



# The Holy See

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***MESSAGGE OF HIS HOLINESS PAUL VI  
TO THE FIRST SPECIAL SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY  
DEDICATED TO DISARMAMENT, DELIVERED ON 6 JUNE 1978 BY  
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SECRETARY OF THE COUNCIL FOR THE PUBLIC AFFAIRS OF THE CHURCH\****

On the occasion of the Special Session which the General Assembly of the United Nations has decided to devote to the problem of disarmament, there exists a widespread expectation, and its echo has reached us. Does not the Holy See have something to say on a subject of such burning relevance and such vital importance for the future of the world?

Without being a member of your Organization, the Holy See follows its many activities with greatest attention and with profound understanding, sharing its preoccupations and its generous intentions. We cannot remain insensitive to an expectation such as this.

We therefore very willingly accept the opportunity that has been given to us to address once again a message to the General Assembly of the United Nations, as we had the honour to do, in person, in that already distant October of 1965. The present circumstance is in effect absolutely exceptional in the life of your Organization and for the whole of humanity.

1. We come to you once again today, in the spirit and with the sentiments of our first meeting, the remembrance of which is always vivid and dear to our heart. Please accept our respectful and cordial greeting.

We come to you as the representative of a Church that is made up of hundreds of millions of people spread throughout all the continents. But at the same time we have the consciousness of giving a voice to the aspirations and hopes of other hundreds of millions of people, Christians and non-Christians, believers and non-believers: we would like to gather them together, as in an immense choir ascending towards God and towards those who have received from God the responsibility for the destiny of the nations.

2. Our message is meant to be, first of all, a message of congratulations for your having resolved to confront decisively, in this lofty forum, the problem of disarmament. Yours is an act of courage and wisdom. It is the response to an extremely grave and urgent need.

Our message is also a message of understanding. We know the exceptional difficulties that you must face, and we fully realize the weight of your responsibilities, but we have confidence in the seriousness and sincerity of your commitment.

Our message is meant to be above all – if you permit me to say so – a message of encouragement.

3. The peoples are manifesting such interest in the theme of your discussion because they believe that to disarm is, first of all, to deprive war of its means: peace is their dream, their deepest aspiration.

The desire for peace is also the noble and profound motive that has brought you to this Assembly. But, in the eyes of statesmen, the problem of disarmament presents itself under a much more articulated and much more complex form.

Faced with the situation as it is, the statesman asks himself, not without reason, if it is just and if it is possible not to recognize the right of the members of the International Community to make their own provisions for the legitimate defence, and hence to procure the means necessary for such a goal.

And the temptation is strong to ask oneself if the best possible protection for peace does not in fact continue to be ensured, basically, by the old system of the balance of forces between the different States or groups of States. A disarmed peace is always exposed to danger; its very weakness is an incentive to attack it.

Against this background one can and must – it is said – develop, in a parallel way, efforts aimed on the one hand at perfecting the methods and bodies for preventing and resolving peacefully conflicts and confrontations; and on the other hand to render less inhuman those wars that are not successfully avoided. At the same time, one can and must endeavour to reduce mutually the arsenals of war, in a way that does not destroy the existing balances, but lessens the temptation to have recourse to weapons and lightens the enormous military budgets.

Such seems to be the path of political realism. It claims justification in reason and experience. To go further seems to many people a useless or indeed dangerous effort.

4. Let us say at once that all substantial progress towards improving the mechanism of preventing conflicts, towards eliminating particularly dangerous and inhumane weapons, and towards

lowering the level of armaments and military expenditure, will be hailed by us as an extremely valuable and beneficial result.

But this is still not enough. The question of war and peace, in fact, presents itself today in new terms.

It is not that the principles have changed. Aggression by one State against another was illicit yesterday just as it is today. Even in the past, an "act of war directed to the indiscriminate destruction of whole cities or vast regions with their inhabitants" was "a crime against God and humanity itself" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 80). And war, although one must honour the heroism of those who sacrifice their lives to the service of their native land - has always been, in itself, a supremely irrational and morally unacceptable means of regulating the relationships between States, though without prejudice to the right of legitimate defence.

But today, war has at its disposal means which have "immeasurably magnified its horrors and wickedness" (*ibid.*).

The logic underlying the quest for the balances of power impels each of the adversaries to seek to ensure a certain margin of superiority, for fear of being left at a disadvantage. This logic, in conjunction with the amazing progress of humanity in the spheres of science and technology, has led to the discovery of ever more sophisticated and powerful instruments of destruction. These instruments have accumulated, and, by virtue of an almost autonomous process, they tend to self-perpetuate unendingly, in a continual escalation both in quantity and quality, with an immense expenditure of men and means, to the point of reaching today a potential amply capable of wiping out all life on the planet.

