

Feast of Mary the Mother of God

World Day of Peace January 1, 2024

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

At the beginning of this New Year, I extend my good wishes to the people of the Diocese of Raphoe and invite you to reflect with me on how we can all be people who pray and advocate for peace in our world. By praying for peace, we assert our faith that love, kindness and mercy are greater than fear, hate and evil. When the world shows chaos, we can show peace.

Peace in our World

Some people say we are living into a Third World War that is going on piecemeal without being officially declared. We are very conscious of the ongoing tragedy of innocent people in Gaza, Israel and the West Bank. Ukraine is never far from our minds. Not so prominent is the tale of horrors going on right now in Sudan; in West Darfur 9,000 people died and 5.6 million were displaced in the past 9 months. Other ongoing conflicts we rarely hear about and yet their suffering is every bit as real.

We will live our Christian faith much more authentically if we can allow ourselves to care for our brothers and sisters enduring the pain of war and seek to hold them up in prayer. When God laid aside his Glory to share our flesh, he made himself vulnerable with the vulnerable. Having just celebrated the birth of the Prince of Peace, we now rededicate ourselves to prayer for peace and to being instruments of peace in a fractured world. May our prayer guide world leaders towards paths of justice, reconciliation, and lasting peace.

Authentic listening and dialogue

Last year I had the great privilege of representing the Irish Bishops at the Synod on Synodality. That was an opportunity to hear the experience of people throughout the Universal Church on how we as a church journey together. There are many varying perspectives in our church; conservative and liberal; East and West; developed and developing world. The synod invited me and others to create a privileged space where we could speak openly and be assured that we would be listened to respectfully. Recognising the gift of our Baptism we held 'Conversations in the Spirit' seeking notice how the Holy Spirit might be guiding us.

If we are to embrace a shared humanity, we need to be people who listen to one another. There is a temptation to surround ourselves by like-minded people but that runs the risk that we polarise and build up walls, barricading ourselves in our own narrow-mindedness. The Christian is called to seek common ground, appreciating the inherent dignity of each person. It is incumbent upon us, while remaining faithful to the truth of the Gospel and the Church's tradition, to resist the lure of polarization. The final document of the synod reminds us that: "If we use doctrine harshly and with a judgmental attitude, we betray the Gospel; if we practice mercy 'on the cheap,' we do not convey God's love."

Peace begins at home.

If peace truly begins at home, then we need to advocate at all political levels that all who reside on this island know that they have somewhere to live, rest, and raise their families without fear of eviction or intimidation. The unrest that took place in Dublin in November highlights the fragility of peace here on our own shores. The anger and vandalism on our streets was an appalling display of racism and betrayed the spirit of *Fáilte* that is central to the Irish Christian soul.

At the same time the crippling cost of living crisis and housing stress place many people in a constant state of anxiety and fear of losing their home. Many young people feel that they may never find a home. In Donegal, because of Mica, we have an additional strain as people fear that their homes, built with their life savings, will crumble and fall around them.

Caring for one another

We know well the saying; “**The measure of a society is how it treats its weakest members.**” The weakest members in our society are the unborn, children and adults who are dependent on the care of others, and people at the final stages of life. There are many family members and healthcare staff who dedicate their very lives to the care of others and their work needs to be recognised, valued and protected.

Even as the society in which we live seeks to normalise the increased availability of abortion and now the proposal of assisted suicide, we must remind ourselves and others of the sacredness of life from conception to natural death.

Artificial Intelligence; threat or opportunity

In his message for the World Day of Peace Pope Francis is encouraging us to think about the challenges of Artificial Intelligence (AI). The term AI, which we all use regularly refers to a range ‘of sciences, theories and techniques aimed at making machines reproduce or imitate ... the cognitive abilities of human beings.’ As AI devices become ever more sophisticated, they can do all kinds of things but their impact; ‘depends ... on the aims and interests of (their) owners and developers, and on the situations in which (they) will be employed.

Any of us who use the internet even a little bit can see how algorithms are at work, noting our habits, picking up our preferences and showing us ads for things that ‘they’ think we might be interested in. Those processes are already being used to ‘control mental and relational habits for commercial or political purposes, often without our knowledge.’ To what extent is AI already being used in campaigns of disinformation that spread false news, unfairly influencing elections and fostering a surveillance society in some countries? We know that so-called Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems are being developed. The very idea of **autonomous** weapons should give us pause.

The advances that are being made all the time offer ‘exciting opportunities and grave risks ... and ought to serve our best human potential and our highest aspirations, not compete with them.’ The Pope is calling on our leaders to help us prepare to deal with the impact of AI. Ireland plays a disproportionately large role in the development of IT. It is important that we be leaders in developing a proper ethics for its use based on “inclusion, transparency, security, equity, privacy and reliability”.

As a New Year opens, we are aware of many challenges before us all, but we let Christmas remind us that our God is a God of endless possibilities, and we go forward with hope in the goodness of the Lord.

May the Lord bless you and keep you.
May the Lord let his face shine on you and be gracious to you.
May the Lord uncover his face to you and bring you peace.

+Bishop Alan McGuckian SJ