



The Holy See

CHRISTMAS MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI TO CATHOLICS LIVING IN THE MIDDLE EAST REGIONS

*To My Beloved Brother Bishops, Priests,
and Lay Faithful in the Middle East*

Bathed in the light of Christmas, we contemplate the presence of the Word who has pitched his tent among us. He is the “light that shines in the darkness” and that “gave us power to become children of God” (cf. *Jn* 1:5, 12). At this most significant time for the Christian faith, I wish to address a special word to you, Catholic brothers and sisters, who live in the Middle East region: I feel spiritually present in each of your particular Churches, even the smallest, sharing with you the worries and the hope with which you await the Lord Jesus, Prince of Peace. To all of you I say with the biblical greeting used by Saint Francis of Assisi: *may the Lord give you peace*.

I greet with affection the communities that are, or feel like, a “little flock” either due to the diminished numbers of their brothers and sisters (cf. *Lk* 12:32), or because they are immersed in a society composed of a majority of believers from other religions, or due to the serious hardships and difficulties being currently experienced by some of the nations in this area. I am thinking above all of countries marked by strained relations and often marred by brutally violent incidents which, as well as causing widespread destruction, strike without pity helpless and innocent people. The daily news coming from the Middle East shows a growth of alarming situations, seemingly with no possible escape. They are events which naturally give rise, in those involved, to recriminations and rage, leading them to thoughts of retaliation and revenge.

We know that these are not Christian sentiments; to give in to them would leave us callous and spiteful, far from that “gentleness and lowliness” which Jesus Christ proposed to us as the model of behaviour (cf. *Mt* 11:29). Indeed, we could lose the opportunity to make a properly Christian contribution to the solution of the grave problems of our time. It would not be at all wise, especially now, to spend our time asking who has suffered the most or presenting an account of injustices suffered, listing the reasons which reinforce one’s own argument. This has often happened in the

past, with results which to say the least were disappointing. Suffering in the end affects everyone, and when one person suffers he should first of all wish to understand how much someone else in a similar situation suffers. Patient and humble dialogue, achieved through listening to each other and being intent upon understanding someone else's situation has already born positive results in many countries previously devastated by violence and revenge. A little more trust in the compassion of others, especially those suffering, cannot but bear efficacious results. Today, many parties rightly plead for this interior disposition.

The Catholic communities in your countries are never far from my thoughts and in this season of Christmas I think of them with a heightened sense of concern. The star seen by the Magi brings us to your lands, the star which guided them to see the child with Mary his mother (cf. *Mt 2:11*). It is in the East that Jesus offered his life and "made the two into one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility" (*Eph 2:14*). There he said to his disciples: "Go into the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation" (*Mk 16:15*). There the Master's disciples were for the first time called Christians (cf. *Acts 11:26*). There the Church of the great Fathers was born and grew, and varying and rich spiritual and liturgical traditions blossomed.

To you, dear brothers and sisters, heirs of these traditions, I express with affection my personal closeness in this situation of human insecurity, daily suffering, fear and hope which you are living. I repeat to your communities the words of the Redeemer: "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give to you the kingdom" (*Lk 12:32*). You can rely on my full solidarity with you in your current circumstances. In this regard, I am sure that I speak for the universal Church. Thus neither individual Catholics nor their communities, should feel alone or abandoned. Your Churches are accompanied in their difficult journey by prayer and by the charitable support of the particular Churches throughout the whole world, according to the example and spirit of the early Church (cf. *Acts 11:29-30*).

In the present circumstances, marked little by light and too much by darkness, it is a cause of consolation and hope for me to know that the Christian communities in the Middle East, whose intense suffering I am well aware of, continue to be vital and active communities, resolute in bearing witness to their faith with their specific identity in the societies in which they are situated. They wish to contribute in a constructive manner to the urgent needs of their respective societies and the whole region. Saint Peter, writing his First Letter to a rather poor and marginalized community, persecuted and held in little regard by the society of that time, did not hesitate to say that that their difficult situation should be considered a "grace" (cf. *1 Pt 1:7-11*). In fact, is it not a grace to be able to participate in the sufferings of Christ, uniting oneself to the action with which he took unto himself our sins in order to atone for them? May Catholic communities, often living in difficult situations, be aware of the powerful force which emanates from suffering accepted with love. Such suffering can change the hearts of others and the heart of the world. I encourage each of you therefore to carry on with perseverance, comforted by the knowledge of the "price" with which Christ has redeemed us (cf. *1 Cor 6:20*). Certainly, the response to one's Christian vocation

is much more difficult for the members of minority communities, often numerically of little significance. Nevertheless, as your Patriarchs wrote in their Pastoral Letter of Easter 1992, “the light can be faint in a house yet lighten up the whole house. Salt is a negligible element in foods, but it is salt which gives them flavour. Very little yeast is in dough, yet it is the leaven which prepares it to become bread.” In making these words my own I encourage the Catholic Bishops to persevere in their ministry, cultivating unity among themselves and always remaining close to their flock. Know that the Pope shares the concerns, hopes and exhortations expressed in their annual pastoral letters, and also in the daily exercise of their sacred duties. He encourages them in their effort to sustain and reinforce in faith, hope and charity the flock entrusted to them. The presence of their communities in the various countries of the region constitutes, among other things, something which can greatly encourage ecumenism.

