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Audience with the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See for the presentation of wishes for the New Year

This morning, in the Hall of Blessings, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See for the presentation of wishes for the new year.

After the introductory words from the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps, His Excellency Mr. Georges Poulides, Ambassador of Cyprus to the Holy See, the Pope delivered the following address:

Address of the Holy Father

Your Eminence, Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I thank you for your presence at our customary meeting, which this year we would like to be a call for peace in a world that is witnessing heightened divisions and wars.

I am grateful in particular to the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps, His Excellency Mr George Poulides, for the good wishes that he extended to me in the name of all. My own greeting goes to each of you, to your families, your co-workers and to the peoples and governments of the countries that you represent. To all of you, and to the authorities of your countries, I am likewise grateful for the messages of condolence sent for the death of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI and for the closeness shown during his funeral.

We have just ended the Christmas season, in which Christians commemorate the mystery of the birth of the Son of God. The prophet Isaiah had foretold that birth in these words: "a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (*Is 9:6*).

Your presence is a sign of the importance of the peace and human fraternity that dialogue helps to build. The task of diplomacy is precisely to resolve conflicts and thus to foster a climate of reciprocal cooperation and trust for the sake of meeting common needs. It can be said that diplomacy is an exercise of humility, since it demands that we sacrifice something of our self-regard in order to build a relationship with others, to understand their thinking and points of view, and thus to oppose the human pride and arrogance that are the cause of every will to wage war.

I am grateful for the consideration shown by your countries to the Holy See, marked in this past year not least by the decisions of Switzerland, the Republic of the Congo, Mozambique and Azerbaijan to appoint resident ambassadors in Rome, as well as by the signing of new bilateral accords with the Democratic Republic of São Tomé and Príncipe and with the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Here I would also mention that, in the context of a respectful and constructive dialogue, the Holy See and the People's Republic of China have agreed to extend for another two-year period the validity of the Provisional Agreement regarding the appointment of Bishops, stipulated in Peking in 2018. It is my hope that this collaborative relationship can increase, for the benefit of the life of the Catholic Church and that of the Chinese people.

At this meeting, I would also assure you once more of the full cooperation of the Secretariat of State and the Dicasteries of the Roman Curia. With the promulgation of the new Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*, the Curia has been reorganized in some of its structures, so that it can carry out its work "with evangelical spirit, working for the good and service of communion, unity and the building up of the universal Church, while also attentive to the circumstances of the world in which the Church is called to carry out its mission".[1]

Dear Ambassadors,

This year marks the sixtieth anniversary of the Encyclical *Pacem in Terris* of Saint John XXIII, issued less than two months before his death.[2]

Very much present in the mind of the "good Pope" was the threat of nuclear war, raised in October 1962 by the so-called *Cuban missile crisis*. Humanity would have been only a step away from its own annihilation, had it not proved possible to make dialogue prevail, in recognition of the devastating effects of atomic weapons.

Sadly, today too, the nuclear threat is raised, and the world once more feels fear and anguish. Here I can only reaffirm that the possession of atomic weapons is immoral, because, as John XXIII observed, "although it is difficult to believe that anyone would dare to assume responsibility for initiating the appalling slaughter and destruction that war would bring in its wake, there is no denying that the conflagration could be started by some chance and unforeseen circumstance".[3]

From this standpoint, particular concern is raised by the stall in the negotiations for the resumption of the *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action*, better known as the Iran nuclear deal. It is my hope that a concrete solution can be reached as quickly as possible, for the sake of ensuring a more secure future.

Today the third world war is taking place in a globalized world where conflicts involve only certain areas of the planet directly, but in fact involve them all. The closest and most recent example is certainly the war in Ukraine, with its wake of death and destruction, with its attacks on civil infrastructures that cause lives to be lost not only from gunfire and acts of violence, but also from hunger and freezing cold. For its part, the conciliar Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* states that "every act of war directed to the indiscriminate destruction of whole cities or vast areas with their inhabitants is a crime against God and humanity which merits firm and unequivocal condemnation" (No. 80). Nor can we forget that war particularly affects those who are most fragile – children, the elderly, the disabled – and leaves an indelible mark on families. Today, I feel bound to renew my appeal for an immediate end to this senseless conflict, whose effects are felt in entire regions, also outside of Europe, due to its repercussions in the areas of energy and food production, above all in Africa and in the Middle East.

