

**Mass of Peace with the Benedictine Torch.
3 March 2011, Westminster Cathedral**

Intro:

I am very pleased to welcome you all to this Cathedral. In particular I welcome our distinguished guests, especially from the Monastery of Monte Cassino. Father Abbot (Pietro Vittorelli) you are most welcome, together with your companions. I also welcome His Excellency Renato Boccardo, the Archbishop of Spoleto and the Abbots and representatives of the Benedictine Communities from these our own countries. And a special word for Bishop Mark Jabele, monk, former abbot, Bishop Emeritus of Menevia and now a parish priest, who kindly represented me at the Service yesterday in Westminster Abbey.

I also welcome those members of the Italian community in London, and further afield, who have been able to join us, and representatives of the Polish community who have such a strong and poignant connection with Monte Cassino, where so many of their compatriots lie buried.

This is the first time that the Benedictine Torch of Peace has been in this country. Since it was first lit in 1964, it has visited many different places but yesterday it made its first appearance here in the United Kingdom.

We begin our Mass, our solemn prayer for peace, especially here in Europe and in all the trouble spots of our world.

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HOMILY

This beautiful Benedictine torch, present in this Cathedral for the first time, is a powerful symbol of our longing for peace, for hope and for unity. It is a symbol of the light of Christ, shining in the world, drawing us closer to those longed-for gifts. And it is held aloft by the hand of faith. These are the thoughts that guide our reflection today.

The torch reminds us of our fundamental unity: a unity of our human family, rooted in the mystery of God and illuminated by the light of Christ. Today, in particular, we think of the roots of European unity, set deep in the soil of our Christian faith and heritage, of which St Benedict is such a powerful patron.

The torch reminds us of the hope we entertain for our world, a hope that goes beyond the horizon of human vision and expectation without ever deserting that vision.

Rather the hope brought by Christ casts such light on our desires and our hopes for life, for truth, for beauty, that we come to realise that such longings are destined to be fulfilled when all things are made anew in the final triumph of Our Lord.

In representing our unity and hope then, this torch stands for peace: the effort of everyone today who tries to live and proclaim life according to those deep roots and according to that transcendent hope.

Many people long for unity, for a clear hope and for peace. But today we celebrate the conviction that the Torch of Peace is carried most steadily by the hand of faith. Or, to put it another way, the pathway to peace is that of faith, and faith requires a pathway of religious freedom.

This, of course, was the theme of Pope Benedict's message for the World Day of Peace for 2011.

His point was clearly and powerfully made: ‘religious freedom is an authentic weapon of peace’ for ‘a society reconciled with God is closer to peace’ for ‘we find in God the stable point of reference for attaining authentic freedom, the inexhaustible force which can give the world a new direction and spirit, and overcome the mistakes of the past.’(No 10)

In our societies there are those who wish to minimise or withdraw that essential freedom for each person ‘to be able to freely exercise the right to profess and manifest, individually or in community, his or her own religion or faith, in public and in private, in teaching, in practice, in publications, in worship and in ritual observances’ (No 5)

Yet, as the Holy Father points out, ‘religious freedom expresses what is unique about the human person, for it allows us to direct our personal and social life to God, in whose light the identity, meaning and purpose of the person are fully understood.’

He continues: ‘To deny or arbitrarily restrict this freedom is to foster a reductive vision of the human person; to eclipse the public role of religion is to create a society which is unjust, in as much as it fails to take account of the true meaning of the human person; it is to stifle the growth of the authentic and lasting peace of the whole human family.’ (No 1)

Religious freedom is a pathway to peace. This is so important for us today, as we reflect, with many others, on our profound and insatiable longing for peace.

Pope Benedict continues by making clear how mistaken is a commonly held view about obtaining peace. There are those who believe that difference is the enemy of peace. So they wish to flatten out all difference, making every sound value relative and proposing that the human mind give up its expectation of finding truth and goodness in themselves.

The Holy Father says: ‘The illusion that moral relativism provides the key for peaceful coexistence is actually the origin of divisions and the denial of the dignity of human beings.’ The antidote, he upholds, is that firm and unswerving commitment to dialogue by which we explore a profound common inheritance of principles and values, illuminated by the gift of faith and the sound use of reason. So the Pope makes it clear that the first ones called to show mutual respect and to take the road of dialogue are those of religious faith and especially their leaders. The pathway of peace, then, is also a pathway of dialogue.

Religious education, too, is a crucial part of this pathway. A religiously illiterate people will find many obstacles on their pathway towards peace. The risk of Religious Education and Religious Studies being neglected in schools in this country if they are excluded from the core subjects of the proposed new Baccalaureate is one that must be carefully weighed. To fail to do so is to weaken the cause of peace at a crucial moment.

The hand that holds the Torch of Peace also embraces real responsibilities. This is true of every torch held aloft for peace.

Peace is never simply a romantic ideal, a movement of the heart for better times. Nor is it ever inspired simply by anger at injustice. Those who carry the Torch of Peace do well to understand all its requirements. And this is true of this Benedictine torch, too. The hand that holds the Torch of Peace must also fulfil many other inseparable responsibilities. They are the responsibilities of respect and dialogue, of compassion and reconciliation, of self-denial and sacrifice. These are the tools by which peace is built. No hand that wishes to build peace can renounce these responsibilities. And they flow to us from Christ and he is our light of unity, of hope and of peace.

During this Mass let us pray for all who aspire to be builders of peace. Let us pray especially that we will accept the responsibilities which accompany that aspiration.

Let us look to St Benedict, the holy man of peace, together with so many other saints who embodied respect, dialogue, compassion, reconciliation, self-denial and sacrifice that they may inspire us in our own journey.

May this blest torch be an inspiration for us all on this day and henceforth.

+Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster
3 March 2011