PACEM IN TERRIS, STILL CURRENT AFTER FIFTY YEARS

Vatican City, 3 October 2013 (VIS) - “Looking at our current situation, I wonder if we have learnt the lessons of 'Pacem in terris'. I ask myself whether the words ‘justice’ and ‘solidarity’ exist only in our dictionary, or if we indeed all work towards making them a reality”, said the Pope, in an address to participants in the meeting promoted by the Pontifical Council “Justice and Peace” to commemorate fifty years since the publication of the encyclical of the future saint John XXIII.

“Pacem in terris” (“Peace on earth”), as Francis noted, was written in the most critical period of the Cold War, when humanity feared finding itself at the brink of a worldwide atomic conflict due to the protracted confrontation between the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. With this encyclical, John XXIII launched a dramatic appeal for peace to world leaders. “It was a cry to mankind, but also a plea to Heaven. The dialogue that opened, with some difficulty, between the two great opposing blocs led them to overcome this phase during the pontificate of the other blessed pope, John Paul II, and to open up space for freedom and dialogue. The seeds of peace sown by blessed John XXIII bore fruit but, despite the fall of walls and barriers, the world continues to hunger for peace and the appeal made in 'Pacem in terris' retains a powerful current relevance”.

John XXIII's encyclical confirms that the foundation for building peace consists in “the divine origin of the human being, of society and authority, which requires individuals, families, the various social groups and States to live in relations based on justice and solidarity. It is therefore the task of all men to build peace, following Jesus Christ's example, and by two routes: the promotion and practice of justice … and by contributing … to full human development, according to the logic of solidarity”.

The consequence of looking to the divine origin of the person, of society and of authority itself is none other than “the value of the person, the dignity of each human being, always to be promoted, respected and protected. And as blessed John XXIII states, these are not only the principal civil and political rights to be guaranteed; every person should also be granted effective access to essential means of subsistence: food, water, shelter, healthcare, education and the possibility of forming and supporting a family. These aims should be an absolute priority for national and international action, and their fulfilment sets the parameters by which such action may be judged. Lasting peace for all depends on this”.

“Certainly, the encyclical states objectives and elements that are now form part of our way of thinking”, stated the Pope, “but it remains to be asked: do they correspond to reality? Fifty years on, do they find confirmation in the development of our societies?”.

“Pacem in terris’ does not intend to state that it is the Church's task to give concrete directions on themes that, in their complexity, should be left open to free discussion. On political, economic and social matters there is not the dogma to indicate practical solutions, but rather to favour dialogue, listening, patience, respect for others, sincerity and also willingness to revise one’s opinion. The basic aim of John XXIII's call for peace in 1962 was to orientate international debate according to these virtues”.

The fundamental principles of the encyclical may be applied to a series of new current situations, including those under analysis in these days by the participants in the meeting organised by the Pontifical Council “Justice and Peace”: education, the influence of mass media communication, access to the earth's resources, the
application of the results of biological research, the arms race, and national and international security measures. “The worldwide economic crisis, which is a serious symptom of the lack of respect for man and for the truth with which decisions have been made by governments and by citizens, provides us with clear evidence. ‘Pacem in terris’ traces a direct line from the peace that is to be constructed in the heart of mankind to a rethinking of our model of development and action at all levels, in order that our world become a world of peace. I wonder”, concluded Francis, “if we are ready to accept the invitation”.

At the end of the meeting, the Pope spoke about the tragic shipwreck this morning near the Italian island of Lampedusa. The stricken boat was carrying over three hundred immigrants, of whom more than 90 lost their lives and approximately 250 are still missing.

“Speaking of peace, speaking of the inhuman worldwide economic crisis, which is a serious symptom of the lack of respect for mankind, I cannot neglect to mention with great suffering the many victims of yet another tragic shipwreck today in the sea of Lampedusa. The word shame springs to mind. Shame! Let us pray together for those who have lost their lives – men, women, children, for their families and for all refugees. Let us unite our strength in order that there be no more tragedies of this type! Only decisive collaboration by all of us can help to prevent this”.

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