

Building Peace Through Dialogue: A Catholic Perspective
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Introduction

Hello everyone,

It's a pleasure to talk to you about something that concerns all of us: peace. When we think about peace, we often picture the end of war or conflict. But real peace is much more than that. It's about justice, respect, and living in harmony with others—including with nature.

It seems that the words used by Pope Pius XII on 24th August 1939, on the eve of World War II remain strikingly relevant today. “Nothing is to be lost with peace; everything can be lost with war”. Aftermath of the World War II, the United Nations also echoed the same sentiments in its Charter: “saving succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind” (Charter of the United Nations, Preamble). Sadly, the specter of larger global conflicts loom over us again, with multiple crises converging –geopolitical tensions, regional wars, and economic instability. In addition to these tensions and conflicts, we are witnessing new forms of conflict –economic (commercial) wars and AI-driven wars. These battles may not always involve bombs and soldiers, but they are deeply impactful. Pope Francis has repeatedly warned that we are experiencing a “third world war fought in piecemeal”. Therefore, he calls for dialogue, diplomacy, and a culture of encounter rather than confrontation.

So today, I want to explore how Catholic teaching, rooted in the Bible and human experience, offers a path to building peace through dialogue. We'll look at:

1. What the Bible teaches about peace
2. How inner peace helps create outer peace
3. When conflict is justified (Just War Theory)
4. The role of interreligious dialogue
5. The power of education in peacebuilding
6. Healing and reconciliation as the foundation of lasting peace
7. The environmental dimension of peace

Let's begin.

1. What the Bible Teaches About Peace

The idea of peace is central to the Bible. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for peace is *shalom*, which means more than just “no war.” It's about wholeness, justice, and right relationships—with God, with others, and with creation. The prophets constantly remind us that peace cannot exist without justice:

- “The work of justice will be peace.” (Isaiah 32:17)
- “Let justice flow like a river and righteousness like an unfailing stream.” (Amos 5:24)

In the New Testament, Jesus takes this even further. He tells us:

- “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” (Matthew 5:9)

- “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (Matthew 5:44)
- And before His death, He tells His disciples: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.” (John 14:27)
- After his resurrection, he sent his disciples as peacemakers and healers: “Peace be with you! As the Father sent me, I now send you” (John 20:21)

For Jesus, peace is not weakness. It’s an active way of life—one that requires courage, justice, and forgiveness. Jesus exemplified this profound teaching through both His life and His sacrifice. As a victim of violence, He experienced first-hand the brutality and injustice that so often plague our world. Yet, in the face of this suffering, Jesus chose a path of peace and forgiveness, even extending love to those who persecuted Him. His teachings, “Love your enemies” (Mt 5:44) and “Blessed are the peacemakers, (Mt. 5:9) resonate as powerful calls to transcend our differences and to seek reconciliation and understanding. Jesus’ life demonstrates that peace is not passive; it requires active engagement, the courage to stand against injustice, and the will to cultivate love even in the most difficult circumstances.

2. Inner Peace as the Foundation of Outer Peace

Before we can build peace in the world, we must find it within ourselves. Think about it—when people are full of anger, fear, or stress, they spread that negativity to others. But when people are at peace with themselves, they are more patient, compassionate, and open to dialogue.

How can we cultivate inner peace?

- Self-reflection and mindfulness – Taking time to reflect and be present helps us understand our emotions and reactions.
- Forgiveness – Holding onto grudges fuels conflict. Jesus teaches that we must forgive “seventy times seven times” (Matthew 18:22).
- Trusting in something greater than ourselves – Whether through prayer, meditation, or simply finding purpose in helping others, inner peace grows when we focus on what truly matters.

As a response to rising global tensions and ongoing conflicts worldwide, on 27 October 1986, Pope St. John Paul II invited world religious leaders to Assisi to fast and pray for peace. Pope St. John Paul II and his successors have been continuing this journey “to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.” (NA, 3). Assisi was chosen, according to the words of Pope John Paul II, “because of the particular significance of the holy man venerated here - Saint Francis - known and revered by so many throughout the world as a symbol of peace, reconciliation and brotherhood.”¹ The “Spirit of Assisi” continues to live, offering a counter-narrative to a world ravaged by conflicts and wars. The 1986 historic summit in Assisi was held in the context of the cold war. The 1993 gathering came amid wars in the Balkans and the Middle East, and the 2002 version in the aftermath of 9/11. The year 2011 marked the rise of religious extremism and militant secularism. The 2016 meeting, responded to “a third world War” that is being fought in pieces,” in the words of Pope Francis.

