

DECLARATION OF POPE BENEDICT XV ON PEACE AND CHRISTIAN RECONCILIATION TO THE WORLD

Benedict XV

Health and Apostolic Benediction.

Peace, the beautiful gift of God, the name of which, as St. Augustine says, is the sweetest word to our hearing and the best and most desirable possession [1]; peace, which was for more than four years implored by the ardent wishes of all good peoples, by the prayers of pious souls and the tears of mothers, begins at last to shine upon the nations. At this We are indeed the happiest of all, and heartily do We rejoice. But this joy of Our paternal heart is disturbed by many bitter anxieties, for if in most places peace is in some sort established and treaties signed, the germs of former enmities remain; and you well know, Venerable Brethren, that there can be no stable peace or lasting treaties, though made after long and difficult negotiations and duly signed, unless there be a return of mutual charity to appease hate and banish enmity. This, then, Venerable Brethren, is the anxious and dangerous question upon which we wish to dwell and to put forward recommendations to be brought home to your people.

2. For Ourselves, never since, by the hidden designs of God, We were raised to the Chair have We ceased to do everything in Our power from the very beginning of the war that all the nations of the world might resume cordial relations as soon as possible. To that end We never ceased to pray, to repeat exhortations, to propose ways of arrangement, to try every means, in fact, to open by divine aid, a path to a just, honourable and lasting peace; and at the same time We exercised all Our paternal care to alleviate everywhere that terrible load of sorrow and disaster of every sort by which the immense tragedy was accompanied.

3. And now, just as from the beginning of Our troubled pontificate the charity to Jesus Christ led Us to work both for the return of peace and to alleviate the horrors of the war, so now that comparative peace has been concluded, this same charity urges Us to exhort all the children of the Church, and all mankind, to clear their hearts of bitterness, and give place to mutual love and concord.

4. There is no need from us of long proof to show that society would incur the risk of great loss if, while peace is signed, latent hostility and enmity were to continue among the nations. There is not need to mention the loss of all that maintains and fosters civil life, such as commerce and industry, art and literature, which flourish only when the nations are at peace. But what is even more important, grave harm would accrue to the form and essence of the Christian life, which consists essentially in charity and the preaching of which is called the Gospel of peace. [2]

5. You know well, and We have frequently reminded you of it, nothing was so often and so carefully inculcated on His disciple by Jesus Christ as this precept of mutual charity as the one which contains all others. Christ called it the new commandment, His very own, and desired that it should be the sign of Christians by which they might be distinguished from all others; and on the eve of His death it was His last testament to His disciples to love one another and thus try to imitate the ineffable unity of the three Divine Persons in the Trinity. "That they may be one as we also are one . . . that they may be made perfect in one"[3]

6. The Apostles, following in the steps of the divine Master, and conforming to His word and commands, were unceasing in their exhortation to the faithful: "Before all things have a constant mutual charity among yourselves"[4]. "But above all these things have charity which is the bond of perfection"[5]. "Dearly beloved, let us love one another for charity is God"[6]. Our brethren of the first Christian ages faithfully observed these commands of Jesus Christ and the Apostles. They belonged to different and rival nations; yet they willingly forgot their causes of quarrel and lived in perfect concord, and such a union of hearts was in striking contrast with the deadly enmities by which human society was then consumed.

7. What has already been said in favour of charity holds good for the inculcation of the pardoning of injuries which is no less solemnly commanded by the Lord: "But I say to you, love your enemies; do good to them that hate you; pray for

those that persecute you and calumniate you, that you may be the children of your Father who is in Heaven, Who maketh His sun to rise upon the good and the bad"[7]. Hence that terribly severe warning of the Apostle St. John. "Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer. And you know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in himself."[8]

8. Our Lord Jesus Christ, in teaching us how to pray to God, makes us say that we wish for pardon as we forgive others: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against Us."[9] And if the observance of this law is sometimes hard and difficult, we have not only the timely assistance of the grace of Our Divine Redeemer, but also His example to help us to overcome the difficulty. For as He hung on the Cross He thus excused before his Father those who so unjustly and wickedly tortured Him: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."[10] We then, who should be the first to imitate the piety and loving kindness of Jesus Christ, whose Vicar, without any merit of Our own, We are; with all Our heart, and following His example, We forgive all Our enemies who knowingly or unknowingly have heaped and are still heaping on our person and Our work every sort of vituperation, and We embrace all in Our charity and benevolence, and neglect no opportunity to do them all the good in Our power. That is indeed what Christians worthy of the name ought to do towards those who during the war have done them wrong.

