

Care for personal health and that of others is a moral obligation

10 January 2022

Address to the members of the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See

Pope Francis

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Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen!

Yesterday concluded the liturgical season of Christmas, a privileged period for cultivating family relationships, from which we can at times be distracted and distant due to our many commitments during the year. Today we want to continue in that spirit, as we once more come together as a large family which discusses and dialogues. In the end, that is the aim of all diplomacy: to help resolve disagreements arising from human coexistence, to foster harmony and to realize that, once we pass beyond conflict, we can recover a sense of the profound unity of all reality. [1: Cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 226-230.]

I am therefore particularly grateful to you for taking part today in our annual “family gathering”, a propitious occasion for exchanging good wishes for the New Year and for considering together the lights and shadows of our time. I especially thank the Dean, His Excellency Mr George Poulides, the Ambassador of Cyprus, for his gracious address to me in the name of the entire Diplomatic Corps. Through all of you, I extend my affectionate greetings to the peoples you represent.

Your presence is always a tangible sign of the attention your countries devote to the Holy See and its role in the international community. Many of you have come from other capital cities for today’s event, thus joining the numerous Ambassadors residing in Rome, who will soon be joined by the Swiss Confederation.

Dear Ambassadors,

In these days, we are conscious that the fight against the pandemic still calls for a significant effort on the part of everyone; certainly, the New Year will continue to be demanding in this regard. The coronavirus continues to cause social isolation and to take lives. Among those who have died, I would like to mention the late Archbishop Aldo Giordano, an Apostolic Nuncio who was well-known and respected in the diplomatic community. At the same time, we have realized that in those places where an effective vaccination campaign has taken place, the risk of severe repercussions of the disease has decreased.

It is therefore important to continue the effort to immunize the general population as much as possible. This calls for a manifold commitment on the personal, political and international levels. First, on the personal level. Each of us has a responsibility to care for ourself and our health, and this translates into respect for the health of those around us. Health care is a moral obligation. Sadly, we are finding increasingly that we live in a world of strong ideological divides. Frequently people let themselves be influenced by the ideology of the moment, often bolstered by baseless information or poorly documented facts. Every ideological statement severs the bond of human reason with the objective reality of things. The pandemic, on the other hand, urges us to adopt a sort of “reality therapy” that makes us confront the problem head on and adopt suitable remedies to resolve it. Vaccines are not a magical means of healing, yet surely they represent, in addition to other treatments that need to be developed, the most reasonable solution for the prevention of the disease.

A political commitment is thus needed to pursue the good of the general population through measures of prevention and immunization that also engage citizens so that they can feel involved and responsible, thanks to a clear discussion of the problems and the appropriate means of addressing them. The lack of resolute decision-making and clear communication generates confusion, creates mistrust and undermines social cohesion, fueling new tensions. The result is a “social relativism” detrimental to harmony and unity.

In the end, a comprehensive commitment on the part of the international community is necessary, so that the entire world population can have equal access to essential medical care and vaccines. We can only note with regret that, for large areas of the world, universal access to health care remains an illusion. At this grave moment in the life of humanity, I reiterate my appeal that governments and concerned private entities demonstrate a sense of responsibility, developing a coordinated response at every level (local, national, regional, global), through new models of solidarity and tools to strengthen the capabilities of those countries in greatest need. In particular, I would urge all states, who are working to establish an international instrument on pandemic preparedness and response under the aegis of the World Health Organization, to adopt a policy of

generous sharing as a key principle to guarantee everyone access to diagnostic tools, vaccines and drugs. Likewise, it is appropriate that institutions such as the World Trade Organization and the World Intellectual Property Organization adapt their legal instruments lest monopolistic rules constitute further obstacles to production and to an organized and consistent access to healthcare on a global level.

Dear Ambassadors,

Last year, thanks also to the lessening of the restrictions put in place in 2020, I had occasion to receive many Heads of State and Governments, as well as various civil and religious authorities.