The Assisi gathering introduced a novelty to interreligious dialogue by discovering the unique value of interreligious prayer for peace. Prayer awakens our conscience, expels inner fears, heals wounds, disarms the violent, tears down walls of enmity, facilitates forgiving and pardoning, and transforms us to be peacemakers.

¹ Basilica of St Mary of the Angels, 27 October 1986.

3. When is Conflict Justified? (Just War Theory)

While peace is the goal, what happens when injustice occurs? Can violence ever be justified?

The Catholic Church teaches that war should always be the last resort. Just War Theory, developed by thinkers like St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, sets strict conditions for when force might be morally acceptable:

1. Just Cause – The reason for war must be to protect innocent lives or defend against aggression.
2. Right Authority – Only a legitimate government can declare war.
3. Right Intention – The goal must be peace, not revenge or greed.
4. Last Resort – All peaceful solutions must be tried first.
5. Proportionality – The harm caused by war must not be worse than the problem it tries to solve.
6. Protection of Civilians – Innocent people must never be targeted.

The Church recognizes that a nation has not just the right, but the obligation to ensure the security of its citizens and to respond to an aggression, even - if only under very strict conditions - by means of military force. But it deals with the strict conditions for legitimate defence by military force to avoiding war.

What about the war against terrorism? How can we justify it? It is a war in favour of the rule of law; it is a war to re-establish broken peace and harmony as well as respect for the dignity of persons and their rights; it is a war which wants to foster coexistence and order in the relationships between persons, peoples and cultures. Even when war is justified, the Church insists that every effort must be made to seek peace and reconciliation.

In his 2020 Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis went even further than this declaring that war cannot be a solution to any problem and even issued a caution about previous interpretations of Just War theory. He stated: “War can easily be chosen by invoking all sorts of allegedly humanitarian, defensive or precautionary excuses, and even resorting to the manipulation of information. In recent decades, every single war has been ostensibly “justified”. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks of the possibility of legitimate *defence* by means of military force, which involves demonstrating that certain “rigorous conditions of moral legitimacy” have been met. Yet it is easy to fall into an overly broad interpretation of this potential right.” (*Fratelli Tutti*, 258)

Pope Francis went on to articulate his belief and hope for an end to wars “We can no longer think of war as a solution, because its risks will probably always be greater than its supposed benefits. In view of this, it is very difficult nowadays to invoke the rational criteria elaborated in earlier centuries to speak of the possibility of a “just war”. Never again war!” (*Fratelli Tutti*, 258).

For Pope John XXIII, peace must be built on four pillars identified in *Pacem in Terris*: truth, justice, love and freedom.

4. The Power of Dialogue Between Religions

Many conflicts in the world involve religious differences. Let us also be clear—religion is neither the solution nor the problem. It is part of the problem, but it is also part of the solution. Conflicts in our world are not caused by religion alone. They are shaped by socio-political struggles, economic inequality, tribal and ethnic divisions, and geopolitical tensions. If we fail to address these deeper

roots, no amount of interfaith dialogue will bring lasting peace.

The Catholic Church teaches that we must engage with people of other faiths with respect and openness. This was emphasized in *Nostra Aetate*, a Vatican II document that encourages dialogue between Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and people of other traditions.

For Pope Francis, dialogue signifies “Approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground: all these things are summed up in the one word “dialogue” (FT 198). He also emphasizes that “If we want to encounter and help one another, we have to dialogue” (FT 198). Through dialogue, the Pope seeks to foster a culture of encounter. It “means that we, as a people, should be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone. This becomes an aspiration and a style of life. The subject of this culture is the people, not simply one part of society that would pacify the rest with the help of professional and media resources” (FT 216).

Interreligious dialogue is important because:

- It builds trust and friendships.
- It prevents religion from being used to justify violence.
- It allows us to work together for social justice and the environment.