9. Christian charity ought not to be content with not hating our enemies and loving them as brothers; it also demands that we treat them with kindness, following the rule of the Divine Master Who "went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil"[11], and finished His mortal life, the course of which was marked by good deeds, by shedding His blood for them. So said St. John: "In this we have known the charity of God, because He hath laid down His life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. He that hath substance of this world and shall see his brother in need and shall shut up his bowels from him: how doth the charity of God abide in him? My little children, let us love not in word nor by tongue, but in deed and in truth."[12]

10. Never indeed was there a time when we should "stretch the bounds of charity" more than in these days of universal suffering and sorrow; never perhaps as today has humanity so needed that universal beneficence which springs from the love of others, and is full of sacrifice and zeal. For if we look around where the fury of the war has been let loose we see immense regions utterly desolate, uncultivated and abandoned; multitudes reduced to want of food, clothing and shelter; innumerable widows and orphans reft of everything, and an incredible number of enfeebled beings, particularly children and young people, who carry on their bodies the ravages of this atrocious war.

11. When one regards all these miseries by which the human race is stricken one inevitably thinks of the traveller in the Gospel [13] who, going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, fell among thieves, who robbed him, and covered him with wounds and left him half dead. The two cases are very similar; and as to the traveller there came the good Samaritan, full of compassion, who bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, took him to an inn, and undertook all care for him; so too is it necessary that Jesus, of Whom the Samaritan was the figure, should lay His hands upon the wounds of society.

12. This work, this duty the Church claims as her own as heir and guardian of the spirit of Jesus Christ - the Church whose entire existence is a marvelously varied tissue of all kinds of good deeds, the Church, "that real mother of Christians in the full sense of the word, who has such tenderness of love and charity for one's neighbours that she can offer the best remedies for the different evils which afflict souls on account of their sins." That is why she "treats and teaches children with tenderness, young people with firmness, old people with great calm, taking account not only of the age but also the condition of soul of each." [14] It would be difficult to exaggerate the effect of many-sided Christian beneficence in softening the heart and thus facilitating the return of tranquility to the nations.

13. Therefore, Venerable Brethren, We pray you and exhort you in the mercy and charity of Jesus Christ, strive with all zeal and diligence not only to urge the faithful entrusted to your care to abandon hatred and to pardon offences; but, and what is more immediately practical, to promote all those works of Christian benevolence which bring aid to the needy, comfort to the afflicted and protection to the weak, and to give opportune and appropriate assistance of every kind to all who have suffered from the war. It is Our especial wish that you should exhort your priests, as the ministers of peace, to be assiduous in urging this love of one's neighbour and even of enemies which is the essence of the Christian life, and by "being all things to all men"[15] and giving an example to others, wage war everywhere on enmity and hatred, thus

doing a thing most agreeable to the loving Heart of Jesus and to him who, however unworthy, holds His place on earth. In this connection Catholic writers and journalists should be invited to clothe themselves "as elect of God, holy and beloved, with pity and kindness." [16] Let them show this charity in their writings by abstaining not only from false and groundless accusations but also from all intemperance and bitterness of language, all of which is contrary to the law of Christ and does but reopen sores as yet unhealed, seeing that the slightest touch is a serious irritant to a heart whose wounds are recent.

14. All that We have said here to individuals about the duty of charity We wish to say also to the peoples who have been delivered from the burden of a long war, in order that, when every cause of disagreement has been, as far as possible, removed, and without prejudice to the rights of justice, they may resume friendly relations among themselves. The Gospel has not one law of charity for individuals, and another for States and nations, which are indeed but collections of individuals. The war being now over, people seem called to a general reconciliation not only from motives of charity, but from necessity; the nations are naturally drawn together by the need they have of one another, and by the bond of mutual good will, bonds which are today strengthened by the development of civilization and the marvellous increase of communication.

15. Truly, as We have already said, this Apostolic See has never wearied of teaching during the war such pardon of offences and the fraternal reconciliation of the peoples, in conformity with the most holy law of Jesus Christ, and in agreement with the needs of civil life and human intercourse; nor did it allow that amid dissension and hate these moral principles should be forgotten. With all the more reason then, now that the Treaties of Peace are signed, does it proclaim these principles as, for example, it did a short time ago in the Letter to the Bishops of Germany [17], and in that addressed to the Archbishop of Paris [18].

16. And this concord between civilized nations is maintained and fostered by the modern custom of visits and meetings at which the Heads of States and Princes are accustomed to treat of matters of special importance. So then, considering the changed circumstances of the times and the dangerous trend of events, and in order to encourage this concord, We would not be unwilling to relax in some measure the severity of the conditions justly laid down by Our Predecessors, when the civil power of the Apostolic See was overthrown, against the official visits of the Heads of Catholic states to Rome. But at the same time We formally declare that this concession, which seems counselled or rather demanded by the grave circumstances in which to-day society is placed, must not be interpreted as a tacit renunciation of its sacrosanct rights by the Apostolic See, as it is acquiesced in the unlawful situation in which it is placed. Rather do we seize this opportunity to renew for the same reasons the protests which Our Predecessors have several times made, not in the least moved thereto by human interests, but in fulfilment of the sacred duty of their charge to defend the rights and dignity of this Apostolic See; once again demanding, and with even greater insistence now that peace is made among the nations that "for the Head of the Church, too, an end may be put to that abnormal condition which in so many ways does such serious harm to tranquillity among the peoples." [19]

17. Things being thus restored, the order required by justice and charity re-established and the nations reconciled, it is much to be desired, Venerable Brethren, that all States, putting aside mutual suspicion, should unite in one league, or rather a sort of family of peoples, calculated both to maintain their own independence and safeguard the order of human society. What specially, amongst other reasons, calls for such an association of nations, is the need generally recognized of making every effort to abolish or reduce the enormous burden of the military expenditure which States can no longer bear, in order to prevent these disastrous wars or at least to remove the danger of them as far as possible. So would each nation be assured not only of its independence but also of the integrity of its territory within its just frontiers.

