens that countries afflicted by some of these pandemics find themselves held hostage, when they try to address them, by those who make economic aid conditional upon the implementation of anti-life policies. It is especially hard to combat AIDS, a major cause of poverty, unless the moral issues connected with the spread of the virus are also addressed. First and foremost, educational campaigns are needed, aimed especially at the young, to promote a sexual ethic that fully corresponds to the dignity of the person; initiatives of this kind have already borne important fruits, causing a reduction in the spread of AIDS. Then, too, the necessary medicines and treatment must be made available to poorer peoples as well. This presupposes a determined effort to promote medical research and innovative forms of treatment, as well as flexible application, when required, of the international rules protecting intellectual property, so as to guarantee necessary basic healthcare to all people.

5. A third area requiring attention in programmes for fighting poverty, which once again highlights its intrinsic moral dimension, is *child poverty*. When poverty strikes a family, the children prove to be the most vulnerable victims: almost half of those living in absolute poverty today are children. To take the side of children when

considering poverty means giving priority to those objectives which concern them most directly, such as caring for mothers, commitment to education, access to vaccines, medical care and drinking water, safeguarding the environment, and above all, commitment to defence of the family and the stability of relations within it. When the family is weakened, it is inevitably children who suffer. If the dignity of women and mothers is not protected, it is the children who are affected most.

6. A fourth area needing particular attention from the moral standpoint is the *relationship between disarmament and development*. The current level of world military expenditure gives cause for concern. As I have pointed out before, it can happen that “immense military expenditure, involving material and human resources and arms, is in fact diverted from development projects for peoples, especially the poorest who are most in need of aid. This is contrary to what is stated in the *Charter of the United Nations*, which engages the international community and States in particular ‘to promote the establishment and maintenance of international peace and security with the least diversion for armaments of the world's human and economic resources’ (art. 26)” [6].

This state of affairs does nothing to promote, and indeed seriously impedes, attainment of the ambitious development targets of the international community. What is more, an excessive increase in military expenditure risks accelerating the arms race, producing pockets of underdevelopment and desperation, so that it can paradoxically become a cause of instability, tension and conflict. As my venerable Predecessor Paul VI wisely observed, “the new name for peace is development” [7]. States are therefore invited to reflect seriously on the underlying reasons for conflicts, often provoked by injustice, and to practise courageous self-criticism. If relations can be improved, it should be possible to reduce expenditure on arms. The resources saved could then be earmarked for development projects to assist the poorest and most needy individuals and peoples: efforts expended in this way would be efforts for peace within the human family.

7. A fifth area connected with the fight against material poverty concerns the *current food crisis*, which places in jeopardy the fulfilment of basic needs. This crisis is characterized not so much by a shortage of food, as by difficulty in gaining access to it and by different forms of speculation: in other words, by a structural lack of political and economic institutions capable of addressing needs and emergencies. Malnutrition can also cause grave mental and physical damage to the population, depriving many people of the energy necessary to escape from poverty unaided. This contributes to the widening gap of inequality, and can provoke violent reactions. All the indicators of relative poverty in recent years point to an increased disparity between rich and poor. No doubt the principal reasons for this are, on the one hand, advances in technology, which mainly benefit the more affluent, and on the other hand, changes in the prices of industrial products, which rise much faster than those of agricultural products and raw materials in the possession of poorer countries. In this way, the majority of the population in the poorest countries suffers a double marginalization, through the adverse effects of lower incomes and higher prices.

Global solidarity and the fight against poverty

8. One of the most important ways of building peace is through a form of globalization directed towards the interests of the whole human family[8]. In order to govern globalization, however, there needs to be a strong sense of *global solidarity* [9] between rich and poor countries, as well as within individual countries, including affluent ones. A “common code of ethics”[10]

is also needed, consisting of norms based not upon mere consensus, but rooted in the natural law inscribed by the Creator on the conscience of every human being (cf. *Rom* 2:14-15). Does not every one of us sense deep within his or her conscience a call to make a personal contribution to the common good and to peace in society? Globalization eliminates certain barriers, but is still able to build new ones; it brings peoples together, but spatial and temporal proximity does not of itself create the conditions for true communion and authentic peace. Effective means to redress the marginalization of the world's poor through globalization will only be found if people everywhere feel personally outraged by the injustices in the world and by the concomitant violations of human rights. The Church, which is the “sign and instrument of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race” [11] will continue to offer her contribution so that injustices and misunderstandings may be resolved, leading to a world of greater peace and solidarity.

