

URBI ET ORBI Christmas Day Message

Pope John Paul II

May my good wishes for peace reach all people on this day which celebrates the Prince of Peace

On Christmas day at noon, the Holy Father offered his Christmas wishes and Apostolic Blessing to the city and the world from the central loggia of St Peter's Basilica. The Pope spoke a few words of greeting in 54 different languages to the vast crowds of pilgrims who had gathered in St Peter's Square for his traditional Urbi et Orbi message; "...our eyes will rejoice at the mystery of the Holy Family, just as children rejoice when they look at the crib, recognizing in it a kind of prototype of their own family", he said, stressing that this year he had addressed his Christmas message especially to families. The Holy Father then gave thanks for the fruits of initiatives during this Year of the Family "the little domestic church", including the World Meeting of Families in October, and Prayed for the unity of families. The Pope did not omit a reference to the "greater human family" and all the countries "where the tragedy of war ... continues to produce countless victims even among innocent and defenceless people". He concluded his message with a special prayer to the Baby Jesus for peace. The following is a translation of the Holy Father's message, which he read in Italian.

1. "The Lord Jesus, when he Prayed to the Father 'that they may all be one' (Jn 17:2 1), ... implied a certain likeness between *the union of the divine Persons and the union of God's children in truth and charity*" Thus we read in the Pastoral Constitution of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council *Gaudium et spes* on the Church in the Modern World (n. 24).

After revealing to human reason the inaccessible perspectives of faith, the Council continues: "This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through *a sincere gift of himself*" (ibid.).

2. Today is the day of the Lord's Birth! The Father has given us his Son: for this indescribable gift we are full of joy.

The Son of God, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Immaculate Virgin Mary and born in the stable at Bethlehem, *chose to enter the world within a family, the Holy Family of Nazareth.*

Before the crib, the eyes of the heart and of faith look intently upon this Family: upon Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

During the whole Christmas period our eyes will rejoice at the mystery of the Holy Family, just as children rejoice when they look at the crib, recognizing in it a kind of prototype of their own family, the family within which they came into the world.

How many cribs there are in the world! In churches, in public squares, as here in St Peter's Square, in homes and even in workplaces. The Birth of the Lord gladdens us, *the mystery of the Holy Family gladdens us.* Everyone wants to share in this joy: this is the joy which today we want to wish everyone.

3. My Christmas Message this year is *addressed especially to families*, At the end of this year particularly dedicated to them, our thoughts return there, to the mystery of the Holy Family, from which the celebration began.

The Papal Legate will go once again to Nazareth, on the Feast of the Holy Family, to conclude solemnly this Year in the place sanctified by the humble and hardworking presence of Mary, Joseph and Jesus.

With this Message, I would like to call to mind what I said to the families of the world last February in the special *Letter* addressed to them. I wish to give thanks for all the fruits which the Year of the Family has produced in the individual Ecclesial Communities and the countries of every continent. Countless *initiatives have been promoted during these months on behalf of the family*, and the crowning of these took place in the unforgettable gathering of families from all over the world here, in this Square, on 8 and 9 October last. With great joy we celebrated then *that great feast* in which the family—the little domestic church—was seen in a truly universal manner. It could be seen how much creative commitment was poured out in favour of the dignity of marriage and the family, according to the expression of *Gaudium et spes*, and in promoting initiatives on behalf of their sanctity.

Recalling all this, there rises from the depths of my heart this supplication: *Family, O Holy Family, guide us with your example and protect us!*

4. Jesus prays to his Heavenly Father that all may be one (cf. Jn 17:21): this prayer comes to his lips the day before his Passion. But it is a prayer which -he already carries in himself at the moment of his birth: Father make it so that "they may be one even as we are one" (Jn 17:22). *Was he not praying at that moment also for the unity of human families?* He was certainly praying above all for the unity of the Church; but the family, sustained by a special Sacrament, is the vital cell of the Church, indeed, according to the teaching of the Fathers, it is a little domestic church. So, Jesus prayed from the very time of his coming into the world that all who believe in him might give expression to their communion. starting with the profound unity of their families; a unity which moreover is inherent "from the beginning" in God's plan for conjugal love, from which the family takes its origin (cf. Mt 19:4-6). We can therefore hold that Jesus prayed for *the sacred and fundamental unity of every family*. He prayed for "the union of God's children in truth and charity". Having given the "sincere gift of himself" in coming into this world, he prayed *that all people, in founding a family, would become, for the good of that family, a sincere mutual gift of self*: husbands and wives, parents and children, and all the generations which make up the family, each individual making his or her own particular contribution.

5. *Family, O Holy Family*—the Family so closely united to the mystery which we contemplate on the day of the Lord's Birth—*guide with your example the families of the whole earth!*

To those families I now wish to send a greeting and the good wishes which spring from the mystery of the Lord's Birth.

Son of God, who came among us in the warmth of the family, grant that all families may grow in love and work together for the good of all humanity through the commitment of faithful and fruitful unity, through respect for life and the quest for fraternal solidarity with everyone.

Teach them therefore to renounce selfishness, deceit and the unscrupulous quest for their own gain.

Help them to develop the immense resources of heart and mind, which increase when it is you who inspire them.

6. But, as I look at families in the light of Christmas, I cannot but turn my thoughts to the *greater human family*, unfortunately torn by persistent forms of selfishness and violence.

The tragedy of war in many parts of the world continues to produce countless victims even among innocent and defenceless people. How can we not think of the endless conflict which, within the heart of Europe, is tearing apart the Balkans? New centres of tension threaten to involve other regions of the world, such as the Caucasus, where the situation is becoming ever greater cause for concern; Angola, which continues to be prey to the convulsions of a fratricidal struggle which has never died down; Rwanda, which, after sustaining grave and profound wounds, is trying to rise from the abyss into which it has been thrown by irrational passions; Burundi,

also a country beset by alarming uneasiness. And what are we to say of the Sudan with its "forgotten" war and of Algeria, where murderous violence holds the whole people hostage? And the very land where Jesus was born, does it not continue to be a theatre of conflicts and a place of division?

May my good wishes for peace reach all people on this day which celebrates the Prince of Peace.

May it particularly reach families, children, women, old people, the handicapped, who are often helpless victims of selfishness and neglect by society.

I ask the Lord, tiny and defenceless as he appears before us in the crib, to inspire in every heart tenderness and compassion:

7. Wipe away, Baby Jesus, the tears of children!
Embrace the sick and the elderly!
Move men to lay down their arms
and to draw close in a universal embrace of peace!
Invite the peoples, O merciful Jesus,
to tear down the walls created
by poverty and unemployment, by ignorance and indifference,
by discrimination and intolerance.
It is you, O Divine Child of Bethlehem,
who save us, freeing us from sin.
It is you who are the true and only Saviour,
whom humanity often searches for with uncertainty.
God of peace, gift of peace for all of humanity,
come to live in the heart of every individual and of every family.
Be our peace and our joy!
Amen!

To the English-speaking pilgrims present the Holy Father said:

May the joy of Christmas and the peace which the Birth of the Saviour brings into the world be in your hearts forever.