# The Teachings of Christianity About Peace:
# Some Basic Principles

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Authentic peace is much more comprehensive and far-reaching than the absence of war. The Jewish concept of *shalom* and its concrete experience entail harmony with nature, with oneself, with others and with God. This article delves into the Hebrew scriptural foundations of Christianity's teachings about peace, and then proceeds to give an overview of some of the key references to the same theme in the New Testament. A number of key affirmations about peace and its various aspects were made during the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). These were followed by several official statements made by the Popes in their annual World Day of Peace Messages since 1968. The Christian concept of peace offers a number of practical applications which can be embraced by all men and women of good will, namely the creation of a purified mentality, as well as a sincere pedagogy of dialogue.

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## Introduction

Humanity craves for true and lasting peace. It is my deep conviction that the very vast majority of men and women in the world desire peace from the very depths of their being, and consequently, prefer to live peacefully, which means, among other things, living a tranquil and honest life without the threat of a sudden violent death, living peacefully in one's house, serenely going to work to earn a decent living, and raising one's children in safe conditions. Unexpected terrorist attacks, especially those in recent months on innocent citizens, have not only stirred emotions, but also led many to live in fear. The ghastly terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015, at Brussels Airport on March 22, 2016, at Atatürk Airport, Istanbul on June 28, 2016, in Dhaka, Bangladesh on July 1, 2016, and in Baghdad on July 3, 2016 are unfortunately just a small sample of the bloodthirsty violence which has claimed the lives of law-abiding, peaceful citizens during their daily routine of life.

On a global level, peaceful conditions entail the rule of justice among nations and peoples, a situation which is generally conducive to trade, cooperation at various degrees and relative prosperity. Unfortunately, men and women have often been blinded and given in to war and violence. Many a time, in its history, humanity has been ignorant of the benefits to which it intensely aspires. A rough estimate by world historians counts up to around one thousand wars in the last 30 centuries. One is probably struck by the words explaining the symbolic monument outside the United Nations Headquarters in New York: "They will hammer their

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swords into ploughshares and their spears into sickles. Nation will not lift sword against nation, no longer will they learn how to make war" (Is 2:4), a text from the Scriptures common to the Jewish and the Christian faiths, a text which lies at the heart of all peace-loving men and women of good will, of whatever faith.

## Peace in the Hebrew Scriptures

The very roots of Christianity can be traced to the Jewish Tradition, and therefore to what we find in the Hebrew Scriptures and to the norms which regulated Jewish life. The very central Jewish concept of *shalom* has been carried over into Christianity, and is also conspicuously present in other faiths. In the Judaeo-Christian Tradition, *shalom-peace* is not only the absence of war. It is much wider than that. It designates,

> the fact of being intact, complete… Biblical peace, then, is not only the "pact" which permits a tranquil life in opposition to "the time of war". It is also indicates the well-being of daily existence, the state of man who lives in harmony with nature, with himself, with God. Concretely, it is blessing, rest, glory, riches, salvation, life[1].

This brief article only allows us to skim rapidly over the very rich treasury on peace in the Hebrew Scriptures. Peace is intimately connected to happiness, mutual confidence, positive dispositions towards others, justice, security, to have a fruitful land, to eat to fullness, to sleep without fear, to be multiplied, and all this, in a word, because "God is with us" (cfr Lev 26:1-13)[2].

A profound question in that amazingly wonderful book of poetry, prayer and song, the book of Psalms, asks: If peace is the fruit and sign of justice, how then can godless men be in peace? (Ps 73:3) The answer to this basic question is found, in various places, in the Judaeo-Christian Tradition: "conceived at first as an earthly happiness, peace appears increasingly as a spiritual good by reason of its heavenly source"[3]. In other words, God is the source of all holiness and peace. On the other hand, it is up to humanity to respond to this gift, either accepting it and therefore living in harmony, or rejecting it and living in a state of anxiety and pain.

## Jesus Christ and His Message in the New Testament

Himself a devout Jew, Jesus Christ fulfils the Hebrew prophecies of old. From the Christian point of view, the hopes of the Hebrew prophets and the authors of the Hebrew wisdom texts become a reality in Christ. The first Christians were Jews, and in the earliest Christian period they not only experienced the stimulating joy at their encounters with the Risen Christ which they sought to share with others in their missionary activity, but they also began to understand the full sense of the Hebrew prophecies which they applied to Jesus Christ.

One of the earliest missionaries, James—one of the disciples of Jesus—writes, while basing himself on the Hebrew writings of old (cfr Is 32:17), that "the fruit of justice is sown in peace by those who practise peace" (3:18). Going through the words and actions of Jesus Christ, as reported in the divinely-inspired texts of the Gospel, one encounters several references to peace. At the birth of Jesus, the announcement made is one of "peace on earth to all men of good will" (Lk 2:14). One of the most poignant speeches made by Jesus is the so-called Sermon on the Mount, a speech praising basic human values, such as gentleness, righteousness and mercy which when embraced are conducive to just and loving relationships. In one of the lines of this speech, Jesus states: "Blessed are the peacemakers: they shall be recognized as children of God" (Mt 5:9).

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[1]  Xavier Léon-Dufour, "Peace", in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, second edition, ed. Xavier Léon-Dufour, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1992), 411.
[2]  Cfr ibid., 412.
[3]  Ibid.

