

True Peace Comes from Respect for Human Rights

A Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Bishops of Uganda to all Catholics and People of Goodwill in Uganda
January 1999

Greetings

We greet, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, all our brothers in the priesthood, brothers and sisters in religious life, the lay faithful and all fellow-believers in Jesus Christ. We greet all peace-loving Ugandans with whom we share the same faith in the Almighty God, the Creator of us all. May peace be with you all, may it be within all our borders and our region.

Occasions and Aims

We are prompted by many factors to write this message to fellow Christians and all Ugandans of goodwill. Each occasion invites each one of us to do something positive in the interests of peace, human rights and integrity.

The 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)

As most of you may by now know, the 10th December, 1948 nations and peoples of the world commemorated 50 years since the proclamation of the UDHR on 10 December, 1948 by the United Nations. This declaration of the fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual is one of the most significant documents in the modern world. Its aim was and still is to ensure peace in every nation and among nations through the strict observance of human rights. The rights contained in this document have been incorporated in each of our Constitutions since 1962. Yet these rights have remained on paper. Many Ugandans have not taken the trouble to know them. Most of our political leaders have ignored them. The call we make to everyone is to know these rights, to insist that they are respected; those in authority to take all the necessary steps to observe and defend them. If this is done, and each one plays his or her rightful role in their protection and promotion, peace will come, as a result.

The Celebration of Christmas, 1998

Each Christmas brings a special message to the followers of Christ. The one whose Birth we annually celebrate is Christ, the Son of God, the king of Peace, the reconciler of people with God the Father and people among themselves. He is the one who calls us to be peace-makers (Mat. 5/9). As we celebrate this year's Christmas, let our thoughts be on peace and how to make it a reality in all parts of our nation and region. Let us be remindful of those without peace, suffering under armed conflicts, turned into refugees or displaced people.

May the Prince of Peace unite us in this mission of ensuring peace and stability for everyone.
The World Day of Peace, 1st January, 1999

Since 1968 the entire Catholic Church and many other organisations and churches celebrate each 1st of January as a day of prayer for peace and new commitment to peace. There is no better way to begin the year than with thoughts of peace and programs and commitment for peace. This is what we wish every Christian and Ugandan on the 1st January, 1999.

Presence of Armed Conflicts in Parts of Our Nation

As we celebrate Christmas and enter the new year, we should never lose sight that many Ugandans in parts of the north and west of our country are terribly suffering from armed conflicts and absence of security. Some have no food or shelter. Families are scattered. Hopes

are shattered. Joy is absent. Yet these are our brothers and sisters in God, our fellow Ugandan citizens. We need to be mindful of their needs and anxieties. We are obliged to fully share in their quest for peace.

Pope's Theme for Peace on 1st January, 1999

The theme given by the Pope for this coming year is: *Respect for Human Rights is the Secret of True Peace*. It is an important theme for every person and nation, and especially ours. We are called upon to reflect on this challenge of respecting human rights in order to generate true peace.

The Catholic Church and Human Rights

Long before the United Nations came up with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, Pope Leo XIII in 1891 had come up with *Rerum Novarum* (On the Conditions and rights of workers) and Pope Pius XI in 1931 had strongly advocated the necessity of constructing society on respect for human rights in his letter *Quadragesimo Anno* (Reconstructing the new Social Order). It was however in 1963 that Pope John XXIII in his letter, Peace on Earth came out most powerfully on the full range of fundamental rights and freedom of every person. He expounded all these rights, recognizing them to be 'universal, inviolable and inalienable' (No.3). The Pope concluded that respect for human rights would guarantee peace and harmony in the world, among nations and in each society.

Centrality of the Social Doctrine

Ever since 1963, the Catholic Church continues to develop its social doctrine on peace, human rights, development and the special care and concern for the vulnerable groups in society. This message is clear in Vatican II teaching, the regular teaching from the Pope, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, the regular synods and the social teaching of national Episcopal Conferences and individual diocesan bishops and synods. The appeal we have for all Catholics and Ugandans of good will is to be committed in knowing, observing and promoting the rights of everyone in order to have true peace in our nation and region.

Violation of Human Rights as the Main Cause of Armed Conflicts

Once the rights of wives or husbands or children are violated, domestic violence occurs. Violation of political and civil rights often turns into armed conflicts and instability. Violation of citizens' economic rights, especially through corruption, leaves society bewildered and unpeaceful in mind.

Such is the lesson we should have learnt, through bitter struggles in our country during the past 36 years of independence. Peace demands respect for the self-determination, territorial integrity and sovereignty of each nation. Peace demands just laws which are equally applied to each and everyone. Peace demands full recognition of equality of every person and non-discrimination against any person. Peace requires a life of ethical principles and integrity among leaders and members of society. Peace can only be built on proper attitudes and strategies for peaceful co-existence and peaceful resolution of any conflict.

Disturbing Questions

Why has peace eluded us for so long? How is it that after the many years of war, conflicts, instability and the sufferings therein, we have allowed armed conflicts to continue in parts of our nation? How is it that as a nation we seem to have failed to resolve our conflicts peacefully? Have we no wisdom and the correct approach to bring about peace in all parts of the nation? Do

we feel we have done all that is possible to make peace? Can we allow ourselves to become pessimists that peace can never come?

Critical Re-examination

Every leader and citizen of this nation should pose him/herself the above questions and attempt an honest response. Peace has eluded us because there is among us as a nation a weak commitment to it and to the powerful means which restores it namely: genuine negotiations, wise mediation, roundtable discussion and use of all diplomatic ways which lead to peace. There are people both inside and outside the country who economically gain from the armed conflicts, either through sale of deadly weapons or promotion of unethical businesses. There are still many people who do not, fully appreciate the use of non-violent means to end conflicts or prevent them before they occur. Many people leave the mission of peace-making to only a few categories of people, instead of understanding it as our common mission and responsibility.

