

PRAYER AND COMMENT ON PEACE AND SOCIAL COHESION AT RUWENG AND BENTIU CONFERENCE PROMOTED BY UNMISS

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Biblical Reading: Isaiah 2:1-5

"It will happen on the final days..." but what about in our time? Can we leave in peace? Can we change our way of life, give up with swords, spears and guns, and invest in building up our society rather than destroying it, and producing prosperity not only for few, but also for all people?

We often pray for peace, because it is a gift from God. Peace is the gift that Jesus gives to his disciples after his resurrection, as he stood among them and said to them: *"Peace be with you"* (Lk 24:36). God is always there to minister peace in every situation. In a very difficult moment, Jesus left his disciples with a gift: *"I leave you with the gift of peace. My own peace I give you. And the peace I give you is a gift the world cannot give"* (Jn 14:27). So, peace is God's gift.

Nonetheless, peace demands human effort as well. In his life, Jesus repeatedly called for peace and reconciliation. In his preaching, he said: *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God"* (Mt 5:9). This beatitude tells us that peace requires our commitment.

- First, peace with God through a life lived according to his will.
- Secondly, peace is an interior peace with oneself. Peace begins with me in my heart.
- Thirdly, peace is an exterior peace with our neighbours and all of creation.

Indeed, peace is the supreme good to ask as a gift from God and, at the same time, peace is to be built with our every effort by respecting the dignity of every person, promoting dialogue, seeking justice, and defending the rights of the most vulnerable people. Social cohesion is not merely a product of chance, but requires active and conscious efforts by individuals, communities, and leaders to foster unity.

In an interview last December (2024), the Holy Father, Pope Francis, condemned the hypocrisy of talking about peace while preparing for conflict by embracing a propaganda that speaks of others like they were threats or enemies. He expressed concern for the weakening of institutions that allow groups profit from the arms trade. Most countries of our world overspend in military expenditure. If part of those expenses were directed to development, avoiding any conflict, famine could possibly end. Pope Francis explained that dialogue is crucial: *"If there is no dialogue, there will be no peace. We must stop attacking one another, stop destroying one another, and start engaging one another"*.

Peace and social cohesion are achieved through dialogue. Any form of violence is always a defeat. Conflicts are caused by a lack of mutual respect and the desire to impose particular interests at the expense of the common good. These tensions often come from those who seek to polarise people and control everything, imposing their vision even on matters that should instead be handled together while seeking the common good. If a decision brings an advantage to one community at the expense of another, it is not good at all. One community benefits when all communities are fine thriving. The nation can stand when all communities can live in dignity. We have to heal the division. Our communities have more in common than what we may be ready to acknowledge; more reasons to be in solidarity than to separate with the illusion that each group can stand alone by its own.

Often decisions are based on past experiences. Sometime experiences were negative, and so we decide to carry on these grievances. Forgiveness is an essential component of any positive progress in society. Jesus gave a new commandment: *"Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another"* (Jn 13:34). *"Love your enemy so that you may be children of your Father in heaven"*

(Mt 5:44). No one is an enemy: the person you call enemy is actually a brother and sister even though they might have done something wrong. Therefore, do not make yourself an enemy to anyone by calling them your enemy. Social cohesion can only be built upon this foundation of love. It requires the active choice to forgive, to show kindness, and to give peace a chance by journeying together along the path of fraternity. St. Paul echoes this sentiment in Ephesians 4:2-3: *“Be humble and kind. Be patient. Bear with one another in love. Make every effort to keep unity through the bond of peace”*. Let us not allow any negative talk or deed rob us of the peace that our communities need and deserve. Preserving unity and upholding peace is a process that demands effort, humility, and patience.

Leaders play a key role in society to pursue peace. In Proverbs 29:2, we read: *“When the wicked are in power, the people groan. When the righteous rule, the people rejoice”*. Leaders – who are righteous and just – help to build a society where peace can be achieved. Leaders must belong to the people, pay attention to their needs and demands, and understand their thoughts and mind. However, leaders must not be led by the popular will just to win consensus. Leaders have a great responsibility. They must lead people by forming their consciences and offering a new vision that peace is always possible; that only non-violent means can solve conflicts; and that only social solidarity can bring sustainable development and real prosperity.

In conclusion, I take the chance to present to you the prayer of St Francis of Assisi that is also known as the Christian prayer for peace. It is beautiful not only reciting it this morning, but also meditating on it every day.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me bring love.
Where there is offence, let me bring pardon.
Where there is DIVISION, let me bring UNITY.
Where there is error, let me bring truth.
Where there is doubt, let me bring faith.
Where there is despair, let me bring hope.
Where there is darkness, let me bring your light.
Where there is sadness, let me bring joy.
O Lord, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love,
for it is in giving that one receives,
it is in self-forgetting that one finds,
it is in forgiving that one is forgiven,
it is in dying that one awakens to eternal life.