9. In the field of *international commerce* and *finance*, there are processes at work today which permit a positive integration of economies, leading to an overall improvement in conditions, but there are also processes tending in the opposite direction, dividing and marginalizing peoples, and creating dangerous situations that can erupt into wars and conflicts. Since the Second World War, international trade in goods and services has grown extraordinarily fast, with a momentum unprecedented in history. Much of this global trade has involved countries that were industrialized early, with the significant addition of many newly- emerging countries which have now entered onto the world stage. Yet there are other low-income countries which are still seriously marginalized in terms of trade. Their growth has been negatively influenced by the rapid decline, seen in recent decades, in the prices of commodities, which constitute practically the whole of their exports. In these countries, which are mostly in Africa, dependence on the exportation of commodities continues to constitute a potent risk factor. Here I should like to renew an appeal for all countries to be given equal opportunities of access to the world market, without exclusion or marginalization.

10. A similar reflection may be made in the area of finance, which is a key aspect of the phenomenon of globalization, owing to the development of technology and policies of liberalization in the flow of capital between countries. Objectively, the most important function of finance is to sustain the possibility of long- term investment and hence of development. Today this appears extremely fragile: it is experiencing the negative repercussions of a system of financial dealings – both national and global – based upon very short-term thinking, which aims at increasing the value of financial operations and concentrates on the technical management of various forms of risk. The recent crisis demonstrates how financial activity can at times be completely turned in on itself, lacking any long-term consideration of the common good. This lowering of the objectives of global finance to the very short term reduces its capacity to function as a bridge between the present and the future, and as a stimulus to the creation of new opportunities for production and for work in the long

term. Finance limited in this way to the short and very short term becomes dangerous for everyone, even for those who benefit when the markets perform well[12].

11. All of this would indicate that the fight against poverty requires cooperation both on the economic level and on the legal level, so as to allow the international community, and especially poorer countries, to identify and implement coordinated strategies to deal with the problems discussed above, thereby providing an effective legal framework for the economy. Incentives are needed for establishing efficient participatory institutions, and support is needed in fighting crime and fostering a culture of legality. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that policies which place too much emphasis on assistance underlie many of the failures in providing aid to poor countries. Investing in the formation of people and developing a specific and well-integrated culture of enterprise would seem at present to be the right approach in the medium and long term. If economic activities require a favourable context in order to develop, this must not distract attention from the need to generate revenue. While it has been rightly emphasized that increasing *per capita* income cannot be the ultimate goal of political and economic activity, it is still an important means of attaining the objective of the fight against hunger and absolute poverty. Hence, the illusion that a policy of mere redistribution of existing wealth can definitively resolve the problem must be set aside. In a modern economy, the value of assets is utterly dependent on the capacity to generate revenue in the present and the future. Wealth creation therefore becomes an inescapable duty, which must be kept in mind if the fight against material poverty is to be effective in the long term.

12. If the poor are to be given priority, then there has to be enough room for *an ethical approach to economics* on the part of those active in the international market, *an ethical approach to politics* on the part of those in public office, and an *ethical approach to participation* capable of harnessing the contributions of civil society at local and international levels. International agencies themselves have come to recognize the value and advantage of economic initiatives taken by civil society or local administrations to promote the emancipation and social inclusion of those sectors of the population that often fall below the threshold of extreme poverty and yet are not easily reached by official aid. The history of twentieth-century economic development teaches us that good development policies depend for their effectiveness on responsible implementation by human agents and on the creation of positive partnerships between markets, civil society and States. Civil society in particular plays a key part in every process of development, since development is essentially a cultural phenomenon, and culture is born and develops in the civil sphere[13].

13. As my venerable Predecessor Pope John Paul II had occasion to remark, globalization “is notably ambivalent”[14] and therefore needs to be managed with great prudence. This will include giving priority to the needs of the world's poor, and overcoming the scandal of the imbalance between the problems of poverty and the measures which have been adopted in order to address them. The imbalance lies both in the cultural and political order and in the spiritual and moral order. In fact we often consider only the superficial and instrumental causes of poverty without attending to those harboured within the human heart, like greed and narrow vision. The problems of development, aid and international cooperation are sometimes addressed without any real attention to the human element, but as merely technical questions – limited, that is, to establishing structures, setting up trade agreements, and allocating funding

impersonally. What the fight against poverty really needs are men and women who live in a profoundly fraternal way and are able to accompany individuals, families and communities on journeys of authentic human development.

