

U r b i e t O r b i

Message of His Holiness Pope Francis – Christmas 2023

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Merry Christmas!

The eyes and the hearts of Christians throughout the world turn to Bethlehem; in these days, it is a place of sorrow and silence, yet it was there that the long-awaited message was first proclaimed: "To you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord" (Lk 2:11). Those words spoken by the angel in the heavens above Bethlehem are also spoken to us. We are full of hope and trust as we realize that the Lord has been born for us; that the eternal Word of the Father, the infinite God, has made his home among us. He became flesh; he came "to dwell among us" (Jn 1:14). This is the good news that changed the course of history!

The message of Bethlehem is indeed "good news of great joy" (Lk 2:10). What kind of joy? Not the passing happiness of this world, not the glee of entertainment but a joy that is "great" because it makes us great. For today, all of us, with all our shortcomings, embrace the sure promise of an unprecedented gift: the hope of being born for heaven. Yes, Jesus our brother has come to make his Father our Father; a small child, he reveals to us the tender love of God, and much more. He, the Only-Begotten Son of the Father, gives us "power to become children of God" (Jn 1:12). This is the joy that consoles hearts, renews hope and bestows peace. It is the joy of the Holy Spirit: the joy born of being God's beloved sons and daughters.

Brothers and sisters, today in Bethlehem, amid the deep shadows covering the land, an undying flame has been lighted. Today the world's darkness has been overcome by the light of God, which "enlightens every man and woman" (Jn 1:9). Brothers and sisters, let us exult in this gift of grace! Rejoice, you who have lost confidence in your certitudes, for you are not alone: Christ is born for you! Rejoice, you who have abandoned all hope, for God offers you his outstretched hand; he does not point a finger at you, but offers you his little baby hand, in order to set you free from your fears, to relieve you of your burdens and to show you that, in his eyes, you are more valuable than anything else. Rejoice, you who find no peace of heart, for the ancient prophecy of Isaiah has been fulfilled for your sake: "a child has been born for us, a son given to us, and he is named... Prince of Peace" (9:6). Scripture reveals that his peace, his kingdom, "will have no end" (9:7).

In the Scriptures, the Prince of Peace is opposed by the "Prince of this world" (Jn 12:31), who, by sowing the seeds of death, plots against the Lord, "the lover of life" (cf. Wis 11:26). We see this played out in Bethlehem, where the birth of the Saviour is followed by the slaughter of the innocents. How many innocents are being slaughtered in our world! In their mothers' wombs, in odysseys undertaken in desperation and in search of hope, in the lives of all those little ones whose childhood has been devastated by war. They are the little Jesuses of today, these little ones whose childhood has been devastated by war.

To say "yes" to the Prince of Peace, then, means saying "no" to war, to every war and to do so with courage, to the very mindset of war, an aimless voyage, a defeat without victors, an inexcusable folly. This is what war is: an aimless voyage, a defeat without victors, an inexcusable folly. To say "no" to war means saying "no" to weaponry. The human heart is weak and impulsive; if we find instruments of death in our hands, sooner or later we will use them. And how can we even speak of peace, when arms production, sales and trade are on the rise? Today, as at the time of Herod, the evil that opposes God's light hatches its plots in the shadows of hypocrisy and concealment. How much violence and killing takes place amid deafening silence, unbeknownst to many! People, who desire not weapons but bread, who struggle to make ends meet and desire only peace, have no idea how many public funds are being spent on arms. Yet that is something they ought to know! It

should be talked about and written about, so as to bring to light the interests and the profits that move the puppet-strings of war.

Isaiah, who prophesied the Prince of Peace, looked forward to a day when "nation shall not lift up sword against nation", a day when men "will not learn war any more", but instead "beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks" (2:4). With God's help, let us make every effort to work for the coming of that day!

May it come in Israel and Palestine, where war is devastating the lives of those peoples. I embrace them all, particularly the Christian communities of Gaza, the parish of Gaza, and the entire Holy Land. My heart grieves for the victims of the abominable attack of 7 October last, and I reiterate my urgent appeal for the liberation of those still being held hostage. I plead for an end to the military operations with their appalling harvest of innocent civilian victims, and call for a solution to the desperate humanitarian situation by an opening to the provision of humanitarian aid. May there be an end to the fueling of violence and hatred. And may the Palestinian question come to be resolved through sincere and persevering dialogue between the parties, sustained by strong political will and the support of the international community. Brothers and sisters, let us pray for peace in Palestine and in Israel.

My thoughts turn likewise to the people of war-torn Syria, and to those of long-suffering Yemen. I think too of the beloved Lebanese people, and I pray that political and social stability will soon be attained.

Contemplating the Baby Jesus, I implore peace for Ukraine. Let us renew our spiritual and human closeness to its embattled people, so that through the support of each of us, they may feel the concrete reality of God's love.

May the day of definitive peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan draw near. May it be advanced by the pursuit of humanitarian initiatives, by the return of refugees to their homes in legality and security, and by reciprocal respect for religious traditions and the places of worship of each community.

Let us not forget the tensions and conflicts that trouble the region of the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and Sudan, as well as Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan.

May the day draw near when fraternal bonds will be consolidated on the Korean peninsula by undertaking processes of dialogue and reconciliation capable of creating the conditions for lasting peace.

May the Son of God, who became a lowly Child, inspire political authorities and all persons of good will in the Americas to devise suitable ways to resolve social and political conflicts, to combat forms of poverty that offend the dignity of persons, to reduce inequality and to address the troubling phenomenon of migration movements.

From the manger, the Child Jesus asks us to be the voice of those who have no voice. The voice of the innocent children who have died for lack of bread and water; the voice of those who cannot find work or who have lost their jobs; the voice of those forced to flee their lands in search of a better future, risking their lives in grueling journeys and prey to unscrupulous traffickers.

Brothers and sisters, we are approaching the season of grace and hope that is the Jubilee, due to begin a year from now. May this time of preparation for the Holy Year be an opportunity for the conversion of hearts, for the rejection of war and the embrace of peace, and for joyfully responding to the Lord's call, in the words of Isaiah's prophecy, "to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners" (61:1).

Those words were fulfilled in Jesus (cf. Lk 4:18), who is born today in Bethlehem. Let us welcome him! Let us open our hearts to him, who is the Saviour, the Prince of Peace!