Among those many meetings, I would like to mention that of 1 July 2021, devoted to reflection and prayer for Lebanon. To the beloved Lebanese people, who are working to find a solution to the economic and political crisis that has gripped the nation, I wish today to renew my closeness and my prayers. At the same time, I trust that necessary reforms and the support of the international community will help the country to persevere in its proper identity as a model of peaceful coexistence and brotherhood among the different religions.

In the course of 2021, I was also able to resume my Apostolic Journeys. In March, I had the joy of travelling to Iraq. Providence willed this, as a sign of hope after years of war and terrorism. The Iraqi people have the right to regain their dignity and to live in peace. Their religious and cultural roots go back thousands of years: Mesopotamia is a cradle of civilization; it is from there that God called Abraham to inaugurate the history of salvation.

In September, I travelled to Budapest for the conclusion of the International Eucharistic Congress, and thereafter to Slovakia. It was an opportunity for me to meet with the Catholic faithful and Christians of other confessions, and to dialogue with the Jewish community. I likewise travelled to Cyprus and Greece, a Journey that remains vivid in my memory. That visit allowed me to deepen ties with our Orthodox brothers and to experience the fraternity existing between the various Christian confessions.

A very moving part of that Journey was my visit to the island of Lesbos, where I was able to see at first hand the generosity of all those working to provide hospitality and assistance to migrants, but above all, to see the faces of the many children and adults who are guests of these centres of hospitality. Their eyes spoke of the effort of their journey, their fear of an uncertain future, their sorrow for the loved ones they left behind and their nostalgia for the homeland they were forced to depart. Before those faces, we cannot be indifferent or hide behind walls and barbed wires under the pretext of defending security or a style of life. This we cannot do.

Consequently, I thank all those individuals and governments working to ensure that migrants are welcomed and protected, and to support their human promotion and integration in the countries that have received them. I am aware of the difficulties that some states encounter in the face of a large influx of people. No one can be asked to do what is impossible for them, yet there is a clear difference between accepting, albeit in a limited way, and rejecting completely.

There is a need to overcome indifference and to reject the idea that migrants are a problem for others. The results of this approach are evident in the dehumanization of those migrants concentrated in hotspots where they end up as easy prey to organized crime and human traffickers, or engage in desperate attempts to escape that at times end in death. Sadly, we must also note that migrants are themselves often turned into a weapon of political blackmail, becoming a sort of "bargaining commodity" that deprives them of their dignity.

Here I would like to renew my gratitude to the Italian authorities, thanks to whom several persons were able to come with me to Rome from Cyprus and Greece. This was a simple yet meaningful gesture. To the Italian people, who suffered greatly at the beginning of the pandemic, but who have also shown encouraging signs of recovery, I express my heartfelt hope that they will always maintain their characteristic spirit of generosity, openness and solidarity.

At the same time, I consider it essential that the European Union arrive at internal cohesion in handling migration movements, just as it did in dealing with the effects of the pandemic. There is a need to adopt a coherent and comprehensive system for coordinating policies on migration and asylum, with a view to sharing responsibility for the reception of migrants, the review of requests for asylum, and the redistribution and integration of those who can be accepted. The capacity to negotiate and discover shared solutions is one of the strong points of the European Union; it represents a sound model for a farsighted approach to the global challenges before us.

Nonetheless, the migration issue does not regard Europe alone, even though it is especially affected by waves of migrants coming from Africa and from Asia. In recent years, we have witnessed, among others, an exodus of Syrian refugees and, more recently, the many people who have fled Afghanistan. Nor can we overlook the

massive migration movements on the American continent, which press upon the border between Mexico and the United States of America. Many of those migrants are Haitians fleeing the tragedies that have struck their country in recent years.