Conclusion

14. In the Encyclical Letter [*Centesimus Annus*](#), John Paul II warned of the need to “abandon a mentality in which the poor – as individuals and as peoples – are considered a burden, as irksome intruders trying to consume what others have produced.” The poor, he wrote, “ask for the right to share in enjoying material goods and to make good use of their capacity for work, thus creating a world that is more just and prosperous for all” [15]. In today's globalized world, it is increasingly evident that peace can be built only if everyone is assured the possibility of reasonable growth: sooner or later, the distortions produced by unjust systems have to be paid for by everyone. It is utterly foolish to build a luxury home in the midst of desert or decay. Globalization on its own is incapable of building peace, and in many cases, it actually creates divisions and conflicts. If anything it points to a need: to be oriented towards a goal of profound solidarity that seeks the good of each and all. In this sense, globalization should be seen as a good opportunity to achieve something important in the fight against poverty, and to place at the disposal of justice and peace resources which were scarcely conceivable previously.

15. The Church's social teaching has always been concerned with the poor. At the time of the Encyclical Letter [*Rerum Novarum*](#), the poor were identified mainly as the workers in the new industrial society; in the social Magisterium of Pius XI, Pius XII, John XXIII, Paul VI and John Paul II, new forms of poverty were gradually explored, as the scope of the social question widened to reach global proportions [16]. This expansion of the social question to the worldwide scale has to be considered not just as a quantitative extension, but also as a qualitative growth in the understanding of man and the needs of the human family. For this reason, while attentively following the current phenomena of globalization and their impact on human poverty, the Church points out the new aspects of the social question, not only in their breadth but also in their depth, insofar as they concern man's identity and his relationship with God. These principles of social teaching tend to clarify the links between poverty and globalization and they help to guide action towards the building of peace. Among these principles, it is timely to recall in particular the “preferential love for the poor” [17], in the light of the primacy of charity, which is attested throughout Christian tradition, beginning with that of the early Church (cf. *Acts* 4:32-36; *1 Cor* 16:1; *2 Cor* 8-9; *Gal* 2:10).

“Everyone should put his hand to the work which falls to his share, at once and immediately”, wrote Leo XIII in 1891, and he added: “In regard to the Church, her cooperation will never be wanting, be the time or the occasion what it may” [18]. It is in the same spirit that the Church to this day carries out her work for the poor, in whom she sees Christ [19], and she constantly hears echoing in her heart the command of the Prince of Peace to his Apostles: “*Vos date illis manducare* – Give them something to eat yourselves” (*Lk* 9:13). Faithful to this summons from the Lord, the Christian community will never fail, then, to assure the entire human family of her support through gestures of creative solidarity, not only by “giving from one's surplus”, but above all by “a change of life- styles, of models of production and

consumption, and of the established structures of power which today govern societies” [20]. At the start of the New Year, then, I extend to every disciple of Christ and to every person of good will a warm invitation to expand their hearts to meet the needs of the poor and to take whatever practical steps are possible in order to help them. The truth of the axiom cannot be refuted: “to fight poverty is to build peace.”

From the Vatican, 8 December 2008.

BENEDICTUS PP. XVI

[1] [Message for the 1993 World Day of Peace](#), 1.

[2] Paul VI, Encyclical Letter [Populorum Progressio](#), 19.

[3] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter [Sollicitudo Rei Socialis](#), 28.

[4] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter [Centesimus Annus](#), 38.

[5] Cf. Paul VI, Encyclical Letter [Populorum Progressio](#), 37; John Paul II, Encyclical Letter [Sollicitudo Rei Socialis](#), 25.

[6] Benedict XVI, [Letter to Cardinal Renato Raffaele Martino on the occasion of the International Seminar organized by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace on the theme: “Disarmament, Development and Peace. Prospects for Integral Disarmament”](#), 10 April 2008: *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 30 April 2008, p. 2.

[7] Encyclical Letter [Populorum Progressio](#), 87.

[8] Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter [Centesimus Annus](#), 58.

[9] Cf. John Paul II, [Address to the Christian Associations of Italian Working People](#), 27 April 2002, 4: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, XXV:1 (2002), p. 637.

[10] John Paul II, [Address to the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences](#), 27 April 2001, 4: *L'Osservatore Romano*, English Edition, 2 May 2001, p. 7.

[11] Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution [Lumen Gentium](#), 1.

[12] Cf. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, [Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church](#), 368.

[13] Cf. *ibid.*, 356.

[14] [Address to Leaders of Trade Unions and Workers' Associations](#), 2 May 2000, 3: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, XXIII, 1 (2000), p. 726.

[15] No. 28.

[16] Cf. Paul VI, Encyclical Letter [*Populorum Progressio*](#), 3.

[17] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter [*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*](#), 42; cf. Encyclical Letter [*Centesimus Annus*](#), 57.

[18] Encyclical Letter [*Rerum Novarum*](#), 45.

[19] Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter [*Centesimus Annus*](#), 58.

[20] *Ibid.*

© Copyright 2008 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana