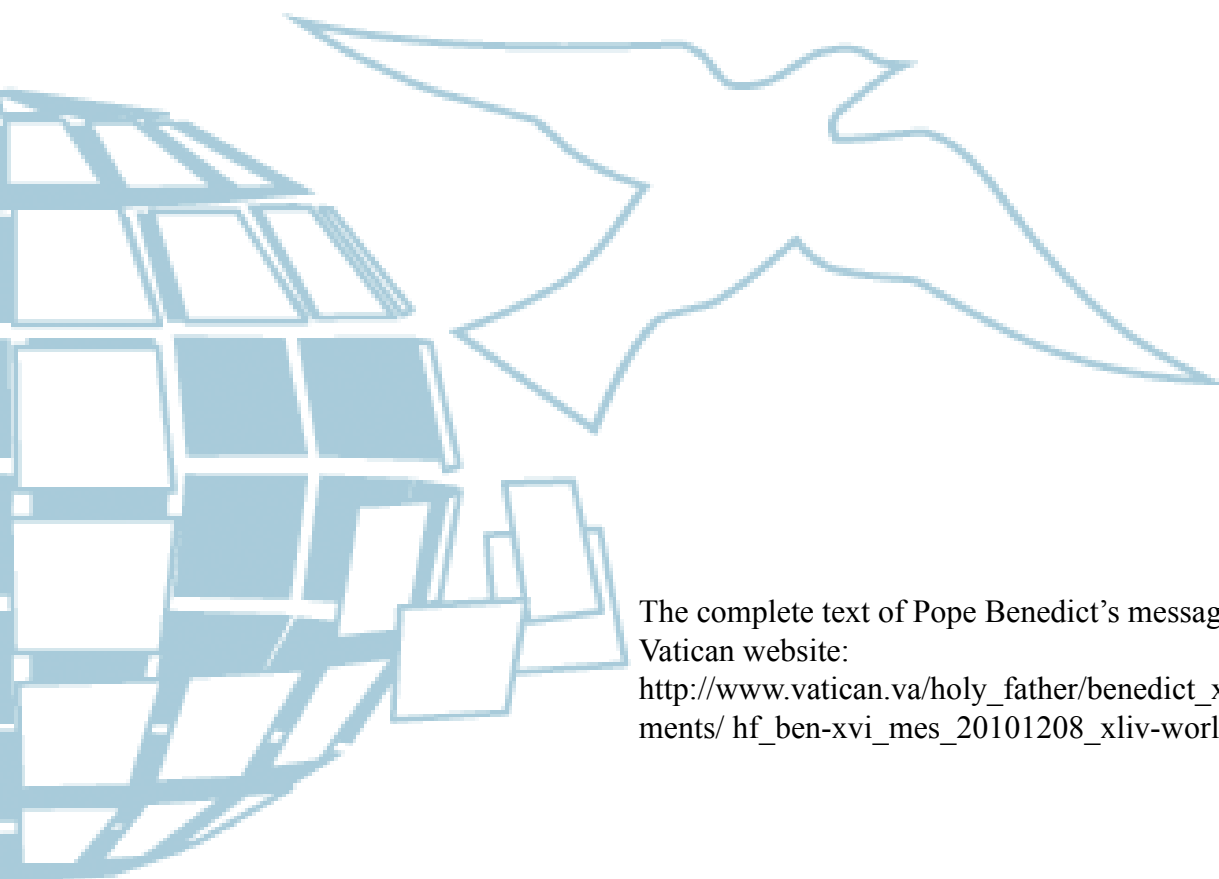


ACSJC Discussion Guide: World Day of Peace Message 2011

On New Year's Day, 2011, Pope Benedict XVI delivered his World Day of Peace Message. A papal message to Christians and all people of the world has been given each year since 1968.

The theme of Pope Benedict XVI's 2011 Message for Peace is: *Religious Freedom, the Path to Peace*.

Each year, the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council issues a brief discussion guide to help promote the Pope's message. This guide consists of a brief summary of the message, some points for reflection and discussion, and prayer.



The complete text of Pope Benedict's message can be found at the Vatican website:

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20101208_xliv-world-day-peace_en.html

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, THE PATH TO PEACE

The theme of the message for the World World Day of Peace, 2011, given by Pope Benedict XVI is '*Religious Freedom, the Path to Peace.*'

CONTEXT

The Pope places the message in the context of threats to religious freedom from secularism, fundamentalism and a growing pluralism. In this context, differences which should enrich human culture are increasingly being exploited, especially in the area of religion. Such exploitation has the effect of impoverishing human culture through intolerance, denial and negation of the right to religious freedom.

Religious freedom expresses what is unique about the human person, for it allows us to direct our personal and social life to God, in whose light the identity, meaning and purpose of the person are fully understood. To deny or arbitrarily restrict this freedom is to foster a reductive vision of the human person; to eclipse the public role of religion is to create a society which is unjust, inasmuch as it fails to take account of the true nature of the human person; it is to stifle the growth of the authentic and lasting peace of the whole human family. (Par 1)

THE NATURE OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Religious freedom acknowledges openness to transcendence, and is a right inherent and unique in human beings. Respecting the right to religious freedom ensures the dignity of each individual and is the guarantee of full mutual respect between persons.