The issue of migration, together with the pandemic and climate change, has clearly demonstrated that we cannot be saved alone and by ourselves: the great challenges of our time are all global. It is thus troubling that, alongside the greater interconnection of problems, we are seeing a growing fragmentation of solutions. It is not uncommon to encounter unwillingness to open windows of dialogue and spaces of fraternity; this only fuels further tensions and divisions, as well as a generalized feeling of uncertainty and instability. What is needed instead is a recovery of our sense of shared identity as a single human family. The alternative can only be growing isolation, marked by a reciprocal rejection and refusal that further endangers multilateralism, the diplomatic style that has characterized international relations from the end of the Second World War to the present time.

For some time now, multilateral diplomacy has been experiencing a crisis of trust, due to the reduced credibility of social, governmental and intergovernmental systems. Important resolutions, declarations and decisions are frequently made without a genuine process of negotiation in which all countries have a say. This imbalance, now dramatically evident, has generated disaffection towards international agencies on the part of many states; it also weakens the multilateral system as a whole, with the result that it becomes less and less effective in confronting global challenges.

The diminished effectiveness of many international organizations is also due to their members entertaining differing visions of the ends they wish to pursue. Not infrequently, the centre of interest has shifted to matters that by their divisive nature do not strictly belong to the aims of the organization. As a result, agendas are increasingly dictated by a mindset that rejects the natural foundations of humanity and the cultural roots that constitute the identity of many peoples. As I have stated on other occasions, I consider this a form of ideological colonization, one that leaves no room for freedom of expression and is now taking the form of the “cancel culture” invading many circles and public institutions. Under the guise of defending diversity, it ends up cancelling all sense of identity, with the risk of silencing positions that defend a respectful and balanced understanding of various sensibilities. A kind of dangerous “one-track thinking” [pensée unique] is taking shape, one constrained to deny history or, worse yet, to rewrite it in terms of present-day categories, whereas any historical situation must be interpreted in the light of a hermeneutics of that particular time, not that of today.

Multilateral diplomacy is thus called to be truly inclusive, not canceling but cherishing the differences and sensibilities that have historically marked various peoples. In this way, it will regain credibility and effectiveness in facing the challenges to come, which will require humanity to join together as one great family that, starting from different viewpoints, should prove capable of finding common solutions for the good of all. This calls for reciprocal trust and willingness to dialogue; it entails “listening to one another, sharing different views, coming to agreement and walking together”. [2: Message for the 2022 World Day of Peace (8 December 2021), 2.] Indeed, “dialogue is the best way to realize what ought always to be affirmed and respected apart from any ephemeral consensus”. [3: Encyclical Letter Fratelli Tutti (3 October 2020), 211.] Nor should we overlook “the existence of certain enduring values”. [4: Ibid.] Those are not always easy to discern, but their acceptance “makes for a robust and solid social ethics. Once those fundamental values are adopted through dialogue and consensus, we realize that they rise above consensus”. [5: Ibid.] Here I wish to mention in particular the right to life, from conception to its natural end, and the right to religious freedom.

In this regard, in recent years we have seen a growing collective awareness of the urgent need to care for our common home, which is suffering from the constant and indiscriminate exploitation of its resources. Here I think especially of the Philippines, struck in these last weeks by a devastating typhoon, and of other nations in the Pacific, made vulnerable by the negative effects of climate change, which endanger the lives of their inhabitants, most of whom are dependent on agriculture, fishing and natural resources.

Precisely this realization should impel the international community as a whole to discover and implement common solutions. None may consider themselves exempt from this effort, since all of us are involved and affected in equal measure. At the recent COP26 in Glasgow, several steps were made in the right direction, even though they were rather weak in light of the gravity of the problem to be faced. The road to meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement is complex and appears to be long, while the time at our disposal is shorter and shorter. Much still remains to be done, and so 2022 will be another fundamental year for verifying to what extent and in what ways the decisions taken in Glasgow can and should be further consolidated in view of COP27, planned for Egypt next November.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen!

