

Full Text: Pope Francis's address to diplomatic corps



The Pope spoke to members of the diplomatic corps in the Vatican's Apostolic Palace

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I offer you a cordial welcome to this annual gathering. It allows me to offer you my best wishes for the New Year and to reflect with you on the state of our world, so loved and blessed by God, and yet fraught with so many ills. I thank your new Dean, His Excellency Armindo Fernandes do Espírito Santo Veira, the Ambassador of Angola, for his kind greeting in the name of the entire Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See. In a special way, I would also like to remember the late

Ambassadors of Cuba, Rodney Alejandro López Clemente, and Liberia, Rudolf P. von Ballmoos, both of whom left us in this past month.

This occasion also allows me to offer a particular word of welcome to those of you who join us for the first time. I note with satisfaction that the number of resident Ambassadors in Rome has increased over the past year. This is an important sign of the interest with which the international community follows the diplomatic activity of the Holy See, as for that matter are the international agreements signed or ratified in the course of this last year. Here I would mention the specific fiscal agreements reached with Italy and the United States of America, reflecting the increased commitment of the Holy See to greater transparency in economic matters. No less important are the more general agreements aimed at regulating essential aspects of the Church's life and activity in different countries, such as the agreement sealed in Dili with the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste.

At the same time, I would like to mention the exchange of instruments of ratification of the agreement with Chad on the juridical status of the Catholic Church in that country, as well as the agreement signed and ratified with Palestine. These two agreements, together with the Memorandum of Understanding between the Secretariat of State and the Foreign Affairs Minister of Kuwait, demonstrate, among other things, how peaceful co-existence between the followers of different religions is possible when religious freedom is recognized and practical cooperation in the pursuit of the common good, in a spirit of respect for the cultural identity of all parties, is effectively guaranteed.

For that matter, every authentic practice of religion cannot fail to promote peace. Our recent celebration of Christmas reminds us of this: we contemplated the birth of a vulnerable child who is "named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace" (cf. Is 9:5). The mystery of the Incarnation shows us the real face of God, for whom power does not mean force or destruction but love, and for whom justice is not vengeance but mercy. It is in light of this that I wished to proclaim the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, exceptionally inaugurated in Bangui during my Apostolic Journey in Kenya, Uganda and the Central African Republic. In a country sorely tried by hunger, poverty and conflict, where fratricidal violence in recent years has left deep wounds, rending the nation and creating material and moral destitution, the opening of the Holy Door of Bangui Cathedral was meant as a sign of encouragement to look ahead, to set out anew and resume dialogue. There, where God's name has been misused to perpetrate injustice, I wanted to reaffirm, together with the Muslim community of the Central African Republic, that "those who claim to believe in God must also be men and women of peace"[1] and consequently of mercy, for one may never kill in the name of God. Only a distorted ideological form of religion can think that justice is done in the name of the Almighty by deliberately slaughtering defenceless persons, as in the brutal terrorist attacks which occurred in recent months in Africa, Europe and the Middle East.

Mercy was the common thread linking my Apostolic Journeys in the course of the past year. This was the case above all with my visit to Sarajevo, a city deeply scarred by the war in the Balkans and the capital of a country, Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is uniquely significant for Europe and the entire world. As a crossroads of cultures, nations and religions, it is working successfully to build new bridges, to encourage those things which unite, and to see differences as opportunities for growth in respect for all. This is possible thanks to a patient and trusting dialogue capable of embracing the values of each culture and accepting the good which comes from the experience of others.[2]

I think too of my Journey to Bolivia, Ecuador and Paraguay, where I encountered peoples who have not given up in the face of difficulties, and who are facing with courage, determination and solidarity their many challenges, beginning with widespread poverty and social inequality. During my Journey to Cuba and the United States of America, I was able to embrace two countries which were long divided and which have decided to write a new page of history, embarking on the path of closer ties and reconciliation.

In Philadelphia for the World Meeting of Families, during my Journey to Sri Lanka and to the Philippines, and more recently with the Synod of Bishops, I reaffirmed the centrality of the family, which is the first and most important school of mercy, in which we learn to see God's loving face and to mature and develop as human beings. Sadly, we recognize the numerous challenges presently facing families, "threatened by growing efforts on the part of some to redefine the very institution of marriage by relativism, by the culture of the ephemeral, by a lack of openness to life".[3] Today there is a widespread fear of the definitive commitment demanded by the family; those who pay the price are the young, who are often vulnerable and uncertain, and the elderly, who end up being neglected and abandoned. On the contrary, "out of the family's experience of fraternity is born solidarity in society",[4] which instils in us a sense of responsibility for others. This is possible only if, in our homes and our societies, we refuse to allow weariness and resentment to take root, but instead make way for dialogue, which is the best antidote to the widespread individualism of today's culture.