18. The Church will certainly not refuse her zealous aid to States united under the Christian law in any of their undertakings inspired by justice and charity, inasmuch as she is herself the most perfect type of universal society. She possesses in her organization and institutions a wonderful instrument for bringing this brotherhood among men, not only for their eternal salvation but also for their material well-being to the sure acquisition of eternal blessings. It is the teaching of history that when the Church pervaded with her spirit the ancient and barbarous nations of Europe, little by little the many and varied differences that divided them were diminished and their quarrels extinguished; in time they

formed a homogeneous society from which sprang Christian Europe which, under the guidance and auspices of the Church, whilst preserving a diversity of nations, tended to a unity that favoured its prosperity and glory. On this point St. Augustine well says: "This celestial city, in its life here on earth, calls to itself citizens of every nation, and forms out of all the peoples one varied society; it is not harassed by differences in customs, laws and institutions, which serve to attainment or the maintenance of peace on earth; it neither rends nor destroys anything but rather guards all and adapts itself to all; however these things may vary among the nations, they are all directed to the same end of peace on earth as long as they do not hinder the exercise of religion, which teaches the worship of the true supreme God." [20] And the same holy Doctor thus addresses the Church: "Citizens, peoples and all men, thou, recalling their common origin, shalt not only unite among themselves, but shalt make them brothers." [21]

19. To come back to what We said at the beginning, We turn affectionately to all Our children and conjure them in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ to forget mutual differences and offences and draw together in the bonds of Christian charity, from which none are excluded and within which none are strangers. We fervently exhort all the nations, under the inspiration of Christian benevolence, to establish a true peace among themselves and join together in an alliance which shall be just and therefore lasting. And lastly We appeal to all men and all peoples to join in mind and heart with the Catholic Church and through the Church with Christ the Redeemer of the human race, so that we may address to them in very truth the words of St. Paul to the Ephesians: "But now in Christ Jesus you who sometimes were afar off, are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For He is our peace, Who hath made both one, and breaking down the middle wall of partition . . . killing the enmities in himself. And coming he preached peace to you that were afar off and peace to them that were nigh." [22]

20. Nor less appropriate are the words which the same apostle addressed to the Colossians: "Lie not to one another: stripping yourselves of the old man with his deeds. And putting on the new, him who is renewed unto knowledge according to the image of Him that created it. Where there is neither Gentile nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian nor Scythian, bond nor free. But Christ is all and in all." [23]

21. Meanwhile, trusting in the protection of Mary the Virgin Immaculate, who not long ago We directed should be universally invoked as "Queen of Peace," as also in the intercession of the three Blessed to whom we have decreed the honour of saints, We humbly implore the Holy Ghost the Paraclete that He may "graciously grant to the Church the gifts of unity and peace" [24], and may renew the face of the earth by a fresh outpouring of His charity for the salvation of all. As an earnest of these heavenly gifts and as a pledge of Our paternal benevolence, We impart with all Our heart to you, Venerable Brethren, to all your clergy and people, the Apostolic Benediction.

Given at St. Peter's, Rome, on May 23, the Feast of Pentecost, 1920, and in the sixth year of Our Pontificate.

BENEDICT XV

1. Civitate Dei. 1. XIX, c. 11.

2. Eph. VI, 15.

3. John XVII, 21-23.

4. I Peter IV, 8.

5. Col. III, 14.

6. I John IV, 7.

7. Matt. V, 44, 45.

8. I John III, 15.

9. Matt. VI, 12.

10. Luke XXIII, 34.

11. Acts X, 38.

12. I John III, 16-18.

13. Luke X, 30 et seq.

14. Augustine de moribus Ecc. Cat. lib. I, c. 30.
15. I Cor. IX 22.
16. Col. III, 12.
17. Litterae Apost. Diuturni, XV Jul., MCMXIX.
18. Epist. Amor Ille Singularis, VII Oct., MCMXIX.
19. Litt. Enc. Ad Beatissimi, I Nov., MCMXIV.
20. De Civitate Dei, lib. XIX, cap. 17.
21. De moribus Ecc. Cat. I, cap. 30.
22. Eph. II, 13 et seq.
23. Col. III, 9-11.
24. **Secreta in Solemn. Corpus Christi.**

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