Dialogue and fraternity are two essential focal points in our efforts to overcome the crisis of the present moment. Yet “despite numerous efforts aimed at constructive dialogue between nations, the deafening noise of war and conflict is intensifying”. [6: Message for the 2022 World Day of Peace, 1.] The entire international community must address the urgent need to find solutions to endless conflicts that at times appear as true proxy wars.

I think first of Syria, where the country’s rebirth does not yet clearly appear on the horizon. Even today, the Syrian people mourn their dead and the loss of everything, and continue to hope for a better future. Political and constitutional reforms are required for the country to be reborn, but the imposition of sanctions should not strike directly at everyday life, in order to provide a glimmer of hope to the general populace, increasingly caught in the grip of poverty.

Nor can we overlook the conflict in Yemen, a human tragedy that has gone on for years, silently, far from the spotlight of the media and with a certain indifference on the part of the international community, even as it continues to claim numerous civil victims, particularly women and children.

In the past year, no steps forward were made in the peace process between Israel and Palestine. I would truly like to see these two peoples rebuild mutual trust and resume speaking directly to each other, in order to reach the point where they can live in two states, side by side, in peace and security, without hatred and resentment, but the healing born of mutual forgiveness.

Other sources of concern are the institutional tensions in Libya, the episodes of violence by international terrorism in the Sahel region, and the internal conflicts in Sudan, South Sudan and Ethiopia, where there is need “to find once again the path of reconciliation and peace through a forthright encounter that places the needs of the people above all else”. [7: Urbi et Orbi Message, 25 December 2021.]

Profound situations of inequality and injustice, endemic corruption and various forms of poverty that offend the dignity of persons also continue to fuel social conflicts on the American continent, where growing polarization is not helping to resolve the real and pressing problems of its people, especially those who are most poor and vulnerable.

Reciprocal trust and readiness to engage in calm discussion should also inspire all parties at stake, so that acceptable and lasting solutions can be found in Ukraine and in the southern Caucasus, and the outbreak of new crises can be avoided in the Balkans, primarily in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Dialogue and fraternity are all the more urgently needed for dealing wisely and effectively with the crisis which for almost a year now has affected Myanmar; its streets, once places of encounter, are now the scene of fighting that does not spare even houses of prayer.

Naturally, these conflicts are exacerbated by the abundance of weapons on hand and the unscrupulousness of those who make every effort to supply them. At times, we deceive ourselves into thinking that these weapons serve to dissuade potential aggressors. History and, sadly, even daily news reports, make it clear that this is not the case. Those who possess weapons will eventually use them, since as Saint Paul VI observed, “a person cannot love with offensive weapons in his hands”. [8: Address to the United Nations (4 October 1965), 5.] Furthermore, “When we yield to the logic of arms and distance ourselves from the practice of dialogue, we forget to our detriment that, even before causing victims and ruination, weapons can create nightmares”. [9: Meeting for Peace, Hiroshima, 24 November 2019.] Today these concerns have become even more real, if we consider the availability and employment of autonomous weapon systems that can have terrible and unforeseen consequences, and should be subject to the responsibility of the international community.

Among the weapons humanity has produced, nuclear arms are of particular concern. At the end of December last, the Tenth Review Conference of the parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, which was to meet in New York in these days, was once again postponed due to the pandemic. A world free of nuclear arms is possible and necessary. I therefore express my hope that the international community will view that Conference as an opportunity to take a significant step in this direction. The Holy See continues steadfastly to maintain that in the twenty-first century nuclear arms are an inadequate and inappropriate means of responding to security threats, and that possession of them is immoral. Their production diverts resources from integral human development and their employment not only has catastrophic humanitarian and environmental consequences, but also threatens the very existence of humanity.

The Holy See likewise considers it important that the resumption of negotiations in Vienna on the nuclear accord with Iran (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) achieve positive results, in order to guarantee a more secure

and fraternal world.

Dear Ambassadors!