Developments in nuclear armament make up a special chapter, and certainly the most typical and striking one, of this quest for security through the balance of power and fear. But can one forget the "progress" that has also been made and that, alas, might still be made in the sphere of other arms of mass destruction or with the capacity to produce particularly damaging effects – arms that are considered to have, for that very reason, a special power of "dissuasion"?

But even though the "balance of terror" has been able to avoid the worst and may do so for some time more, to think that the arms race can thus go on indefinitely, without causing a catastrophe, would be a tragic illusion.

Certainly, the subject above all concerns, at least directly, the Great Powers and the countries forming their blocs, but it would be very hard for the other countries not to feel concerned.

Humanity therefore finds itself forced to turn back on itself and ask itself where it is going, or rather, what it is plunging into. It is forced above all to ask whether the point of departure is not

mistaken and should therefore be radically altered.

The reasons for a change of this kind – whether moral reasons, or reasons of security or of particular and general interest – are certainly not lacking.

But, is it possible to find a substitute for the security – however uncertain and costly it may be – that each is trying to ensure by acquiring the means of his own defence?

5. Few problems appear today so inevitable and difficult as the problem of disarmament. Few problems respond so much to the needs and expectations of the peoples, and at the same time so readily provoke mistrust, scepticism and discouragement. It seems to be a problem situated at the level of a prophetic vision open to the hopes of the future. And yet one cannot really face this problem without remaining solidly based upon the hard and concrete reality of the present.

Disarmament therefore calls for an extraordinary effort of intelligence and political will on the part of all the members of the great family of nations, in order to reconcile demands that seem to contradict one another and cancel one another out.

The problem of disarmament is substantially a problem of mutual trust. It would therefore be largely useless to seek possible solutions of the technical aspects of disarmament if one were to fail to cure at its source the situation that serves as fertile soil for the proliferation of armaments.

Even the terror of new weapons runs the risk of being ineffective, to the extent that other guarantees are not found for the security of States and for the solution of the problems capable of bringing those States into confrontation on points vital to them.

If one wishes – as one must – to make substantial progress along the road to disarmament, it is therefore essential to find means of replacing "the balance of terror" by "the balance of trust".

But, in practice, is it possible? And to what extent? Certainly, a first step consists in trying to improve with good faith and good will the atmosphere and the reality of international relations, especially between the Great Powers and the blocs of States. In this way the fears and suspicions that today divide them can lessen, and it will be easier for them to believe in the real desire for mutual peace. It involves a long and complicated effort, but one that we would like to encourage with all our power.

Detente in the real sense, that is to say, founded upon a proven willingness to exercise mutual respect, is a condition for setting in motion a true process of disarmament. In turn, balanced and properly supervised disarmament measures assist detente to progress and grow stronger.

However, the international situation is too exposed to the ever possible changes and caprices of

tragically free will. Solid international trust therefore also presupposes structures that are objectively suitable for guaranteeing, by peaceful means, security and respect for or recognition of everyone's rights, against always possible bad will. In other words, such trust presupposes an international order capable of giving everyone what each is today seeking to ensure for himself by the possession and threat of arms, if not by their use.

But is there not a risk of thus slipping into utopianism? We think that we can and must resolutely answer no. It is true that the task in question is extremely arduous, but it is not beyond the tenacity and wisdom of people who are aware of their own responsibilities before humanity and history – above all before God. This means the need for a higher religious awareness. Even those who do not take God into account can and must recognize the fundamental exigencies of the moral law that God has written in the depths of human hearts and that must govern people's mutual relationships on the basis of truth, justice and love.

At a time when humanity's horizons are widening far beyond the confines of our planet, we refuse to believe that man, animated by such an awareness, is not capable of exorcising the demon of war which threatens to destroy him, even if this demands of him immense efforts and a reasonable renunciation of old-fashioned concepts that continue to set peoples and nations at odds.

6. In making our own and expressing to you the hope and anguish of humanity aspiring to the peace it needs, we are aware that the path which must lead to the coming of a new international order capable of eliminating wars and the causes of wars and thus making arms superfluous cannot in any case be as short as we would like it to be.

It will therefore be indispensable in the meantime to plan and promote a strategy of peace and disarmament – a step-by-step strategy but one that is at the same time almost impatient, a strategy that is balanced yet courageous – always keeping our eyes and our wills fixed on the final goal of general and complete disarmament.