The right to religious freedom is rooted in the very dignity of the human person whose transcendent nature must not be ignored or overlooked. God created man and woman in his own image and likeness (cf. Gen 1:27). For this reason each person is endowed with the sacred right to a full life, also from a spiritual standpoint. Without the acknowledgement of their spiritual being, without openness to the transcendent, human persons withdraw within themselves, fail to find answers to the heart's deepest questions about life's meaning, fail to appropriate lasting ethical values and principles, and fail even to experience authentic freedom and to build a just society. (Par 2)

Through the family and education, new generations will come to understand religious freedom and to see others as their brothers and sisters, members of the one human family, from which no one is to be excluded. (Par 4)

PUBLIC DIMENSIONS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Religious freedom is not just an individual right but exists in relationship with others and is attained in one's community and in society where believers and religious institutions make a positive contribution.

The contribution of religious communities to society is undeniable. Numerous charitable and cultural institutions testify to the constructive role played by believers in the life of society. More important still is religion's ethical contribution in the political sphere. Religion should not be marginalised or prohibited, but seen as making an effective contribution to the promotion of the common good. (Par 6)

Religious freedom is not to be exploited or imposed.

The exploitation of religious freedom to disguise hidden interests, such as the subversion of the established order, the hoarding of resources or the grip on power of a single group, can cause enormous harm to societies. Fanaticism, fundamentalism and practices contrary to human dignity can never be justified, even less so in the name of religion. The profession of a religion cannot be exploited or imposed by force. (Par 7)

The exclusion of religion from public life deprives society of a dimension open to transcendence. It fails to respect the fundamental rights and freedoms of the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and deprives society of a vital aspect of human development.

The international order thus recognizes that rights of a religious nature have the same status as the right to life and to personal freedom, as proof of the fact that they belong to the essential core of human rights, to those universal and natural rights which human law can never deny. (Par 5)

With due respect for the positive secularity of state institutions, the public dimension of religion must always be acknowledged. A healthy dialogue between civil and religious institutions is fundamental for the integral development of the human person and social harmony. (Par 9)

When religious freedom is acknowledged, the dignity of the human person is respected at its root, and the ethos and institutions of peoples are strengthened. On the other hand, whenever religious freedom is denied, and attempts are made to hinder people from professing their religion or faith and living accordingly, human dignity is offended, with a resulting threat to justice and peace, which are grounded in that right social order established in the light of Supreme Truth and Supreme Goodness. (Par 5)

LIVING IN RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

In a globalised world marked by increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies, the great religions can serve as an important factor of unity and peace for the human family.

On the basis of their religious convictions and their reasoned pursuit of the common good, their followers are called to give responsible expression to their commitment within a context of religious freedom. Amid the variety of religious cultures, there is a need to value those elements which foster civil coexistence, while rejecting whatever is contrary to the dignity of men and women. (Par 10)

The Church too is called to dialogue as a shared pursuit.

For the Church, dialogue between the followers of the different religions represents an important means of cooperating with all religious communities for the common good. The Church herself rejects nothing of what is true and holy in the various religions. (Par 11)

Today's world witnesses cases of persecution, discrimination, acts of violence and intolerance based on religion. The leaders of these religions are the first ones called to mutual respect and dialogue.

The leaders of the great world religions and the leaders of nations should therefore renew their commitment to promoting and protecting religious freedom, and in particular to defending religious minorities; these do not represent a threat to the identity of the majority but rather an opportunity for dialogue and mutual cultural enrichment. (Par 13)

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, THE PATH TO PEACE.

The world needs God. It needs universal, shared ethical and spiritual values, and religion can offer a precious contribution to their pursuit, for the building of a just and peaceful social order at the national and international levels. (Par 15)

In his homily on the World Day of Peace, Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that 'The world needs God.' It needs universal shared ethical and spiritual values, and religion offers a precious contribution to their pursuit. In the face of discrimination, abuses and religious intolerance, he urges us not to yield to discouragement but to be animated by a genuine spirit of peace, which is inspired by prayer and lived in daily interaction.

FOR REFLECTION

When have you been aware of the importance of the right to religious freedom, for yourself or for others?

Have you been challenged by other people's exercise of this right? How?

How do you practise an 'openness to transcendence'?

How can you and your parish community support the right to religious freedom?

FOR DISCUSSION

In what ways is religious freedom a safeguard of human dignity? What is your experience of this?

Why are the search for truth and religious freedom, and openness to the transcendent, essential for promoting the common good?

What are some current examples religious freedom being denied in the world today?

How does exploitation of religious freedom harm societies? What are some examples?

How is religious freedom protected in Australia?

RESOURCES

Dignitatis Humanae - Declaration on Religious Freedom, Vatican Council II, 1965. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html

Universal Declaration of Human Rights. <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

Religious Freedom in Australia. <http://www.dfat.gov.au/facts/religion.html>

International Religious Freedom report 2010, US Department of State, November 17, 2010. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148659.htm>

PRAYER

God of Creation

Creator of the universe,

We pray that all humans be open to the reality of your transcendent love.

May this openness lead us to honour the dignity of each person, and to respect one another's beliefs, values and culture.

We may have different words to name you, and different ways to worship you.

Still, we pray with hope that we may see the universal, shared values that underpin the many religions whose very presence in the world speaks of a transcendent reality.

Help us to recognise the contribution all people of goodwill can make to building a just and peaceful social order in our towns and cities, our nations, and in our world.

When we falter in our respect for and practice of religious freedom, may our cries of pain always be accompanied by faith, by hope and by the witness of our love for you.

building
social justice
networks

researching
policy

educating
on issues

presenting
Catholic teaching

promoting
a spirituality of
justice

advocating
change

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