Pope Francis states that “True openness involves remaining steadfast in one’s deepest convictions, clear and joyful in one’s own identity, while at the same time being ‘open to understanding those of the other party’ and ‘knowing that dialogue can enrich each side’” (*Evangelli gaudium* n. 251). In this way, this fraternal dialogue “recognizes one another as travelling companions, truly brothers and sisters” (*Fratelli Tutti* n. 274) and also “by mutual listening, both parts can be purified and enriched” (*Evangelli gaudium* n. 250).

Dialogue doesn’t mean we have to agree on everything. But it does mean we listen, respect, and find common ground. In this regard, Pope Francis invites “each one of us [...] to be an artisan of peace, by uniting and not dividing, by extinguishing hatred and not holding on to it, by opening paths of dialogue and not by constructing walls” (*Fratelli Tutti* n. 284). He also notes: “There is only one road for conquering [...] fear and it is dialogue and encounter marked by friendship and respect. When we take this path, it is a human one” (*To Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue*, 28 November 2013).

5. The Role of Education in Peacebuilding

Education is one of the most powerful tools for building peace. Why? Because ignorance breeds fear, and fear breeds division. Catholic teaching emphasizes that schools and universities should:

1. Teach the dignity of every human person—because every person has value, regardless of background.
2. Encourage critical thinking—so people can resist propaganda and avoid stereotyping others.
3. Promote respect for diversity—because learning about different cultures and beliefs fosters understanding.

Pope Francis, in *Fratelli Tutti*, reminds us that real peace requires dialogue, and dialogue begins with education. He launched the Global Compact on Education, pointing out that education is “one

of the most effective ways of making our world and history more human.”² “If we desire a more fraternal world, we need to educate young people “to acknowledge, appreciate and love each person, regardless of physical proximity, regardless of where he or she was born or lives” (Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, 1).”

To this end, Pope Francis invites all those who work in the field of education to be guided by the following four pillars:

- i. The fundamental principle “Know yourself” has always guided education. Yet we should not overlook other essential principles:
- ii. “Know your brother or sister”, in order to educate in welcoming others (cf. Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*; *Document on Human Fraternity*, Abu Dhabi, 4 February 2019);
- iii. “Know creation”, in order to educate in caring for our common home (cf. Encyclical *Laudato Si'*) and
- iv. “Know the Transcendent”, in order to educate in the great mystery of life.

We are concerned to ensure an integral formation that can be summed up in knowledge of ourselves, our brothers and sisters, creation and the Transcendent. We cannot fail to speak to young people about the truths that give meaning to life.”

In the same speech he highlighted the importance of overcoming past shortcomings by embracing a holistic educational model. Here, too, he identifies four past errors and rectifies them.

- i). From Division to Mutual Respect – Differences once caused conflicts, but now they are seen as enriching. Education must foster peaceful coexistence and respect for diverse paths to God.
- ii). From Discrimination to Inclusion – Religion was used to discriminate against minorities. Now, education must defend the dignity of all, teaching young people to accept others without prejudice.
- iii). From Violations of Human Rights to Their Defence – Women, children, and vulnerable people were not always respected. Today, education must uphold their rights and train young people to be voices for the voiceless.
- vi). From Exploiting Creation to Caring for It – The environment was plundered, but now we must act as responsible stewards, promoting sustainability and ecological awareness.

Each point underscores education’s role in building a just, peaceful, and sustainable world. Today we need to play a leading role of educating each individual integrally: head, hands, heart and soul.³

6. Healing and Reconciliation as the Foundation of Lasting Peace

War and conflict inflict both internal and external wounds - physically, emotionally, and

² Pope Francis, Video Message on the Occasion of the Meeting “Global Compact on Education. Together to look beyond”, 15 October 2020.

³ Address Of His Holiness Pope Francis To The Participants In The Meeting “Religions And Education: Towards A Global Compact On Education”, *Clementine Hall*, 5 October 2021

spiritually. The destruction goes beyond the battlefield, leaving behind shattered bodies, broken families, and traumatized communities. This often stems from the perception of the other as a threat—whether political, economic, cultural, or religious. When we see others as enemies rather than fellow human beings, it becomes easier to justify violence against them.