The present third world war fought piecemeal also makes us consider other theatres of tension and conflict. Once more this year, with immense sorrow, we must look to the war-torn land of Syria. The rebirth of that country must come about through needed reforms, including constitutional reforms, in an effort to give hope to the Syrian people, affected by growing poverty, while at the same time ensuring that the international sanctions imposed do not affect the daily life of a people that has already suffered so much.

The Holy See also follows with concern the increase of violence between Palestinians and Israelis, sadly resulting in a number of victims and complete mutual distrust. Jerusalem, a holy city for Jews, Christians and Muslims, is particularly affected by this. The name Jerusalem evokes its vocation to be a city of peace, but sadly, it has become a theatre of conflict. I trust that it can rediscover this vocation to be a location and a symbol of encounter and peaceful coexistence, and that access and liberty of worship in the holy places will continue to be guaranteed and respected in accordance with the *status quo*. At the same time, I express my hope that the authorities of the State of Israel and those of the State of Palestine can recover the courage and determination to dialogue directly for the sake of implementing the two-state solution in all its aspects, in conformity with international law and all the pertinent resolutions of the United Nations.

As you know, at the end of the month, I will at last be able to go as a pilgrim of peace to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in the hope that violence will cease in the east of the country, and that the path of dialogue and the will to work for security and the common good will prevail. My pilgrimage will continue in South Sudan, where I will be accompanied by the Archbishop of Canterbury and by the General Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. Together we desire to unite ourselves to the plea for peace by the country's people and thus contribute to the process of national reconciliation.

Nor must we forget other situations still burdened by the effects of still unresolved conflicts. I think in particular of the situation in the South Caucasus. I urge the parties to respect the cease-fire, and I reiterate that the liberation of military and civil prisoners would prove to be an important step towards a much-desired peace agreement.

I think too of Yemen, where the last October's truce holds, yet many civilians continue to die because of mines, and of Ethiopia, where I trust that the peace process will continue and the international community will reaffirm its commitment to respond to the humanitarian crisis experienced by that country.

I also follow with deep concern the situation in West Africa, increasingly plagued by acts of terrorist violence. I think in particular of the tragic situations endured by the populations of Burkina Faso, Mali and Nigeria, and I express my hope that the processes of transition under way in Sudan, Mali, Chad, Guinea and Burkina Faso will take place in respect for the legitimate aspirations of the populations involved.

I am particularly attentive to the situation of Myanmar, which for two years now has experienced violence, suffering and death. I invite the international community to work to concretize the processes of reconciliation and I urge all the parties involved to undertake anew the path of dialogue, in order to restore hope to the people of that beloved land.

Finally, I think of the Korean Peninsula, and I express my hope that the good will and commitment to concord will not diminish, for the sake of achieving greatly-desired peace and prosperity for the entire Korean people.

All conflicts nonetheless bring to the fore the lethal consequences of a continual recourse to the production of new and ever more sophisticated weaponry, which is sometimes justified by the argument that "peace cannot be assured except on the basis of an equal balance of armaments".[4] There is a need to change this way of thinking and move towards an integral disarmament, since no peace is possible where instruments of death are proliferating.

Dear Ambassadors

At a time of such great conflict, we cannot avoid wondering about how we can weave anew the threads of peace. Where do we begin?

To sketch a response, I would like to take up with you some elements of *Pacem in Terris*, a text that continues to be extremely timely, even though the international context has changed greatly. Saint John XXIII was convinced that peace is possible in respect for four fundamental goods: truth, justice, solidarity and freedom. These serve as the pillars that regulate relationships between individuals and political communities alike.[5]

These dimensions intersect in the fundamental premise that “each human being is a person, possessed of a nature endowed with intelligence and free will. As such, he or she has rights and duties which together flow as a direct consequence of his or her nature. These rights and duties are universal and inviolable, and therefore altogether inalienable”.[6]

Peace in truth

To build peace in truth means above all to respect the human person with his or her “right to life and to physical integrity”,[7] and guaranteeing his or her “freedom in investigating the truth and to freedom of speech and publication”.[8] This requires civil authorities to “make a positive contribution to the creation of an overall climate in which individuals can both safeguard their own rights and fulfil their duties, and can do so readily”.[9]

Despite the commitments undertaken by all states to respect human rights and the fundamental freedoms of each person, even today, in many countries, women are considered second-class citizens. They are subjected to violence and abuse, and are denied the opportunity to study, work, employ their talents, and have access to healthcare and even to food. Whereas when human rights are fully recognized for all, women can offer their unique contribution to the life of society and to be the first allies of peace.