Dear Ambassadors,

An individualistic spirit is fertile soil for the growth of that kind of indifference towards our neighbours which leads to viewing them in purely economic terms, to a lack of concern for their humanity, and ultimately to feelings of fear and cynicism. Are these not the attitudes we often adopt towards the poor, the marginalized and the "least" of society? And how many of these "least" do we have in our societies! Among them I think primarily of migrants, with their burden of hardship and suffering, as they seek daily, often in desperation, a place to live in peace and dignity.

Today, then, I would like to reflect with you on the grave crisis of migration which we are facing, in order to discern its causes, to consider possible solutions, and to overcome the inevitable fears associated with this massive and formidable phenomenon, which in 2015 has mainly concerned Europe, but also various regions of Asia and North and Central America.

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"Be not frightened, neither be dismayed; for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go" (Jos 1:9). This is the promise which God makes to Joshua, revealing his concern for every person, but particularly those in precarious situations such as people seeking refuge in a foreign country. The Bible as a whole recounts the history of a humanity on the move, for mobility is part of our human nature. Human history is made up of countless migrations, sometimes out of an awareness of the right to choose freely, and often dictated by external circumstances. From the banishment from Eden to Abraham's journey to the promised land, from the Exodus story to the deportation to Babylon, sacred Scripture describes the struggles and sufferings, the desires and hopes, which are shared by the hundreds of thousands of persons on the move today, possessed of the same determination which Moses had to reach a land flowing with "milk and honey" (cf. Ex 3:17), a land of freedom and peace.

Now as then, we hear Rachel weeping for her children who are no more (cf. Jer 31:15; Mt 2:18). Hers is the plea of thousands of people who weep as they flee horrific wars, persecutions and human rights violations, or political or social instability, which often make it impossible for them to live in their native lands. It is the outcry of those forced to flee in order to escape unspeakable acts of cruelty towards vulnerable persons, such as children and the disabled, or martyrdom solely on account of their religion.

Now as then, we hear Jacob saying to his sons: “Go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die” (Gen 42:2). His is the voice of all those who flee extreme poverty, inability to feed their families or to receive medical care and education, hopeless squalor or the effects of climate change and extreme weather conditions. Sadly, we know that hunger continues to be one of the gravest banes of our world, leading to the death of millions of children every year. It is painful to realize, however, that often these migrants are not included in international systems of protection based on international agreements.

How can we not see in all this the effects of that “culture of waste” which endangers the human person, sacrificing men and women before the idols of profit and consumption? It is a grievous fact that we grow so inured to such situations of poverty and need, to these tragedies affecting so many lives, that they appear “normal”. Persons are no longer seen as a paramount value to be cared for and respected, especially when poor or disabled, or “not yet useful” – like the unborn, or “no longer needed” – like the elderly. We have grown indifferent to all sorts of waste, starting with the waste of food, which is all the more deplorable when so many individuals and families suffer hunger and malnutrition[5].

The Holy See trusts that, amid today’s sad context of conflicts and disasters, the First World Humanitarian Summit, convened by the United Nations for May 2016, will succeed in its goal of placing the person and human dignity at the heart of every humanitarian response. What is needed is a common commitment which can decisively turn around the culture of waste and lack of respect for human life, so that no one will feel neglected or forgotten, and that no further lives will be sacrificed due to the lack of resources and, above all, of political will.

Sadly, now as then, we hear the voice of Judah who counsels selling his own brother (cf. Gen 37:26-27). His is the arrogance of the powerful who exploit the weak, reducing them to means for their own ends or for strategic and political schemes. Where regular migration is impossible, migrants are often forced to turn to human traffickers or smugglers, even though they are aware that in the course of their journey they may well lose their possessions, their dignity and even their lives. In this context I once more appeal for an end to trafficking in persons, which turns human beings, especially the weakest and most defenceless, into commodities. The image of all those children who died at sea, victims of human callousness and harsh weather, will remain forever imprinted on our minds and hearts. Those who survive and reach a country which accepts them bear the deep and indelible scars of these experiences, in addition to those left by the atrocities which always accompany wars and violence.