Robert Schreiter identifies different ways of perceiving the other as a menace as follows:

- i). We can *demonize* the other, treating the other as someone to be feared and eliminated if possible.
- ii). We can *colonize* the other, treating the other as inferior, worthy of pity or contempt.
- iii). We can *generalize* the other, treating the other as non-individual and thus bereft of personal identity.
- iv). We can *trivialize* the other by ignoring what makes the other disturbingly different.
- v). We can *vaporize* the other by refusing to acknowledge the presence of the other.⁴

Peace is impossible without overcoming the demarcation of “we/other” relationship—both for individuals and societies. War, discrimination, and injustice leave deep wounds. If these wounds are not addressed, resentment and hatred grow. To break this cycle of violence religion can play a crucial role if it is used as a force for peace rather than division.

St. Paul reminds us that in Jesus Christ that transformation is possible: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything is made new!” (2 Corinthians 5:17). The healing and reconciliation seek to elevate both the victim and the wrongdoer to a new place: freedom for the victim and repentance for the perpetrator. This inner change in the life of the perpetrator as well as the victim brings forth a new creation, a new humanity. St. Paul further continues: “So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5: 20). To be ambassador for Christ means to represent him in the world and embody his message of reconciliation, peace and love by pulling down the walls of hostility.

Pope John Paul II, in his message for the World Day of Peace 2002 entitled “No peace without justice and no justice without forgiveness”⁵ notes that “Forgiveness is above all a personal choice, a decision of the heart to go against the natural instinct to pay back evil with evil. The measure of such a decision is the love of God who draws us to himself in spite of our sin. It has its perfect exemplar in the forgiveness of Christ, who on the Cross prayed: ‘Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do’” (*Lk* 23:34) (no:8). Pope John Paul II also observed that forgiveness does not negate justice,[...]” (no: 5).

How can we heal?

- Forgiveness and reconciliation – The Sacrament of Confession is one way the Church helps people seek and receive healing.
- Restorative justice – Instead of just punishing criminals, restorative justice brings victims and offenders together to promote healing.
- Support for trauma survivors – Whether it’s victims of war, refugees, or those affected by violence, healing must be part of peacebuilding.

⁴ ROBERT J. SCHREITER, *Reconciliation, Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order*, pp. 52-53.

⁵ POPE JOHN PAUL II, Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, 1 January 2002, *No Peace Without Justice, No Justice Without Forgiveness*.

Healing and reconciliation are essential foundations for lasting peace. Without them, peace is only a fragile ceasefire, ready to collapse under the weight of unresolved wounds and grievances.

7. The Environmental Dimension of Peace

Finally, we must recognize that peace is not just about human relationships—it's also about our relationship with nature. Climate change, deforestation, and pollution cause suffering, especially among the world's poorest communities.

More recently, Pope Francis has emphatically reminded us again that caring for Creation and cruelly destroying the resources of poorer nations and communities also stands in the way of true peace. This more holistic idea of peace is often called 'positive peace', 'just peace' or 'sustainable peace' by scholars and practitioners.

Pope Francis, in *Laudato Si'*, reminds us that caring for the earth is part of caring for each other. Environmental destruction leads to conflict—over land, water, and resources. Protecting the planet is part of building a peaceful future.

How can we make a difference?

- Reducing waste and consumption
- Supporting sustainable practices
- Advocating for policies that protect the environment and human dignity

Peace with nature is peace with each other. Therefore, any vision of peace that ignores the ecological justice and environmental refugees is incomplete.

Conclusion

So, where do we go from here?

Building peace is not just the job of world leaders—it's our job, too. We can start by:

1. Practicing peace in our daily lives—through kindness, patience, and forgiveness.
2. Engaging in respectful dialogue—especially with those who think differently.
3. Caring for the planet—because a peaceful world must be a sustainable one.

Let us heed to the warning of Pope John Paul II pronounced in Assisi in 1986: "Either we learn to walk together in peace and harmony, or we drift apart and ruin ourselves and others" (Basilica of St Mary of the Angels, 27 October 1986, n. 5). St. Francis of Assisi prayed: "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope." Let us carry this vision forward, confident in the belief that, together, we can create the world, we dream of—a world where universal fraternity is not just a hope, but a reality.

Let us be peacemakers in our world. Thank you.