

## Reflection on Pope John XXIII's Encyclical "*Pacem in Terris*"

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On April 11, 1963, during the Solemnity of Holy Thursday, Pope John XXIII promulgated his profound encyclical "*Pacem in Terris*", Peace on Earth. It coincided with the Gospel of Saint John, which is proclaimed at the Holy Thursday Liturgy, where Jesus washes the feet of his disciples; the act of a servant, but in truth the symbol of love. After this symbolic action, Jesus commands his disciples to love one another. As a priest, Pope John XXIII witnessed the horrors of World War I and as an Apostolic Delegate the horrors of World War II.

As Pope, in 1963 he was in the midst of the great Cold War that had split Europe in two, and threatened to escalate into another world war. In addressing the encyclical to "all men of good will", Pope John XXIII publicly acknowledged that all people desire peace, not just Catholics, "*Pacem in Terris*" is not a letter on the Just War Theory.

That term was never mentioned, deliberately I believe since history has shown it to be misunderstood, and therefore misapplied. Misunderstood: because people/governments forget that first and foremost is the overriding presumption against war. Misapplied: it is used too often in a mechanical way, a hypothetical checklist of reasoning for governments to declare war. To Pope John XXIII, peace is more than the absence of armed conflict. Peace is harmony, the tranquility of order, e.g. Isaiah chapter 11 vs. 1-9.

For this harmony, tranquility of order to prevail Pope John XXIII said the world must accept one fundamental principle: each individual is a person endowed with intelligence and free will and has rights and duties. These rights and duties are universal and inviolable and therefore altogether inalienable. The human person is not an object to be used by another and then disposed when no longer useful. Each person is made in the Image and Likeness of God, e.g. **Genesis chapter 1 vs. 27** and in each person dwells the breath of God, e.g. **Genesis chapter 2 vs. 7**. This encyclical promulgated the concept of Human Rights, which has come a long way since then! Pope John XXIII listed these as the Rights of a Human Person: right to live, to bodily integrity and to the means necessary for the proper development of life, particularly food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest and social services, to be looked after in the event of ill health, disability, widowhood, old age, enforced unemployment, the right to a good education and the right to exercise his/her faith, the right to be accurately informed about public events. This is an impressive list of rights! But we know they are not being enjoyed by all within our own country much less in the developing world. While Pope John XXIII also stated that the human person has a primary duty to recognize every person as an equal, history is replete with humanity's failures, and thus we have ongoing wars, poverty, slavery, and genocide.

Pope John XXIII called for the general welfare of society. He challenged governments to avoid subservience to the rich and powerful (the role of lobbyist and money in our own political system), rather encouraging greater attention to the weak, incapable of defending their rights and asserting their legitimate interests. He called on rich nations to avoid exploiting political or economic domination over underdeveloped ones, and listed their responsibility to become leaders for universal social progress. How does this fit in today when U.S. Foreign Aid is limited to only a few countries, and is often, military in nature.

His encyclical can also be used to question transnational companies and the profits they earn on

the backs of oppressed workers. The common good of any one nation cannot be divorced from the common good of the Human Family.

Pope John XXIII was deeply distressed and troubled by the amount of intellectual and material resources devoted to the production of destructive weapons, which not only kill people but also burden their own citizens because arms development priorities negate social needs. Forty-one years later this concern of Pope John XXIII is still valid. In the US today, too many have no health care, too many cannot afford their medications, our schools are crumbling literally and figuratively, too many unemployed or employed at jobs that do not allow them to truly support their families, yet our Defense Establishment demands we spend more money and expend more intellectual capital to produce "better weapons" that continue the cycle of violence. As Pope John XXIII reminds us in ***Pacem in Terris*** we must counteract the common belief that peace can be assured by an equal balance of armaments. Peace is based on mutual trust and respect for the dignity of every human person. Pope John XXIII called all Catholics to work for peace, to be a nucleus of love, a leaven of the whole mass.

We must all ask ourselves how do we safeguard and promote the dignity of others: our fellow family members, our co-workers, the cashier at the supermarket, and even the person who cut us off on the road.

Do we fervently pray that the Holy Spirit's gift of peace will reside in our heart and direct all our actions?