We do not have the competence or authority to indicate to you the methods and mechanisms for such a strategy, which in any case presupposes the setting up of reliable and effective international controls systems. We believe however that there is common agreement with you on the need to lay down some principles in the effort aimed at halting the arms race and reducing the amount of existing arms.

a) Nuclear weapons certainly have first place: they are the most fearsome menace with which mankind is burdened. We appreciate very much the initiatives that have already been taken in this area, but we must encourage all countries, particularly those which have the chief responsibility for it, to continue and to develop these initiatives, with the final goal of completely eliminating the atomic arsenal. At the same time means must be found for giving all peoples access to the immense resources of nuclear energy for their peaceful use.

b) Next comes already existing or possible weapons of mass destruction, such as chemical, radiological, and all other such weapons, and those that strike indiscriminately or, to use an expression that is itself rather cruel, weapons with excessively and needlessly cruel effects.

c) Mention must also be made of trade in conventional weapons, which are, so to speak, the principal fuel for local or limited wars. In comparison with the immensity of the catastrophe that a war resorting to the whole arsenal of strategic and other weapons would mean for the world or for whole continents, such conflicts may seem of minor importance, if not negligible.

But the destruction and suffering that they cause to the peoples that are their victims are no less than those that would be brought about on quite a different scale by a general conflict.

Furthermore, the increase in arms budgets can stifle the economy of countries that are often still at the developing stage. Besides, account must be taken of the danger that in a world which has grown small and in which different interests interfere and clash a local conflict could gradually provoke much wider conflagrations.

7. The arms race is a matter of scandal; the prospect of disarmament is a great hope. The scandal concerns the crying disproportion between the resources in money and intelligence devoted to the service of death and the resources devoted to the service of life. The hope is that, by cutting down on military expenditure, a substantial part of the immense resources that it now absorbs can be employed in a vast world development project. We feel the scandal. We make the hope our own.

In this same hall where you are gathered today we renewed on 4 October 1965 the appeal we made to all States on the occasion of our journey to Bombay the previous December: "to devote to the benefit of developing nations at least a part of the money that could be saved through a reduction of armaments".

We now repeat this appeal with still more force and insistence, calling on all countries to study and put into operation an organic plan within the framework of the programmes for the fight against inequality, underdevelopment, hunger, disease and illiteracy. Justice demands it; the general interest recommends it. For progress by each of the members of the great human family will be to the advantage of progress by all and will serve to give a more solid foundation to peace.

8. Disarmament, a new world order, and development are three obligations that are inseparably bound together and that by their essence presuppose a renewal of public outlook.

We know and understand the difficulties presented by these obligations. But it is our will and our duty to remind you strongly, as people who are conscious of responsibility for the destiny of mankind, of the very serious reasons that make it necessary to find means of overcoming these difficulties. Do not depart without having laid the foundations and given the indispensable impulse to the solution of the problem that has brought you here together. Tomorrow may be too late.

But, you will ask, what contribution can and will the Holy See make to this immense common effort for disarmament and peace?

It is a question you have a right to ask. It places us in our turn face to face with our responsibilities, with respect to which our means are much inferior to our will.

The Holy See is not a World Power, nor has it political power. It has declared in a solemn treaty that "it wishes to remain and will remain extraneous to all temporal disputes between States and to international congresses held for such objects, unless the contending parties make concordant appeal to its mission of peace; at the same time reserving the right to exercise its moral and spiritual power" (Lateran Treaty, Article 24).

Sharing your problems, conscious of your difficulties, and strong by our very weakness, we accordingly say to you with great simplicity: If you ever think that the Holy See can help overcome the obstacles blocking the way to peace, it will not shelter behind the argument of its "non-temporal" character nor shy away from the responsibilities that could be involved in interventions that have been desired and asked for. For the Holy See greatly esteems peace and greatly loves it.

In any case, we shall continue to proclaim aloud, untiringly and without losing courage, the duty of peace, the principles that govern its dynamism, and the means of gaining and defending it through renouncing by common accord the weapons that threaten to kill it while claiming to serve it.

We know the strength of public opinion when it is upheld by solid ideals, convictions firmly rooted in consciences. We shall therefore continue to cooperate in order to educate dynamically for peace the new humanity. We shall continue to recall that there will be no disarmament of weapons if there is no disarmament of hearts.

We shall continue to pray for peace. Peace is the fruit of the good will of men and women, but it remains continually exposed to perils that good will does not always succeed in controlling. That is why peace has always appeared to mankind as above all else a gift from God. We shall ask him for it: Grant us peace. And we shall ask him to guide your work, in order that its results, both immediate and future, will not disappoint the hope of the peoples.

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\*ORa n.24 p.2-3, 12;

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