Now as then, we hear the angel say: “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you” (Mt 2:13). His is the voice heard by many migrants who would never have left

their homeland had they not been forced to. Among these are many Christians who in great numbers have abandoned their native lands these past years, despite the fact that they have dwelt there from the earliest days of Christianity.

Finally, we also hear today the voice of the Psalmist: “By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion” (Ps 137:1). His is the cry of those who would readily return to their own country, if only there they could find adequate conditions of security and sustenance. Here too my thoughts turn to the Christians of the Middle East, who desire to contribute fully as citizens to the spiritual and material well-being of their respective nations.

Many of the causes of migration could have been addressed some time ago. So many disasters could have been prevented, or at least their harshest effects mitigated. Today too, before it is too late, much could be done to end these tragedies and to build peace. But that would mean rethinking entrenched habits and practices, beginning with issues involving the arms trade, the provision of raw materials and energy, investment, policies of financing and sustainable development, and even the grave scourge of corruption. We all know, too, that with regard to migration there is a need for mid-term and long-term planning which is not limited to emergency responses. Such planning should include effective assistance for integrating migrants in their receiving countries, while also promoting the development of their countries of origin through policies inspired by solidarity, yet not linking assistance to ideological strategies and practices alien or contrary to the cultures of the peoples being assisted.

Without overlooking other dramatic situations – in this regard, I think particularly of the border between Mexico and the United States of America, which I will be near when I visit Ciudad Juárez next month – my thoughts turn in a special way to Europe. Over the past year Europe has witnessed a great wave of refugees – many of whom died in the attempt – a wave unprecedented in recent history, not even after the end of the Second World War. Many migrants from Asia and Africa see in Europe a beacon for principles such as equality before the law and for values inherent in human nature, including the inviolable dignity and equality of every person, love of neighbour regardless of origin or affiliation, freedom of conscience and solidarity towards our fellow men and women.

All the same, the massive number of arrivals on the shores of Europe appear to be overburdening the system of reception painstakingly built on the ashes of the Second World War, a system that is still an acknowledged beacon of humanity. Given the immense influx and the inevitable problems it creates, a number of questions have been raised about the real possibilities for accepting and accommodating people, about changes in the cultural and social structures of the receiving countries, and about the reshaping of certain regional geopolitical balances. Equally significant are fears about security, further exacerbated by the growing threat of international terrorism. The present wave of migration seems to be undermining the foundations of that “humanistic spirit” which Europe has always loved and defended.[6] Yet there should be no loss of the values and principles of humanity, respect for the dignity of every person, mutual subsidiarity and solidarity, however much they may prove, in some moments of history, a burden difficult to bear. I wish, then, to reaffirm my conviction that Europe, aided by its great cultural and religious heritage, has the means to defend the centrality of the human person and to find the right balance between its twofold moral responsibility to protect the rights of its citizens and to ensure assistance and acceptance to migrants[7].

Here I likewise feel obliged to express gratitude for all initiatives aimed at providing a dignified

reception to these persons; I think, for example, of the Migrant and Refugee Fund of the Council of Europe Development Bank, and the generous solidarity shown by a number of countries. I also have in mind the nations neighbouring Syria, which have responded immediately with help and acceptance, especially Lebanon, where refugees make up a fourth of the total population, and Jordan, which has not closed its borders despite the fact that it already harbours hundreds of thousands of refugees. Nor should we overlook the efforts made by other countries in the front lines, especially Turkey and Greece. I wish to express particular gratitude to Italy, whose decisive commitment has saved many lives in the Mediterranean, and which continues to accept responsibility on its territory for a massive number of refugees. It is my hope that the traditional sense of hospitality and solidarity which distinguishes the Italian people will not be weakened by the inevitable difficulties of the moment, but that, in light of its age-old tradition, the nation may prove capable of accepting and integrating the social, economic and cultural contribution which migrants can offer.

It is important that nations in the forefront of meeting the present emergency not be left alone, and it is also essential to initiate a frank and respectful dialogue among all the countries involved in the problem – countries of origin, transit, or reception – so that, with greater boldness and creativity, new and sustainable solutions can be sought. As things presently stand, there is no place for autonomous solutions pursued by individual states, since the consequences of the decisions made by each inevitably have repercussions on the entire international community. Indeed, migrations, more than ever before, will play a pivotal role in the future of our world, and our response can only be the fruit of a common effort respectful of human dignity and the rights of persons. The Development Agenda adopted last September by the United Nations for the next fifteen years, which deals with many of the problems causing migration, and other documents of the international community on handling the issue of migration, will be able to find application consistent with expectations if they are able to put the person at the centre of political decisions at every level, seeing humanity as one family, and all people as brothers and sisters, with respect for mutual differences and convictions of conscience.