Peace requires before all else the defense of life, a good that today is jeopardized not only by conflicts, hunger and disease, but all too often even in the mother’s womb, through the promotion of an alleged “right to abortion”. No one, however, can claim rights over the life of another human being, especially one who is powerless and thus completely defenceless. For this reason, I appeal to the consciences of men and women of good will, particularly those having political responsibilities, to strive to safeguard the rights of those who are weakest and to combat the throwaway culture that also, tragically, affects the sick, the disabled and the elderly. States have a primary responsibility to ensure that citizens are assisted in every phase of human life, until natural death, and to do so in a way that makes each feel accompanied and cared for, even in the most delicate moments of his or her life.

The right to life is also threatened in those places where the death penalty continues to be imposed, as is the case in these days in Iran, following the recent demonstrations demanding greater respect for the dignity of women. The death penalty cannot be employed for a purported State justice, since it does not constitute a deterrent nor render justice to victims, but only fuels the thirst for vengeance. I appeal, then, for an end to the death penalty, which is always inadmissible since it attacks the inviolability and the dignity of the person, in the legislation of all the countries of the world. We cannot overlook the fact that, up until his or her very last moment, a person can repent and change.

Tragically, we increasingly witness the emergence of a “fear” of life, which translates in many places into a fear of the future and a difficulty in creating families and bringing children into the world. In some contexts, I think for example of Italy, there is a dangerous fall in the birthrate, a veritable demographic winter, which endangers the very future of society. I wish once more to encourage the beloved Italian people to confront with tenacity and hope the challenges of the present time by drawing strength from their religious and cultural roots.

Fears are fueled by ignorance and prejudice, and thus easily degenerate into conflicts. Education is the antidote to this. The Holy See promotes an integral vision of education, in which “the cultivation of religious values is able to keep pace with scientific knowledge and continually advancing technical progress”.[10] The work of education always requires showing integral respect for the person, and for his or her natural physiognomy, and

avoiding the imposition of a novel and confused vision of the human being. This entails integrating the processes of human, spiritual, intellectual and professional growth, thus enabling the person to be set free from multiple forms of enslavement and, in freedom and responsibility, to take his or her place in society. In this regard, it is unacceptable that part of a people should be excluded from education, as is happening to Afghan women.

Education is prey to a crisis made even more acute by the devastating effects of the pandemic and by the troubling geopolitical scenario. In this regard, the Transforming Education Summit convened by the General Secretary of the United Nations, which met in New York last September, provided governments with a unique opportunity to adopt courageous policies aimed at confronting the present “educational catastrophe” and to enact concrete decisions to achieve quality instruction for everyone by 2030. May states find the courage to reverse the embarrassing and disproportionate relationship between public funding for education and expenditures on armaments!

Peace also calls for the universal recognition of religious freedom. It is troubling that people are being persecuted simply because they publicly profess their faith and in many countries religious freedom is limited. About a third of the world’s population lives under these conditions. Along with the lack of religious freedom, there is also persecution for religious reasons. I cannot fail to mention, as certain statistics have shown, that one out of every seven Christians experiences persecution. Here I express my hope that the new *Special Envoy of the European Union for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU*, will be able to dispose of the resources and means necessary to carry out his specific mandate in an appropriate way.

At the same time, we should not overlook the fact that violence and acts of discrimination against Christians are also increasing in countries where the latter are not a minority. Religious freedom is also endangered wherever believers see their ability to express their convictions in the life of society restricted in the name of a misguided understanding of inclusiveness. Religious freedom, which cannot be reduced simply to freedom of worship, is one of the minimum requisites for a dignified way of life. Governments have the duty to protect this right and to ensure that each person, in a way compatible with the common good, enjoys the opportunity to act in accordance with his or her own conscience, also in the public sphere and in the exercise of their profession.

Religion provides genuine opportunities for dialogue and encounter between different peoples and cultures. The Timor-Leste Parliament bore witness to this in its unanimous decision to approve the Document on Human Fraternity that I signed with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar in 2019 and by including the Document in the programmes of the nation’s educational and cultural institutions. I was able to experience this personally during my visit to Kazakhstan last September on the occasion of the Seventh Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, with whom I shared a number of concerns about today’s world and saw first-hand that religions are “not a problem, but part of the solution for a more harmonious life in society”.^[11] Equally significant was my visit to Bahrain, where a further step forward was taken in the journey of Christian and Muslim believers.