In my Message for the World Day of Peace celebrated on 1 January last, I sought to highlight several factors that I consider essential for promoting a culture of dialogue and fraternity.

Education holds a special place, since it trains the younger generation, the future and hope of the world. Education is in fact the primary vehicle of integral human development, for it makes individuals free and responsible. [10: Cf. Message for the 2022 World Day of Peace, 3.] The educational process is slow and laborious, and can lead at times to discouragement, but we can never abandon it. It is an outstanding expression of dialogue, for no true education can lack a dialogical structure. Education likewise gives rise to culture and builds bridges of encounter between peoples. The Holy See wished to stress the importance of education also by its participation in Expo 2021 in Dubai, with a pavilion inspired by the theme of the Expo: "Connecting Minds, Creating the Future".

The Catholic Church has always recognized and valued the role of education in the spiritual, moral and social growth of the young. It pains me, then, to acknowledge that in different educational settings – parishes and schools – the abuse of minors has occurred, resulting in serious psychological and spiritual consequences for those who experienced them. These are crimes, and they call for a firm resolve to investigate them fully, examining each case to ascertain responsibility, to ensure justice to the victims and to prevent similar atrocities from taking place in the future.

Despite the gravity of such acts, no society can ever abdicate its responsibility for education. Yet, regrettably, state budgets often allocate few resources for education, which tends to be viewed as an expense, instead of the best possible investment for the future.

The pandemic prevented many young people from attending school, to the detriment of their personal and social development. Modern technology enabled many young people to take refuge in virtual realities that create strong psychological and emotional links but isolate them from others and the world around them, radically modifying social relationships. In making this point, I in no way intend to deny the usefulness of technology and its products, which make it possible for us to connect with one another easily and quickly, but I do appeal urgently that we be watchful lest these instruments substitute for true human relationships at the interpersonal, familial, social and international levels. If we learn to isolate ourselves at an early age, it will later prove more difficult to build bridges of fraternity and peace. In a world where there is just "me", it is difficult to make room for "us".

The second thing that I would like to mention briefly is labour, "an indispensable factor in building and keeping peace. Labour is an expression of ourselves and our gifts, but also of our commitment, self-investment and cooperation with others, since we always work with or for someone else. Seen in this clearly social perspective, the workplace enables us to learn to make our contribution towards a more habitable and beautiful world". [11: Message for the 2022 World Day of Peace, 4.]

We have seen that the pandemic has sorely tested the global economy, with serious repercussions on those families and workers who experienced situations of psychological distress even before the onset of the economic troubles. This has further highlighted persistent inequalities in various social and economic sectors. Here we can include access to clean water, food, education and medical care. The number of people falling under the category of extreme poverty has shown a marked increase. In addition, the health crisis forced many workers to change professions, and in some cases forced them to enter the underground economy, causing them to lose the social protections provided for in many countries.

In this context, we see even more clearly the importance of labour, since economic development cannot exist without it, nor can it be thought that modern technology can replace the surplus value of human labour. Human labour provides an opportunity for the discovery of our personal dignity, for encounter with others and for human growth; it is a privileged means whereby each person participates actively in the common good and offers a concrete contribution to peace. Here too, greater cooperation is needed among all actors on the local, national, regional and global levels, especially in the short term, given the challenges posed by the desired ecological conversion. The coming years will be a time of opportunity for developing new services and enterprises, adapting existing ones, increasing access to dignified work and devising new means of ensuring respect for human rights and adequate levels of remuneration and social protection.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The prophet Jeremiah tells us that God has "plans for [our] welfare and not for evil, to give [us] a future and a

hope" (29:11). We should be unafraid, then, to make room for peace in our lives by cultivating dialogue and fraternity among one another. The gift of peace is "contagious"; it radiates from the hearts of those who long for it and aspire to share it, and spreads throughout the whole world. To each of you, your families and the peoples you represent, I renew my blessing and offer my heartfelt good wishes for a year of serenity and peace.

Thank you!