Jesus Christ exhorted his followers on many occasions to do good deeds and to shun evil. Although his demands are often challenging, yet they are not impossible to follow. He demands loving one's enemies, going the extra mile, sharing necessities, and forgiving one's enemies when wronged. With a troubled conscience, I state that, unfortunately, a number of Christ's followers have not always been faithful to these guidelines. Sadly, the weakness of certain Christians over the centuries has tarnished the beauty of Christ's message. Yet, this does not hinder me from proposing the key elements of Christianity on peace, especially in the Church's pronouncements in the last fifty years.

## The Quest for Peace at the Second Vatican Council

At the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the bishops of the Catholic Church met to discuss an immensely-wide variety of matters. One topic was the role of the Church in the contemporary world. The Cuban missile crisis was then still in everybody's memory, and the Cold War between East and West, as well as the fears of a nuclear war, were at the back of the bishops' mind at the Council. In one of the documents published at the conclusion of the Council, we read that peace is a dynamic process and therefore must be built continually: "Peace cannot be obtained on earth unless the welfare of man is safeguarded and people freely and trustingly share with one another the riches of their minds and their talents"[4]. The following aspects are highlighted in the quest for peace: the respect of human dignity, peaceful non-violent means to uphold human rights[5], upholding security and freedom[6], disarmanent[7], and the strengthening of the moral authority of international organizations which bring members of the community of nations together to promote the cause of peace[8].

Peace is also achieved when the basic needs of humanity, such as food, hygiene, education and employment, are met[9]. International cooperation in economic matters, solidarity and the effort to reduce the excessive inequalities in resources are all right steps in the path to peace[10].

## The Recent Popes on Peace

The Christian message, based on word and witness of life, is not simply a case of charitable tasks, "doing good and getting initiatives off the ground, but rather about our very being a way of life that shines out to others"[11]. On a practical level, this entails dialogue, tolerance, social commitment, preferential love of the poor and love for one's enemies—in other words, reciprocal love.

Since 1968, the Catholic Church has dedicated the first day of the year to world peace. Of particular significance are the texts of the annual Message by the different Popes since then, namely Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis. Indeed, one can safely conclude that the main Christian concepts regarding peace are to be explored and found in these Messages and explained to all men and women of good will. Some examples taken from the titles of these Messages suffice: the promotion of human rights, the way to peace (1969, 1999); education for peace and reconciliation (1970); every man is my brother (1971); if you want peace,

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[4]  Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), 78.
[5]  Cfr ibid.
[6]  Cfr ibid., 79.
[7]  Cfr ibid., 80-81.
[8]  Cfr ibid., 83-84.
[9]  Cfr ibid., 84.
[10]  Cfr ibid., 85.
[11]  Cfr Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (December 8, 1975), 41-42, as quoted in Brendan Leahy, *A Theology of Community Revisited*, in *Ecclesia Tertii Millennii Advenientis*, eds. F. Chica et al. (Roma: Piemme, 1997), 213.

work for justice (1972); peace depends on you too (1974); if you want peace, defend life (1977); the truth, the power of peace (1980); to serve peace, respect freedom (1981); from a new heart, peace is born (1984); peace is a value with no frontiers North-South, East-West: only one peace (1986); development and solidarity: two keys to peace (1987); religious freedom: condition for peace (1988); to build peace, respect minorities (1989); peace with all of creation, the environment (1990); if you want peace, respect the conscience of each person (1991); if you want peace, reach out to the poor (1993); the family creates the peace of the human family (1994); offer forgiveness and receive peace (1997); dialogue between cultures for a civilization of love and peace (2001); an ever timely commitment: teaching peace (2004); fighting poverty to build peace (2009); if you want to cultivate peace, protect creation (2010); the theme of universal brotherhood: globalization makes us neighbours but not brothers (2014); no longer slaves, but brothers and sisters (2015); overcoming indifference and the acquisition of peace (2016).

In his social encyclical *Charity in Truth*, Pope Benedict XVI, outlines a number of key aspects with regard to the teachings of Christianity on peace and its promotion. He insists upon integration and solidarity among peoples, while focusing upon "a deeper critical evaluation of the category of relation"[12]. The transcendent dignity of the human person is underlined, this being further defined by means of interpersonal relations. The human being's intrinsic dignity as a contributor to the universal web of relationships lies at the foundation of lasting peace. Furthermore, Benedict XVI explains that peace-making efforts, if they are to be enduring, are to "be based on values rooted in the truth of human life. That is, the voice of the peoples affected must be heard and their situation must be taken into consideration"[13]. He highlights the necessity of cooperation between governments in order to promote peace-building efforts and the efforts to counter terrorism. He refers to economic, technological and cultural exchanges, diplomatic contacts and agreements on common projects.

## Conclusion

As this brief presentation has sought to demonstrate, the Christian concept of peace offers a variety of practical applications which if honestly carried out with a spirit of determination can contribute to peace in the world. In a nutshell, peace is the fruit of authentic reciprocal love. This entails two complementary keys to the door to peace: (1) conversion which brings about a new purified mentality: changing one's negative ways and looking with new eyes at others; (2) a pedagogy of dialogue: in other words, the reciprocal listening and the reciprocal sharing which lead to a true environment of dialogue essential for peace in the world[14].

Our common quest for peace is meant to be a visible icon in contemporary history and society. May the truth and the beauty of this icon of peace be there for all to see! It is not a message which becomes an experience. Rather, it is an experience which becomes a message!

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[12]  Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate* (29 June 2009), 53.

[13]  Ibid., 72.

[14]  Cfr Brendan Leahy, *A Theology of Community Revisited*, 214.