

In the Heartland With Bishop Pates

“Pacem in Terris” – 50 Years Later

On April 11, 1963, Pope John XXIII published the landmark encyclical “Pacem in Terris.” It was widely acclaimed at the time. *The New York Times* published the document in its entirety. Besides to the Catholic world, for the first time an encyclical was addressed “to all men of good will” echoing the Angels’ proclamation to the shepherds on the occasion of the birth of Jesus.

1963 was a receptive time for the message of good Pope John. The world had held its breath as the Cuban Missile crisis evolved and Soviet-American mutual destruction seemed a distinct possibility. Reasonable time had passed since World War II but there was yet a prevalent sentiment abroad that war at such a scale should never erupt again.

Two conferences were held recently to mark this singular document. One gathering entitled “Pacem in Terris after 50 years” was jointly sponsored by the Lumen Christi Institute Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago and The Center for Civil and Human Rights at Notre Dame Law School.

The other event was at the Catholic University of America in Washington D.C. and sponsored by the *Catholic Peacebuilding Network* consisting of 13 active Catholic organizations dedicated to constructing peace. In my current role as Chair of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on International Justice and Peace, I was fortunate to attend both.

The basic structure of *Pacem in Terris* has weathered well. Its thesis is explicitly founded in natural law. This means that God is the origin and destiny of each person. Each human being is uniquely created by God in his image and likeness and endowed with intelligence and freedom and destined to share eternity with God. The individual man and woman, therefore, enjoys a profound dignity always to be respected.

Because of this identity, each person is endowed with inalienable rights and associated duties. These rights have universally come to be known as human rights. When these human rights are fully respected, peace emerges. Key to tranquility and peace is the adherence to the creative and ongoing order which has been incorporated in creation by God. This order of the universe and the nature of human beings are able to be identified by human reason.

Peace emerges when this order is applied to relations between persons, between individuals and public authorities, between countries, and between men and women of political communities with the world community. At every level, if the order with which

nature has been endowed is operative and human dignity is upheld, the possibility of stable tranquility is likely.

Pope John recognizes that this conceptual framework, idealistic as it is, is implemented by persons who wear the stain of Adam impressed on their character. Thus, peace is achieved “little by little” by putting in place those institutions and mechanisms which facilitate preserving human dignity. Over time, democratic government, freedoms honoring the dignity of persons, and appropriate safeguards and security have been found essential in achieving peace.

One freedom that is crucial and has been substantiated as such by empirical studies is religious freedom and the associated freedoms of conscience and expression. Because of this, the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution must be vigorously protected. Totalitarian governments exclude religion because it challenges ideology and an imposed lack of such freedom leads to the failure to respect human rights. On another side, the so-called liberal viewpoint, there is a conviction that freedom comes from shedding religious restraints. The United States is particularly aware of the challenge to religious freedom with the implementation of the HHS mandates whereby government intrusion coupled with a growing documented social hostility to religion set about a the chain reaction where many other human rights begin to crumble.

One area that *Pacem in Terris* has spawned is peacebuilding – which is the intentional utilization of strategies to foster tranquil societies. Such efforts are widespread. They are frequently implemented after conflict. Components of a peaceful society are gradually introduced along with the establishment of institutions that support the human heart’s yearning for peace.

Many organizations, for instance, energized by the vision and optimism of *Pacem in Terris* and the later *Gaudium Et Spes* document of the Second Vatican Council and the U.S. Bishops’ *The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response* have begun to enter into solidarity with people all over the world who so desperately want this enduring gift.

In this vein, the U.S. Conference of Bishops under the guidance of its Committee on International Justice and Peace is working with many initiatives. Among them:

- 1) In the Democratic Republic of the Congo where a “hidden war” has taken the lives of six million people, support is rendered to resolve grievances, to expose the truth and then to initiate the sometimes painful steps of reconciliation.
- 2) In Cuba where a population suffers and a culture disintegrates in the face of restrictive freedoms, solidarity and relief for these justifiably proud people are being advocated by engagement with the American people and government rather than isolation.
- 3) In the Palestinian-Israeli conflict where there are grievances aplenty on both sides, the setting aside of subjective sympathies and establishing solidarity with the

people of the region enable an objective rendering of the wrongs of each party and the hope for a pathway to peace.

Pacem in Terris stirred optimism for the possibility of peace. May we be emboldened in our day to stir the embers and ignite a new fervor to achieve this undying hope rooted in our hearts.

The exhortation to prayer of Pope John the XXIII rings true in our time. “Let us, then, pray with all fervor for this peace which our divine Redeemer came to bring us. May He banish from the souls of men whatever might endanger peace. May He transform all men into witnesses of truth, justice and brotherly love. May He illumine with His light the minds of rulers, so that, besides caring for the proper material welfare of their peoples, they may also guarantee them the fairest gift of peace. (171)