

TREASURE THE MESSAGE FOR PEACE

SOME THOUGHTS FROM CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN AT THE BEGINNING OF THE NEW YEAR

In 1968 Pope Paul VI dedicated January 1st as the 'World Day For Peace' and each year since then all successive Popes have continued to mark the start of each year as World Day For Peace. Here in Scotland successive Bishop Presidents of our Scottish Justice and Peace Commission have issued their own messages – and I commend that of Bishop Peter Moran whose message will be read on Epiphany Sunday 7th January 2007.

Thinking, praying and working for peace is a marvellous way to begin the year – twofold prayer we might say, when we ask Mary, Mother of God, to protect us through the coming year, and when we dedicate the day and year ahead to peace, and ourselves to be the people who might make that peace possible.

We see from the beautiful first reading of the feast day Mass at the beginning of the year, found in the Book of Numbers, that peace is a blessing of God. The threefold prayer asks the Lord to bless us and keep us, to let his face shine upon us, and to bring us peace. What better way to begin the year than that?

I have already said that the World Day for Peace has been marked by the Pope each year since 1968, and this year Pope Benedict XVI has given us **a particularly poignant and urgent message of peace**. His theme throughout the message is 'The human person – the heart of peace', and we would do well to ponder deeply the meaning and implication of this title. We are indeed the heart of peace, and have the power to work for peace or not. Indeed, Pope Benedict describes peace as both a gift and a task, and without a doubt it is both a precious gift and a vital task, especially at this present time when peace seems to be far from the minds and hearts of so many in our country and our world.

Sharing deeply the Holy Father's concern for peace I would like to simply highlight some of the issues he raises and ask that we make them our issues as well at the beginning of the year when we are full of good intentions and desires to make and keep resolutions.

Can we resolve today to "**respect the dignity of each human being, in whose nature the image of the Creator is reflected**"? (Message, section 4) The Holy Father addresses himself particularly to nations such as our own, strong and economically developed, urging that we do not "use that power to violate the rights of others who are less fortunate". Intrinsic to this respect for the human person is a "respect for the right to life at every stage". The Pope speaks of the "silent deaths caused by hunger, abortion, experimentation on human embryos and euthanasia"; and he goes on to speak of the difficulties that both Christians and the followers of other religions frequently encounter in publicly and freely professing their religious convictions.

Can we resolve today to **respect the earth and do all in our power to heal the wound it suffers at this time**? As the Holy Father says most forcefully, "humanity, if it truly desires peace, must be increasingly conscious of the links between natural ecology, or respect for nature, and human ecology." (Message section 8) Spelling out more precisely what this means he goes on to warn that "The destruction of the environment, its improper or selfish use, and the violent hoarding of the earth's resources cause grievances, conflicts and wars, precisely because they are the consequences of an inhumane concept of development". (Message section 9) How clear a warning do we need? War and conflict is a direct result of our destruction of the environment, and immediate steps must be taken to redress this. By protecting our planet we clearly work for peace at the same time.

Can we resolve today to **work for the elimination of nuclear weapons**? Pope Benedict addressed the issue of nuclear weapons in his message for peace last year and returns to it this year. One year ago he told us that counting on nuclear weapons to ensure national security was both baneful and fallacious. He encouraged Britain and all other nuclear powers to strive for nuclear disarmament. It grieves me greatly to note that far from striving for nuclear disarmament our government seems bent on committing us to 50 more years of nuclear terror. The Holy Father has this to say to our parliament and to all of us who choose to listen concerning nuclear weapons: “The way to ensure a future of peace for everyone is found not only in international accords... but also in the determined commitment to seek their reduction and definitive dismantling”. (Message Section 15) I urge all MP’s, in the name of justice, in the name of peace, and in the name of Christ to vote against the replacement of Trident. As the Pope clearly says: “The fate of the whole human family is at stake!”

This year **I have joined with my friend and brother, Reverend Alan McDonald, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland** in a joint New Year Message. To my knowledge this is the first time a Moderator and a Cardinal have joined together in a shared New Year Message. In our message we express together our fervent desire for peace. In addition to the issues raised above we spoke of our sadness at the presence of sectarianism in Scotland. In our message we called “on all to resist attempts to divide people on religious or any other grounds. Faith unites us infinitely more than it divides us. The promise of peace is for all people, whatever denomination and whatever faith.”

May I ask finally, then, can we resolve to be men and women who see all people of faith as brothers and sisters, and pledge to work for the peace of all the world?

To be faithful to these resolutions will not be easy. We must make determined efforts, and we must seek strength through prayer. Let us take Mary as our model on this her feast day. We heard there in the Gospel of Luke that Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. May we, too, treasure the message of peace and treasure this World Day for Peace. May we ponder in our hearts all that the Holy Father asks of us, and determine to live out our new year resolutions. And may the Lord continue always to bless us and keep us, let his face shine upon us and bring us his peace.