Attempts are often made to blame religion for the various conflicts within our human family, and deplorable efforts are sometimes made to exploit religion for purely political ends. This runs counter to the Christian understanding, which sees the root of every conflict in an imbalance present in the human heart: in the words of the Gospel, “from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts” (*Mk 7:21*). Christianity is a force for peace, since it encourages conversion and the exercise of virtue.

Peace in justice

Building peace requires pursuing justice. The 1962 crisis was averted thanks to the contribution of men and women of good will who were able to devise suitable solutions that prevented political tension from degenerating into an actual war. It was also due to the conviction that disputes could be resolved within the framework of international law and through those organizations, principally the United Nations, that were established in the aftermath of the Second World War and encouraged multilateral diplomacy. In the words of Saint John XXIII, “the United Nations Organization has the special aim of maintaining and strengthening peace between nations, and of encouraging and assisting friendly relations between them, based on the principles of equality, mutual

respect, and extensive cooperation in every field of human endeavour”.[12]

The current conflict in Ukraine has made all the more evident the crisis that has long affected the multilateral system, which needs a profound rethinking if it is to respond adequately to the challenges of our time. This demands a reform of the bodies that allow it to function effectively, so that they can be truly representative of the needs and sensitivities of all peoples, and avoid procedures that give greater weight to some, to the detriment of others. It is not a matter of creating coalitions, but of providing opportunities for everyone to be partners in dialogue.

Great good can be achieved by working together. We need only think of the praiseworthy initiatives that aim at reducing poverty, assisting migrants, combating climate change, promoting nuclear disarmament and providing humanitarian aid. Yet, in recent times, the various international forums have seen an increase in polarization and attempts to impose a single way of thinking, which hinders dialogue and marginalizes those who see things differently. There is a risk of drifting into what more and more appears as an ideological totalitarianism that promotes intolerance towards those who dissent from certain positions claimed to represent “progress”, but in fact would appear to lead to an overall regression of humanity, with the violation of freedom of thought and freedom of conscience.

In addition, more and more resources have been spent on imposing forms of ideological colonization, especially on poorer countries, and directly connecting the provision of economic aid to the acceptance of such ideologies. This has strained debate within international organizations, precluding fruitful exchanges and often leading to the temptation to address issues independently and, consequently, on the basis of power relations.

During my visit to Canada last July, I was able to experience first-hand the consequences of colonization, especially in my meetings with the indigenous peoples who suffered from the assimilation policies of the past. Attempts made to impose alien ways of thinking upon other cultures open the way to sharp confrontation and at times even violence.

In the name of that solidarity “born of the consciousness that we are responsible for the fragility of others as we strive to build a common future”,[13] we must return to dialogue, mutual listening and negotiation, and foster shared responsibility and cooperation in the pursuit of the common good. Efforts to preclude or veto discussion will only fuel further divisions.

Peace in solidarity

In my annual *Message for the World Day of Peace*, I noted that the Covid-19 pandemic left in its wake “the realization that we all need one another”.[14] The paths of peace are paths of solidarity, for no one can be saved alone. We live in a world so interconnected that, in the end, the actions of each have consequences for all.

Here, I wish to draw attention to three areas in which this interconnection uniting today’s human family is particularly felt, and where greater solidarity is especially needed.

The first area is that of migration, which concerns entire regions of the world. Often it is an issue of individuals fleeing from war and persecution, and who face immense dangers. Then too, “every human being has the right to freedom of movement... to emigrate to other countries and take up residence there”[15] and everyone should have the possibility of returning to his or her own country of origin.

Migration is one issue where we cannot “move ahead at random”. To understand this, we need but look at the Mediterranean, which has become a massive tomb. Those lost lives are emblematic of the shipwreck of civilization, as I noted during my trip to Malta last spring. In Europe, there is a pressing need to reinforce the regulatory framework through the approval of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, so as to put in place suitable policies for accepting, accompanying, promoting and integrating migrants. At the same time, solidarity

requires that the burden of the operations needed to aid and care for the shipwrecked does not fall entirely on the people of the main landing points.