For some time now it has become clear that many Christians are leaving the Middle East, to such an extent that the Holy Places are at risk of being reduced to archaeological sites, void of any ecclesial life. Undoubtedly, minorities find it difficult to survive in the midst of dangerous geopolitical situations, cultural conflicts, economic and strategic interests, and forms of aggression which claim justification from a social or religious basis. In fact, many Christians eventually give in to the temptation to emigrate. Often the damage done is practically irreparable. One must not forget, however, that simply being together and living through common suffering has a healing effect on wounds and disposes people to thoughts and deeds of reconciliation and peace. This in turn gives rise to a habitual, fraternal dialogue, which in time and with the grace of the Holy Spirit, can become a broader dialogue in the cultural, social and political spheres. Believers moreover are confidently aware of a hope that does not delude, because it is rooted in the presence of the Risen One. From him comes the commitment of faith and our active love of neighbour (cf. *1 Th* 1:3). Even in the most distressing situations Christian hope teaches us that passive resignation and pessimism are the great threat which can thwart the unfolding of our baptismal vocation. They bring about distrust, fear, self-pity, fatalism and flight.

In the present situation Christians are called to be courageous and steadfast in the power of the Spirit of Christ, knowing that they can count on the closeness of their brothers and sisters in the faith scattered throughout the world. Saint Paul, writing to the Romans, declares that there is no comparison between the sufferings of this present time and the future glory that awaits us (cf. 8:18). Likewise Saint Peter, in his First Letter reminds us that we Christians, even when afflicted by various trials, have a higher hope that fills our heart with joy (cf. 1:6). Saint Paul again, in the Second Letter to the Corinthians states with conviction that “the God of all consolation... comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction” (1:3-4). We know well that the consolation promised by the Holy Spirit does not consist merely of nice words, but in a broadening of mind and heart, that allows us to understand our own situation in the wider picture of all creation labouring in the act of giving birth while awaiting the revelation of the sons of God (cf. *Rom* 8:19-25). From this perspective it is possible to think more of our neighbour’s sufferings than of our own, more of common ills than private ones. We can strive to do

something so that others may understand that their sufferings are recognized and understood, and that we have the will, as far as possible, to remedy them.

Through you, my dearly beloved, I wish to make an appeal to your fellow citizens, men and women of the different Christian confessions, of different religions and all who honestly seek peace, justice and solidarity by listening and sincere dialogue. I say to you all: persevere with courage and trust! I appeal to those who hold positions of responsibility in guiding events to cultivate that sensitivity, attentiveness and closeness which surpasses schemes and strategies so that they can build societies that are more peaceful and just, truly respectful of every human being.

You are well aware, dear brothers and sisters, of my ardent desire that Providence will allow me to make a pilgrimage to the Land made holy by the events of Salvation History. I hope to be able to pray in Jerusalem, “the cherished homeland of all the spiritual descendants of Abraham, who hold it so dearly” (cf. John Paul II, *Redemptionis Anno*, AAS LXXVI, 1984, 625). I am convinced that it can rise up as “a symbol of encounter, of union and peace for the whole human family” (*ibid* p. 629). While we await the fulfilment of this desire, I encourage you to continue along the path of trust, with acts of friendship and good will. I refer both to the simple, daily deeds practiced for years in your region by so many good and humble people who have always treated others with consideration, and also to those deeds considered heroic, inspired by authentic respect for human dignity and the desire to find solutions to situations of grave hostility. Peace is such an important and urgent good that it warrants great sacrifices on the part of all.

As my venerable predecessor, Pope John Paul II, wrote: “there is no peace without justice”. It is necessary therefore that the rights of all be recognized and upheld. Pope John Paul II however added: “there is no peace without forgiveness”. Agreements opening the way to dialogue and future cooperation are not normally reached without coming to terms with past errors. In this case forgiveness is an indispensable condition if we wish to be free to build a new future. Works of solidarity are born and developed from forgiveness offered and received. Many such initiatives have already been undertaken in your region by the Church, governments and non-governmental organizations.

The song of the Angels over the stable of Bethlehem – “peace on earth to those whom God loves” – takes on during these days its full meaning and produces now those fruits that in eternal life will exist fully. I hope that the Christmas season will be marked by an end to or at least a reprieve from so much suffering. May it give to families that extra hope which is necessary to persevere in the arduous task of promoting peace in a world so wounded and divided. Dear brothers and sisters, be assured that along this path you are accompanied by the fervent prayers of the Pope and the whole Church. May the intercession and example of so many martyrs and saints, who have given courageous witness to Christ in your lands, sustain and strengthen you in your faith. And may the Holy Family of Nazareth watch over your worthy resolutions and commitments.

With these sentiments, I cordially impart to each one of you a special Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of my affection and closeness.

From the Vatican, 21 December 2006

BENEDICTUS XVI

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