

Pacem in Terris: The Origin and Dimensions of Peace

Angela Smith

In the fall of 1962, during the Cuban missile crisis, Pope John XXIII discreetly facilitated dialogue between Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev and President John F. Kennedy.¹ Humanity's need for an understanding of peace, and its origin in Christ, urged him to write the encyclical *Pacem in Terris*.

Notably, Pope John addressed his teaching not only to Catholics, but to "all men of good will,"² echoing the angels' announcement of Christ's birth to the shepherds.³ "Peace," Cardinal Peter Turkson reminds us, "is an aspect of God."⁴ How can Catholics, living in a pluralistic society, advance Christ's peace?

The divine Mind has stamped all of Creation with His sense of order. Scientific and technological advances are predicated upon it. Yet order among human beings is of a different type than order in the cosmos at large. We discover it, not through telescopes or microscopes, but with an internal gaze. The precepts of this order, the natural law, are readily apparent to all people of good will: "The Father of the universe has inscribed them in man's nature, and that is where we must look for them."⁵

The craving for divine order-- the universal aspiration toward liberty, freedom, truth, justice, and solidarity⁶-- permeates all dimensions of human relations. Pope John exhorts us to labor to bring this order to fruition between individuals, between states, and between individuals, states, and world community. For this, we can-- indeed, must-- stand elbow to elbow with all those of good will in the human family.

Order Between Individuals

Peace and Human Nature

As the Book of James indicates, war originates in greed and envy. Nations will always compete, thus peace must begin with persons. Here it manifests itself, as Augustine and Aquinas taught, as "the tranquility of order, particularly of the will."

¹ Christiansen, Drew. "A Vision of Peace: How the Prophetic 'Pacem in Terris' Helped Change the World." America, March 27, 2013.

² Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, Encyclical letter, April 11, 1963. (PIT)

³ Address by Cardinal Peter Turkson, *Peacebuilding 2013: Pacem in Terris at 50*, Catholic University. (CT)

⁴ CT

⁵ PIT

⁶ CT

Rightly ordered human relations require an accurate understanding of human nature. Peace must begin with the truth that each of us “is truly a person...endowed with intelligence and free will.”⁷ Our rights and duties are rooted in this fact.

Rights and Duties

Pope John names some of these natural rights: “Man has the right to live. He has the right to bodily integrity and to the means necessary for the proper development of life, particularly food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest, and, finally, the necessary social services.” He elucidates further rights: those involving moral and cultural values, economic and political rights, and migratory rights. Yet “to claim one's rights and ignore one's duties, or only half fulfill them, is like building a house with one hand and tearing it down with the other.”⁸ Each right implies a corresponding duty, e.g., the right to life implies a duty to preserve life.

Just Authority Derives from God

Pontius Pilate posed the question to Jesus: “Do you not know that I have power to release you and I have power to crucify you?” Jesus replied: “You would have no power over me if it had not been given to you from above.” This is the core truth underlying Pope John’s explication of rightly ordered relations between the individual and public officials: their authority ultimately derives from God. Yet, as St. Augustine taught, an unjust law is no law at all. Civic authority must operate in accordance with natural law, for the purpose of promoting the common good. Justice and solidarity prescribe special protections for the weakest among us, and the person with ten talents is duty bound to contribute out of his abundance.

Order Between Nations

Nations Consist of Persons

“The same law of nature that governs the life and conduct of individuals must also regulate the relations of political communities with one another.”⁹ We can scale up the necessity of correspondence with natural law, reciprocity of rights and duties, protection for the weak, and special responsibility for the strong to understand the prerequisites for concord among nations.

Nations and Ethnic Groups

Pope John stresses the importance of mutual respect among races, with the majorities bearing greater responsibility toward sheltering the dignity and unique cultural contributions of the minorities.

⁷ PIT

⁸ PIT

⁹ PIT

Work and Property

“It is imperative, therefore, that nations enter into collaboration with each other, and facilitate the circulation of goods, capital and manpower. We advocate in such cases the policy of bringing the work to the workers, wherever possible, rather than bringing workers to the scene of the work.”¹⁰

Political Refugees

“The deep feelings of paternal love for all mankind which God has implanted in our heart makes it impossible for us to view without bitter anguish of spirit the plight of those who for political reasons have been exiled from their own homelands...refugees are persons and all their rights as persons must be recognized. Refugees cannot lose these rights simply because they are deprived of citizenship of their own states.”¹¹

Nuclear Weapons

“Justice, right reason, and the recognition of man's dignity cry out insistently for a cessation to the arms race...A general agreement must be reached on a suitable disarmament program, with an effective system of mutual control.”

Nations with Unequal Power

“Relations between states must be regulated by the principle of freedom. This means that no country has the right to take any action that would constitute an unjust oppression of other countries, or an unwarranted interference in their affairs.” Stronger nations must assist the weaker so that “the poorer states shall in as short a time as possible attain to a degree of economic development that enables their citizens to live in conditions more in keeping with their human dignity.”¹²

Order Within the World Community

The Necessity of a Just Global Authority

Pope John insists that while “In the past rulers of States seem to have been able to make sufficient provision for the universal common good through the normal diplomatic channels,” in our era, we face “problems of the utmost gravity, complexity and urgency—especially as regards the preservation of the security and peace of the whole world” and no matter how sincere the efforts of national political leaders, “their authority is not sufficiently influential.”¹³

¹⁰ PIT

¹¹ PIT

¹² PIT

¹³ PIT

This implies the need for a “general authority equipped with world-wide power,” yet “the universal common good cannot be imposed by force. It must be set up with the consent of all nations. If its work is to be effective, it must operate with fairness, absolute impartiality, and with dedication to the common good of all peoples.”¹⁴

Solidarity and Subsidiarity in Balance

“It is no part of the duty of universal authority to limit the sphere of action of the public authority of individual States, or to arrogate any of their functions to itself. On the contrary, its essential purpose is to create world conditions in which the public authorities of each nation, its citizens and intermediate groups, can carry out their tasks, fulfill their duties and claim their rights with greater security.”¹⁵ Pope John praises the United Nations as a “step in the right direction.”

Conclusion

Individual Mandate

Finally, Pope John exhorts us to act as leaven in our spheres of influence. Professionals, especially in the sciences, must repair the “cleavage between [their] faith and practice.”¹⁶ Educators must equip them for this task. We must patiently seek collaborators among all individuals, societal groups, and nations in the noble responsibility of peace making.

The Character of Lasting Peace

“Yet peace is but an empty word, if it does not rest upon that order which...is founded on truth, built up on justice, nurtured and animated by charity, and brought into effect under the auspices of freedom.” We know that “human resources alone... cannot hope to achieve it.” Thus Pope John exhorts us to “pray earnestly to Him who by His bitter passion and death washed away men's sins,” so that humanity can revel in the promise of Christ: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid.”¹⁷

¹⁴ PIT

¹⁵ PIT

¹⁶ PIT

¹⁷ John 14:27