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Papal peace message stresses dignity of all

By Greg Erlanson

VATICAN CITY (NC) — Pope John Paul II appealed for greater respect of the rights of the world's minorities while at the same time rejecting the "inhuman path of terrorism" as a means of correcting grievances.

In his annual World Day of Peace Message, titled "To Build Peace, Respect Minorities," the pope said that a nation's treatment of its ethnic, racial, cultural and religious minorities reveals its state of development as a civilization.

The pope also said that, "as members of the one family of God," Christians "can tolerate no division or discrimination" against such groups.

The papal message outlined rights he said should be guaranteed all minorities, including the rights to exist and to develop their own cultures. He reminded minorities that they have duties as well, particularly to contribute to the common good of the larger society.

Nowhere in the message does the pope refer by name to specific minority groups or countries.

The peace day message was dated Dec. 8 and was released by the Vatican Dec. 9. The World Day of Peace is celebrated Jan. 1.

Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, said Dec. 9 it was the first time the magisterium had dedicated a document solely to the question of minorities. The justice and peace commission helped the pope prepare the peace day message.

The pope's intention was not to list specific cases but to write a universal document that gives "the elements necessary for a conflictive situation to be resolved in peace and justice," said Cardinal Etchegaray, a French Basque.

Others must apply the pope's criteria in different situations, and local churches have been active in defending minority rights, he added.

The cardinal cited defense of Indian rights by bishops in Brazil and Guatemala.

The pope did not mention specific situations because he "does not want to single out some groups more than others," Bishop Jorge Mejia, vice president of the justice and peace commission, said at the press conference.

All violations of minority rights are of equal importance, said Bishop Mejia.

The pope termed as "delicate" the problems that arise when a minority group asks a nation for political autonomy or independence.

"Dialogue and negotiation are the obligatory path to peace" in such situations, he said, while "refusal to enter into dialogue can open the door to violence."

The pope strongly rejected terrorism as a means of righting wrongs or seeking justice.

"May those who follow the inhuman path of terrorism hear my voice," he said. "To strike blindly, kill innocent people or carry out bloody reprisals does not help a just evaluation of the claims advanced by the minorities for whom they claim to act."

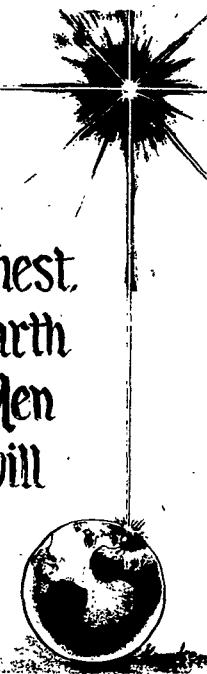
The papal message stressed the "inalienable dignity of the human person" and the unity of the human race as "fundamental principles" that must undergird society.

"In a truly democratic society, to guarantee the participation of minorities in political life is a sign of a highly developed civilization," the pope said. "It brings honor upon those nations in which all citizens are guaranteed a share in national life in a climate of true freedom."

In a message directed to Christian readers, the pope said they should tolerate no discrimination against minorities in church or society.

"Just as there can be no place for discrimination within the church, so no

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And on Earth Peace to Men of Goodwill



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Christian can knowingly foster or support structures and attitudes that unjustly divide individuals or groups," he said.

"This same teaching must be applied to those who have recourse to violence or support it," he added.

Minorities must be assured protection of their basic rights, the pope said. These rights include the right: to exist; to "preserve and develop their own culture;" to religious freedom and education; to have contacts with other communities within and outside their national borders.

The pope said a people's right to exist can be threatened not only directly, as in the extreme case of genocide, but also more subtly.

He cited the example of indigenous peoples with a "special relationship" with the land. When this is severed, he noted, they risk "disappearing as a people."

The pope criticized places where restrictions have been placed on a minority's cultural expression, including the banning of its language, names or celebrations.

The right to develop one's culture also means freedom to contact groups who share that heritage, but who might live in another country, he said.

While many of these rights are "enshrined" in laws and declarations, "the translation of law into behavior constitutes a long and slow process," according to the pope.

Individuals must contribute to this process, particularly reminding parents of their "great responsibility" to pass along these values to their children, he added.

The pope also said minorities have duties of their own as well as rights. Not only must they contribute to the common good of society, but they must "promote the freedom and dignity" of their own members, he said. This means respecting a member's decision, even if it is "to adopt the majority culture."

The pope also said minority groups who have emigrated from a situation of oppression have a duty to defend the rights of those left behind.

However, he added, such cases call for "great prudence and enlightened discernment."

"All members of minority groups, wherever they may be, must conscientiously judge the correctness of their claims in the light of historical developments and present reality," he said.

"Not to do so would involve the risk of remaining prisoners of the past without prospects for the future."



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