

# **“The Communications Media at the Service of Authentic Peace in Light of *Pacem in Terris*”**

*Message of the Holy Father for the 37th World Communications Day  
Vatican City  
January 24, 2003*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. In the dark days of the Cold War, Blessed Pope John XXIII's Encyclical Letter *Pacem in terris* came as a beacon of hope to men and women of good will. Declaring that authentic peace requires “diligent observance of the divinely established order” (*Pacem in terris*, 1), the Holy Father pointed to truth, justice, charity and freedom as the pillars of a peaceful society (ibid., 37).

The emergence of the power of modern social communications formed an important part of the Encyclical's background. Pope John XXIII had the media especially in mind when he called for “fairness and impartiality” in the use of “instruments for the promotion and spread of mutual understanding between nations” afforded by science and technology; he decried “ways of disseminating information which violate the principles of truth and justice, and injure the reputation of another nation” (ibid., 90).

2. Today, as we observe the fortieth anniversary of *Pacem in terris*, the division of peoples into opposing blocs is mostly a painful memory, but peace, justice, and social stability are still lacking in many parts of the world. Terrorism, conflict in the Middle East and other regions, threats and counter-threats, injustice, exploitation, and assaults upon the dignity and sanctity of human life, both before and after birth, are dismaying realities of our times.

Meanwhile, the power of the media to shape human relationships and influence political and social life, both for good and for ill, has enormously increased. Hence the timeliness of the theme chosen for the

Thirty-seventh World Day of Communications: “The Communications Media at the Service of Authentic Peace in the Light of *Pacem in terris*.” The world and the media still have much to learn from the message of Blessed Pope John XXIII.

3. Media and Truth. The fundamental moral requirement of all communication is respect for and service of the truth. Freedom to seek and speak what is true is essential to human communication, not only in relation to facts and information but also, and especially, regarding the nature and destiny of the human person, regarding society and the common good, regarding our relationship with God. The mass media have an inescapable responsibility in this sense, since they constitute the modern arena in which ideas are shared and people can grow in mutual understanding and solidarity. This is why Pope John XXIII defended the right “to freedom in investigating the truth and—within the limits of the moral order and the common good—to freedom of speech and publication” as necessary conditions for social peace (*Pacem in terris*, 12).

In fact, the media often do render courageous service to the truth; but sometimes they function as agents of propaganda and disinformation in the service of narrow interests, national, ethnic, racial, and religious prejudices, material greed, and false ideologies of various kinds. It is imperative that the pressures brought to bear on the media to err in such ways be resisted first of all by the men and women of the media themselves, but also by the Church and other concerned groups.

4. Media and Justice. Blessed Pope John XXIII spoke eloquently in *Pacem in terris* of the universal human good—“the good, that is, of the whole human family” (No. 132)—in which every individual and all peoples have a right to share.

The global outreach of the media carries with it special responsibilities in this regard. While it is true that the media often belong to particular interest groups, private and public, the very nature of their impact on life requires that they must not serve to set one group against another—for example, in the name of class conflict, exaggerated nationalism, racial supremacy, ethnic cleansing, and the like. Setting some against others in the name of religion is a particularly serious failure against truth and justice, as is discriminatory treatment of religious beliefs, since these belong to the deepest realm of the human person’s dignity and freedom.

By accurately reporting events, correctly explaining issues and fairly representing diverse points of view, the media have a strict duty to foster justice and solidarity in human relationships at all levels of society. This does not mean glossing over grievances and divisions but getting at their roots so that they can be understood and healed.

5. Media and Freedom. Freedom is a precondition of true peace as well as one of its most precious fruits. The media serve freedom by serving truth: they obstruct freedom to the extent that they depart from what is true by disseminating falsehoods or creating a climate of unsound emotional reaction to events. Only when people have free access to true and sufficient information can they pursue the common good and hold public authority accountable.

If the media are to serve freedom, they themselves must be free and correctly use that freedom. Their privileged status obliges the media to rise above purely commercial concerns and serve society's true needs and interests. Although some public regulation of the media in the interests of the common good is appropriate, government control is not. Reporters and commentators in particular have a grave duty to follow the demands of their moral conscience and to resist pressures to "adapt" the truth to satisfy the demands of wealth or political power.

As a practical matter, ways must be found not only to give the weaker sectors of society access to the information which they need for their individual and social development, but also to ensure that they are not excluded from having an effective and responsible role in deciding media content and determining the structures and policies of social communications.

6. Media and Love. "The anger of man does not work the righteousness of God" (James 1:20). At the height of the Cold War, Blessed Pope John XXIII expressed this simple but profound thought on what the path to peace entailed: "The preservation of peace will have to be dependent on a radically different principle from the one which is operative at the present time. True peace among nations must depend not on the possession of an equal supply of weapons, but solely upon mutual trust" (*Pacem in terris*, 113).

The communications media are key actors in today's world, and they have an immense role to play in building that trust. Their power is such that in a few short days they can create the positive or negative public reaction to events which suits their purposes. Reasonable people will

realize that such enormous power calls for the highest standards of commitment to truth and goodness. In this sense the men and women of the media are especially bound to contribute to peace in all parts of the world by breaking down the barriers of mistrust, fostering consideration of the point of view of others, and striving always to bring peoples and nations together in mutual understanding and respect—and beyond understanding and respect, to reconciliation and mercy! “Where hatred and the thirst for revenge dominate, where war brings suffering and death to the innocent, there the grace of mercy is needed in order to settle human minds and hearts and to bring about peace” (Homily at the Shrine of Divine Mercy at Kraków-Lagiewniki, 17 August 2002, No. 5).

Challenging as all this is, it is by no means asking too much of the men and women of the media. For by vocation as well as by profession they are called to be agents of truth, justice, freedom, and love, contributing by their important work to a social order “founded on truth, built up on justice, nurtured and animated by charity, and brought into effect under the auspices of freedom” (*Pacem in terris*, 167). My prayer, therefore, on this year’s World Communications Day is that the men and women of the media will ever more wholly live up to the challenge of their calling: service of the universal common good. Their personal fulfillment and the peace and happiness of the world depend greatly on this. May God bless them with light and courage.

Pope John Paul II