



Pope Benedict challenges us to take personal steps towards achieving peace

By ACBC President, Archbishop Philip Wilson
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As we begin a New Year and look towards a new decade, it's natural for us to take a few moments to make some resolutions about what we might do to make our world a better place this year. Perhaps your resolution involves addressing an issue of importance to your own life – losing weight, quitting smoking, getting more exercise. Fabulous! But what if someone told you that by making a resolution to live more simply, and then actually following through on your resolution with concrete action, you could contribute in a real way to world peace? World peace – now that's a New Year's Resolution.

New Year's Eve celebrations, with their fireworks and exuberant partying, are a great reminder of just what an affluent country we live in. And while we can enjoy such celebrations, they can also give us pause to recall that human lifestyles, particularly in affluent nations, more than ever affect the capacity of the poor to live in security and peace. In a world which is troubled by war, hunger, and terrorism, it is important for people of good will to take stock and consider ways in which peace can be achieved.

This year in his World Day of Peace Message, Pope Benedict XVI has made an impassioned plea to all people, particularly those living in affluent nations, to care for the earth, and to be good stewards of creation. In less religious terms, the Pope is asking us, as human beings of good will to consider how our lifestyles might affect those in poorer nations.

The World Day of Peace, celebrated on January 1, is an observance launched by the Catholic Church under Pope Paul VI in 1967. This year's message contains pertinent remarks for people of all or even no faith. Pope Benedict has chosen this year to appeal to all people to care for the environment in his letter "if you want to cultivate peace, protect creation."

Pope Benedict has earned his reputation as the "Green Pope" by installing solar panels atop a Vatican audience hall and signing an agreement to make the Vatican Europe's first carbon-neutral state.

The Pope's letter came, interestingly, at the same time as the nations of the world came together to discuss how to address climate change and its effects in climate change. The letter was released early to coincide with the Copenhagen summit. Sadly, as reflected in the outcomes of Copenhagen, international consensus on a united way forward in caring for the earth remains elusive.

Pope Benedict's letter used forceful language to reason that in times of international conflict, war, terrorism and hunger, peace will never be achieved as long as people go without. Peace is made impossible by a lack of justice for those living in countries which may be reduced to nothing if action is not taken.

Human relationships with the natural environment have much to do with how we relate to one another. Indeed, Benedict is calling for a change of lifestyle – a lifestyle of simplicity. Some have used the phrase "live simply, so that others can simply live". Indeed, how we relate to the environment more than ever before affects those who have little control over their circumstances.

Pope Benedict's letter focuses in particular about the need for wealthy nations, and indeed individuals, to recognise the fundamental right to life of all – which requires in turn the right to health, food and to development.

"How can one remain indifferent in the face of problems such as climate change, desertification, the degradation and loss of productivity in vast agricultural areas, the pollution of rivers and aquifers, the loss of biodiversity, the increase in extreme weather, and the deforestation of equatorial and tropical areas?" he asked.

In this letter, Pope Benedict describes the earth in terms of a "covenant" or a sacred agreement between humans and the environment – articulating that how we treat the earth should reflect how it was lovingly created by God. "For this reason, it is imperative that mankind renew and strengthen "that covenant between human beings and the environment, which should mirror the creative love of God, from whom we come and towards whom we are journeying".

Benedict's 2010 World Peace Day message builds upon what many experts already regard as a most striking element of his social teaching. It is hoped that all people, Catholic or not, may hear this message, and start to understand the impact of excessive consumption and lack of regard for our environment.

The imminent threat to island nations such as Tuvalu and Kiribati requires a genuine and serious commitment. Sadly, Copenhagen's outcomes will not be enough, but perhaps the Pope's words may change some hearts.