In facing the issue of migrations, one cannot overlook its cultural implications, beginning with those linked to religious affiliation. Extremism and fundamentalism find fertile soil not only in the exploitation of religion for purposes of power, but also in the vacuum of ideals and the loss of identity – including religious identity – which dramatically marks the so-called West. This vacuum gives rise to the fear which leads to seeing the other as a threat and an enemy, to closed-mindedness and intransigence in defending preconceived notions. The phenomenon of migration raises a serious cultural issue which necessarily demands a response. The acceptance of migrants can thus prove a good opportunity for new understanding and broader horizons, both on the part of those accepted, who have the responsibility to respect the values, traditions and laws of the community which takes them in, and on the part of the latter, who are called to acknowledge the beneficial contribution which each immigrant can make to the whole community. In this context, the Holy See reaffirms its commitment in the ecumenical and interreligious sectors to inaugurating a sincere and respectful dialogue which, by valuing the distinctness and identity of each individual, can foster a harmonious coexistence among all the members of society.

Distinguished Members of the Diplomatic Corps,

2015 witnessed the conclusion of important international agreements, which give solid hope for the future. I think first of the so-called Iran nuclear deal, which I hope will contribute to creating a climate

of détente in the region, as well as the reaching of the long-awaited agreement on climate at the Paris Conference. This significant accord represents for the entire international community an important achievement; it reflects a powerful collective realization of the grave responsibility incumbent on individuals and nations to protect creation, to promote a “culture of care which permeates all of society”.[8] It is now essential that those commitments prove more than simply a good intention, but rather a genuine duty incumbent on all states to do whatever is needed to safeguard our beloved earth for the sake of all mankind, especially generations yet to come.

For its part, the year which has just begun promises to be full of challenges and more than a few tensions have already appeared on the horizon. I think above all of the serious disagreements which have arisen in the Persian Gulf region, as well as the disturbing military test conducted on the Korean peninsula. It is my hope that these conflicts will be open to the voice of peace and a readiness to seek agreements. Here I note with satisfaction of certain significant and particularly encouraging gestures. I think especially of the climate of peaceful coexistence in which the recent elections in the Central African Republic were held; these are a positive sign of the will to persevere on the path to full national reconciliation. I also think of the new initiatives under way in Cyprus to heal a long-standing division, and to the efforts being made by the Colombian people to leave behind past conflicts and to attain the long-awaited peace. All of us look with hope to the important steps made by the international community to achieve a political and diplomatic solution of the crisis in Syria, one which can put a long overdue end to the sufferings of the population. The signals coming from Libya are likewise encouraging and offer the hope of a renewed commitment to ending violence and reestablishing the country’s unity. On the other hand, it appears increasingly evident that only a common and agreed political action will prove able to stem the spread of extremism and fundamentalism, which spawn terrorist acts which reap countless victims, not only in Syria and Libya, but in other countries like Iraq and Yemen.

May this Holy Year of Mercy also be the occasion of dialogue and reconciliation aimed at consolidating the common good in Burundi, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and in South Sudan. Above all, may it be a favourable time for definitively ending the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Of fundamental importance is the support which the international community, individual states and humanitarian organizations can offer the country from a number of standpoints, in order to surmount the present crisis.

Yet the greatest challenge we face is that of overcoming indifference and working together for peace,[9] which remains a good which must constantly be sought. Sadly, among the many parts of our beloved world which long fervently for peace, there is the land for which God showed a particular love and chose to show to all the face of his mercy. I pray that this new year can heal the deep wounds dividing Israelis and Palestinians, and enable the peaceful coexistence of two peoples who – of this I am sure – in the depths of their heart ask only for peace!

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On the diplomatic level, the Holy See will never cease its efforts to enable the message of peace to be heard to the ends of the earth. I thus reiterate the complete readiness of the Secretariat of State to cooperate with you in favouring constant dialogue between the Apostolic See and the countries which you represent, for the benefit of the entire international community. I am certain that this Jubilee year

will be a favourable occasion for the cold indifference of so many hearts to be won over by the warmth of mercy, that precious gift of God which turns fear into love and makes us artisans of peace. With these sentiments I renew to each of you, to your families and your countries, my heartfelt good wishes for a blessed New Year.

Thank you.

Catholic Herald - Staff Reporter - Monday, 11 Jan 2016