

# MIDEAST VOICES



Mideast Voice of the Poor, Columbus, OH

<http://www.vincentianvoice.org/voiceofpoor.html> Email: [colsvop@gmail.com](mailto:colsvop@gmail.com)

## *Pacem in Terris*

The Challenge of Peace on Earth  
50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of *Pacem in Terris*

By Jerry Freewalt

### INSIDE THIS ISSUE

<i>Pacem in Terris (Peace on Earth)</i>	1
Prayer for Systemic Change	3

This year marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the papal encyclical *Pacem in Terris (Peace on Earth)* by Blessed John XXIII. Today with civil wars, military coups, and suicide bombings along with threats of nuclear weapons by rogue dictators, I think we could use a little more *Pacem in Terris*. What does this document say to us and has it made any difference?

To put things into context, Pope John XXIII released this beautifully written document in 1963 during the height of the Cold War. The world just averted horror when two superpowers duelled with the real possibility of mass destruction in the Cuban Missile Crisis. In its aftermath, the Church came forward to urge us to give peace a chance. But it did more than that. John XXIII laid out what peace actually looks like and how can it be authentically achieved.

The core of his message is peace can never be achieved “except by the diligent observance of the divinely established order.” It’s an order built on a foundation of natural law based in truth, justice, charity, and freedom. This order recognizes the inherent dignity of each person and values the development of right relationships to achieve the universal common good.

John XXIII dedicates a substantial portion of the encyclical making the point that the recognition of human rights is an essential element in establishing peace. To the American reader, his listing and explanation of rights have a familiar tone: basic human rights are fundamental, universal, and inalienable.

At the forefront is the right to life and in his words “the right to bodily integrity and to the means necessary for the proper development of life, particularly food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest, and, finally, the necessary social services.” Liberty and its enumeration of articulated rights follows which includes the freedom of speech, the freedom to choose a

profession, the right to share in the benefits of culture and receive a good education, the right to worship according to one's conscience, and the right to choose freely one's state in life whether to start a family or embrace a religious vocation.

The document delves into economic and political rights. People have the right to the opportunity to work with just wages and conditions that respect human dignity. People have the right to meet in associations designed to protect personal freedom and dignity. The right to own private property, exercise personal initiative, and start a business; it's covered in *Pacem in Terris*. But John XXIII reminds the reader "the right to private property entails a social obligation as well." People have a right to freedom of movement within a state and for just reasons are permitted to emigrate to other countries. Finally, people have the right to actively participate in public life and contribute to the common good. John XXIII acknowledges the increasing role of women in public life promoting awareness of their dignity as well as rights and duties.

This is a long list of rights, rights that continue to be articulated in Catholic social teaching. But this encyclical is not just about rights. There's a catch, a flipside if you will, to the great cause of achieving peace. We have to work at it, and that requires duty. We have responsibility. Without it, the whole thing falls apart.

Blessed John XXIII, soon to be canonized a saint, paints a picture that a well ordered human society demands people who are "guided by justice, respect the rights of others and do their duty. It demands, too, that they be animated by such love as will make them feel the needs of others as their own, and induce them to share their goods with others, and to strive in the world to make all men alike heirs to the noblest of intellectual and spiritual values." This is all carried out by human society thriving on freedom in recognition that people are endowed with reason and assume responsibility for actions.

A considerable portion of his message explains the interchange, the duality, of rights and duties from the micro to the macro level. The natural law that governs individuals governs relations among nations, ranging from the person to the United Nations. The order necessary for peace rests on the establishment and maintenance of right relationships. Love and trust in personal relationships are essential elements for *Peace on Earth*. A family which flourishes is nourished by love and trust, and so are the relationships among nations and the entire human family.

The relationship between individuals and public authorities requires the recognition of human rights and the promotion of the duty to protect rights. The sole purpose of public authority is the attainment of the common good which demands the recognition of the dignity of the human person, the opportunity for participation by everyone, special attention to the poor and vulnerable, and the promotion of material and spiritual welfare. The criteria for a good government requires a charter of fundamental human rights, a constitution, and clear rules for relationships between citizens and public authorities in terms of rights and duties.

Mutual trust and collaboration among nations is tantamount for peace and John XXIII called for the need for disarmament. Simply put, he wrote, "Nuclear weapons must be banned." He was concerned about the policy of deterrence. Although in theory the competition of stockpiling weapons may prevent war, true and lasting peace among nations cannot happen without mutual trust.

Where does God fit in with all this talk of peace? Weaved throughout the encyclical we get the message. The order that achieves lasting peace, based on natural law with rights and duties, has truth as its foundation. The first truth and the source of it all – justice, charity, and freedom – is God. Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace. Peace is an empty word unless it rests on this order. God must come to our aid "if human society is to bear the closest possible resemblance to the kingdom of God." John XXIII calls for an integral education of moral goodness and the cultivation of religious values. Most importantly, he calls for the integration of faith and action among humanity: "Their inner, spiritual unity must be restored, so that faith may be the light and love the motivating force of all their actions."

Blessed John XXIII offers a message of encouragement in *Pacem in Terris*. He knows working for peace is a challenge and an immense task, but it is possible. He reminds us it will take time and can be done little by little. It is a constant endeavor requiring the work of every person, group, institution, and nation.

Since the release of the encyclical, the Holy See created the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, dioceses across the world established offices for justice and peace, the U.S. Bishops issued a statement entitled *The Challenge of Peace* in 1983, Catholic schools and universities teach principles on peace, and Vatican diplomats and Church peacemakers are engaged at this very moment promoting human dignity and defending human rights.

Has this encyclical made a difference in the last fifty years? It has and will continue...if we take up the challenge and work for peace on earth.

**Voice of the Poor (VOP)** Voice of the Poor does not take positions for or against a political party or individual candidates. However, Voice of the Poor is interested in working with those elected officials, whether Republicans or Democrats, who support initiatives that will benefit the poor, children, elderly, immigrants – documented or not, and all of those who SVdP cares for and serves.

### *Prayer for Systemic Change*

*We praise and thank you, O God, Creator of the Universe. You have made all things good and have given us the earth to cultivate. Grant that we may always use created things gratefully, and share them generously with those in need. Give us creativity in helping the poor meet their basic human needs. Open our minds and hearts so that we might stand at their side and assist them to change whatever unjust structures keep them poor. Enable us to be brothers and sisters to them, friends who walk with them in their struggle for fundamental human rights. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

*From: National Voice of the Poor*

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Voice of the Poor  
c/o Deb Zabloudil  
710 Winsholen Court  
Westerville, OH 43081-3769

