

World Day of Peace  
Jan 1<sup>st</sup> 2013  
Church of St Therese of Lisieux, Belfast  
*Bishop Donal McKeown*

We all have our personal memories of 2012 – and these will be linked to successes, losses and private issues. But on a global scale, I don't think that we will remember the last year as one of our finest – floods, earthquakes, wars, protests and economic crisis will all make the Olympics successes look a lonely light. And now we face into 2103 – more in hope than expectation. As someone said hope takes over when optimism fails.

For people of faith always walk in hope in the power of grace and goodness. Last June we celebrated the International Eucharistic Congress in Dublin and, here in Down and Connor, we are working our way through both the Year of Faith and our Living Church project. The theme that Pope Benedict puts before us this year on the World Day of Peace is a phrase taken from the Beatitudes of Jesus – *Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God*. At a time of crisis for many of the core human institutions – including the Church, politicians, the BBC, the banks – the Holy Father recalls that a peaceful world is part of God's dream for us. We may lose hope in God. God never loses hope in us

The Pope's message is clear. Peace is not just the absence of war. At the heart of what threatens peace is a false understanding of who we are as human beings - and who God is. The God of the Bible is not some sort of great mechanic in the sky, nor a childish sugar-daddy that keeps us childish. The God of the Old and New Testaments has a passion for the healing of the world, because it is made up of human persons who are all made in the divine image and likeness. The universe was created to be at peace with itself and with its creator. Human sin has scarred the face of the earth – but *Jesus' beatitude tells us that peace is both a messianic gift and the fruit of human effort (2)... and that peace is not a dream or something utopian; it is possible.(3)*

The Pope suggests a number of elements that are necessary if we are to work for peace.

There will not be peace and justice without an awareness of the transcendent dimension of who we are. If we believe that we are the arbiter of all right and good in society, that we are a world closed in on itself without guidelines about what is true, good and beautiful, then we will not even be able to have a shared language about how to create peace. We already see the fragmentation that occurs when our culture tells us that there is no natural law, no core values written in the human heart, nothing worth living for other than self-interest and whatever suits me or my group. The core tenets of Catholic Social teaching are now being actively looked at by some outside our faith family. And this huge corpus of teaching can be summed up under the following headings – human dignity, service of the common good, solidarity and subsidiarity. As the Pope says, *the attainment of peace depends above all in recognising that we, in God, one human family(2)*.

Secondly, there will be no peace if we do not love, defend and promote life in its fullness. The Pope is quite clear that *the liberalization of abortion.... will never be able to produce happiness or peace* (4). Catholic teaching is unambiguous. *The child in the womb is not a 'potential' life, but a human life with potential* (Choose Life. Irish Bishops' Conference Oct 2012). Legislation should give an equal right to life to both the mother and her baby, not preferring one over the other. As Bishop Treanor said in his statement about the proposed opening of the Marie Stopes Clinic in Belfast, *As a Christian community and as citizens, not only must we show compassion for women who find themselves facing an unwanted pregnancy, but we should support them to explore avenues which provide care while respecting the life of their child in the womb. We should enable them to respond to such situations in a life-affirming and positive way.* Peace-making means believing that life-affirming and positive ways can be found to solve all problems, whether in the personal or the international sphere. Death-dealing solutions can never create peace.

Thirdly, the Holy Father says that we have to believe that there are new possible economic models other than the *prevalence of a selfish and individualistic mindset which finds expression in an unregulated financial capitalism* (1) We have seen what happens when we become slaves to an inhuman economic system rather than architects of a system of trade that promotes human dignity and solidarity. The Pope calls on individuals, groups and institutions to foster human creativity. The current economic system was not the one that was always there. It too will be superseded. We need people who will develop new and more human ways of trading and serving the human race.

And Pope Benedict says that Catholic institutions – and particularly schools and colleges – have a particular responsibility to promote peace. We do not put so much time and energy into schools just so that they can obtain exam grades that above the NI average. Catholic schools are put in place to develop a Catholic and faith-based way of looking at life, or, as one principal put it, *a lens through which to view the world*. A school whose main boast is that it gets excellent marks is a poor Catholic school. A genuine Catholic school is one that actively seeks to develop peace-makers, to build solidarity with people around the world and around the corner, to support a new generation of generous young idealists who can transform the world. This pedagogy of peace, as the Pope calls it, *calls for a rich interior life, clear and valid moral points of reference, and appropriate attitudes and lifestyles...and a mentality and a culture of peace* (7). Unless a Catholic school actually does things differently from how other schools are, then we actually have little reason to exist. If we have only segregated 'schools for Catholics' and not Catholic schools open to all, then we are divisive and sectarian – and I could not defend their existence. Thus, a genuine Catholic education system exists, not to be an exam factory with a bit of Catholic piety on the side - but to respond to the *pressing need to ensure the presence of a Christian mentality in the society of the present day. Reference to Jesus Christ teaches us to discern the values that ennoble us from those which degrade us.*<sup>1</sup> Now that Catholic schools have shown their ability to deliver

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<sup>1</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education *The Catholic School* (1977), para 11.

excellent educational outcomes, our next huge challenge is to support develop our great Governors and school leaders so that they will not be ashamed to say that they are seeking to offer a counter-cultural, faith-based educational experience. A world of war, injustice and loneliness needs Catholic schools to produce heroes who will serve the cause of right. Catholic schools need to measure themselves against the challenge of healing the world and not just against the stranglehold of statistics. Peacemakers need big hearts more than they need exam passes, for we have all seen the damage cause by many highly intelligent crooks. In an age when there is a need for a new evangelization of Europe and of our culture, each Catholic school is at the service of world and not just at the service of its own narrow constituency. An inward-looking Catholic school, concerned only for its own welfare, is a contradiction in terms

On this New Year day, we are invited to celebrate the presence among us of Emmanuel, God with us, the God who has faith in us. We commit ourselves to work to renew the face of the earth. And in NI, where religion has so often been used to serve sectarian and political ends, we promise to work for a society that cherishes diversity rather than fearing it, a community that can be at the peace with the past and thus architects of peace for the future.