Our Message and Stand

As religious leaders of the catholic church in Uganda and moral teachers in our nation, we discern with dismay and apprehension the suffering endured by so many Ugandans because of those prolonged armed conflicts. We are extremely worried by the danger which threatens our entire region with war. We consider it our religious, moral and ethical duty to raise our voices and warn everybody concerned to beware lest we be consumed by the flames of war.

We want to state once again and as clearly as possible that *war is one of the worst evils that can befall people. War is the greatest enemy to the sacred human life, human dignity, human solidarity, human development and happiness.* War is one of the main causes of violation of human rights. Children are abducted and abused; women are raped and harassed; property is destroyed; families separated; people starved and forced into displacement. War undermines morality, dehumanises people, creates and perpetuates hatred, divisions, feelings of revenge and disunity. Because of this we should be opposed to war in any form.

We Stand for Peace

We stand for peace in all parts of our country and in the region. We call upon everyone to peace. We believe peace is a gift from God to people who desire and are prepared to work for and defend peace. Peace is a basic Christian value preached by our founder, Jesus Christ and insisted on by his Church. Peace is an essential pre-requisite in building nations and relationships among peoples and individuals. Peace is the great value every nation and people must cherish, work for and guarantee. Every human being is called by God to be a peacemaker. Leaders of nations have a primary responsibility of protecting and promoting peace, stability and security for all their citizens in every part of their nations. *We believe strongly that the most powerful means of bringing peace about where it is absent is through extensive use of all the peaceful means available.* We believe that we all need a change of heart from selfishness to genuine interests and well-being of others.

Peace is Possible

We believe that peace is possible in all parts of our nation and in the region, if, we, the citizens and the leaders put all our energy, mind, work on peace, beginning with those areas where peace is absent. With wars, small and big, going on in our nation and region for a long time, we run the risk of getting used to them. Time may come when many will no longer be aware of what is right and what is wrong.

It is important to re-state what followers of all religions believe: *'You shall not kill'*. Every person is created in the image and likeness of God. Every human person is dear to God. For this reason, every human person has inherent rights, centred on the right to life. These ought to be respected

by everyone. Once respect for the human person, his or her dignity and equality is done, wars and conflicts may one day become memories of the past.

We believe peace is possible because wars are people-made. Once people decide for peace, and acquire attitudes of peace, tolerance and reconciliation, wars will be no more. Peace is possible because we have faculties of reason for discussion, negotiation, mutual acceptance and principled compromise.

Peace is possible because the majority of people are for it. Once this majority becomes united to work for peace and each one does what he or she can, peace will be achieved. We have, therefore, Christian optimism that peace is not only possible but will come to all parts of Uganda once we all become committed to it.

We Should Never Despair

For a follower of Christ there is no place for despair where war seems to be defeating peace, where evil is battling to defeat what is good, right and godly. A feeling of helplessness and hopelessness among many who have witnessed war for 12 years should not be entertained. It is at moments such as those that God's power should be most trusted and prayed for to break the deadlocks and bring about the true peace we are searching for. Call to renewed efforts at peace-making.

We call, once again, upon our government, the leaders of our nation, and all the groups fighting government and the people of Uganda to heed the cries of the people and give peace a real chance. Many efforts tried in the past have failed. We need to examine why they have failed and plan new efforts. We call upon all followers of Christ and all Ugandans of goodwill to play a leading part in peace-making, using all the skills, contacts and strategies at their disposal for this noble cause. We commit ourselves to this cause of peace and manifest our willingness to play any part desirable for the attainment of peace

Time for Special Prayers for Peace

During this Christmastide and throughout the new year, we should pray more earnestly that God touches the hearts of those responsible for these armed conflicts and those in positions which can cause peace to come, to do whatever is possible to see peace reign in all parts of Uganda. Our thoughts in 1999, the year of our loving Father, should center on peace in our hearts, families, communities and the entire country and region.

Our Solidarity with All who Suffer due to War

To all people of God in Uganda who suffer due to war in Gulu, Kitgum, Lira, Kasese, Bundibugyo and Kabarole districts and on the borders of Congo, we wish to express our heartfelt sympathy. Never think for a moment that you are not dear to our hearts. Never think we ever forget you in your sufferings. We pray for you always. We know what you are going through. We know what you have lost and are still losing, beginning from your dear ones to property. Our consolation can never be sufficient. We call upon God, to be with you, to show you how much He still loves and cares for you. Continue to trust Him and cooperate with Him in the search for peace. We call on all our fellow Christians and people of goodwill to show generosity, through donation of the necessary items for life, to all those who suffer.

Call for Penance and Action for Peace

We propose to all Catholics to make this Christmastide and the entire New Year a period of penance, devout prayers and acts of generosity as we implore God to establish His Kingdom of peace throughout this country, in our entire region and throughout the world. We call upon all Catholic Dioceses, institutions and communities to make concrete and appropriate programs for

the realisation of this urgent and important appeal we make to you. We urge every Ugandan to be committed to such actions, attitudes, plans and programs which can bring true peace to our country and region during this new year.

Conclusion

As we desire peace, let us learn to respect the rights of everyone, every group and the entire society. As we build peace, let us construct it on the pillars of human dignity, equality, tolerance and reconciliation. It is then that we shall deserve to be called sons and daughters of God.

May the Lord bless you and keep you

May the Lord let his face shine on you and be gracious to you

May the Lord uncover his face to you and bring you PEACE (Numbers 6:23-25)

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