The second area concerns the economy and work. The crises of recent years have highlighted the limits of an economic system aimed more at creating profit for a few than at providing opportunities for the benefit of the many; an economy more focused on money than on the production of useful goods. This has created more fragile businesses and unjust labour markets. There is a need to restore dignity to business and to work, combating all forms of exploitation that end up treating workers as a commodity, for “without dignified work and just remuneration, young people will not truly become adults and inequality will increase”.^[16]

The third area is the care of our common home. We are continually witnessing the results of climate change and their serious effects on the lives of entire peoples, either by the devastation they produce, as in the case of Pakistan in the areas that experienced flooding, where outbreaks of disease borne by stagnant water continue to increase; or in vast areas of the Pacific Ocean, where global warming has caused great damage to fishing, which is the basis of daily life for entire populations; or in Somalia and the entire Horn of Africa, where drought is causing severe famine; and in recent days too, in the United States, where sudden and intense blizzard conditions caused numerous deaths.

Last summer, the Holy See chose to accede to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, as a means of lending its moral support to the efforts of all states to cooperate, in accordance with their responsibilities and respective capabilities, in offering an effective and appropriate response to the challenges posed by climate change. It is to be hoped that the steps taken at COP27 with the adoption of the Sharm el-Sheikh Implementation Plan, however limited, can raise everyone’s awareness of an urgent issue that can no longer be ignored. Promising goals, however, were agreed upon during the recent United Nations Biodiversity Conference (COP15) held in Montreal last month.

Peace in freedom

Finally, building peace requires that there be no place for “violation of the freedom, integrity and security of other nations, no matter what may be their territorial extension or their capacity for defense”.^[17] This can come about only if, in every single community, there does not prevail that culture of oppression and aggression in which our neighbour is regarded as an enemy to attack, rather than a brother or sister to welcome and embrace.^[18]

It is a source of concern that, in many parts of the world, there is a weakening of democracy and of the breadth of freedom that it enables, albeit with all the limitations of any human system. It is women or ethnic minorities who often pay the price for this, as too do entire societies in which unrest leads to social tensions and even armed clashes.

In many areas, a sign of the weakening of democracy is heightened political and social polarization, which does not help to resolve the urgent problems of citizens. I think of the various countries of the Americas where political crises are laden with tensions and forms of violence that exacerbate social conflicts. In particular, I would mention recent events in Peru and in the latest hours in Brazil, and the worrying situation in Haiti, where steps are finally being taken to address the political crisis that has been underway for some time. There is a constant need to overcome partisan ways of thinking and to work for the promotion of the common good.

I have also closely followed the situation in Lebanon, which is still awaiting the election of a new President of the Republic. I trust that political leaders will make every effort to enable the country to recover from the dramatic economic and social situation it is presently experiencing.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

How wonderful it would be if, just once, we were to gather simply to thank the Lord Almighty for his constant blessings, without having to list all the tragic events plaguing our world. If I may quote once more the words of

John XXIII, “we nonetheless remain hopeful that, by establishing contact with one another and by a policy of negotiation, nations will come to a better recognition of the natural ties that bind them together as men and women. We are hopeful, too, that they will come to a fairer realization of one of the cardinal duties deriving from our common nature: namely, that love, not fear, must dominate the relationships between individuals and between nations. It is principally characteristic of love that it draws men and women together in all sorts of ways, sincerely united in the bonds of mind and matter; and this is a union from which countless blessings can flow”.^[19]

With these sentiments, I renew to you, and to the countries you represent, my heartfelt good wishes for the new year.

Thank you!

[1] Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* (19 March 2022), Art. 1.

[2] On 11 April 1963. Cf. AAS 55 (1963), 257-304.

[3] *Pacem in Terris* (ed. Carlen), 111.

[4] *Pacem in Terris*, 110.

[5] Cf. *ibid.*, 85.

[6] *Ibid.*, 9.

[7] *Ibid.*, 11.

[8] *Ibid.*, 12.

[9] *Ibid.*, 63.

[10] *Ibid.*, 153.

[11] *Address to the Plenary Session of the VII Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions*, Astana, 14 September 2022.

[12] *Pacem in Terris*, 142.

[13] Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* (3 October 2020), 115.

[14] *Message for the 2023 World Day of Peace* (8 December 2022), 3.

[15] *Pacem in Terris*, 25.

[16] *Address to Participants in the “Economy of Francesco” Event*, Assisi, 24 September 2022.

[17] *Pacem in Terris*, 124. Cf. PIUS XII, *Christmas Radio Message*, 24 December 1941.

[18] Cf. *Address to the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See*, 22 March 2013.

[19] *Pacem in Terris*, 129.
