

## Christmas Message

Konrad Raiser

"Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace." This is the song the angels sing in the story of Jesus' birth in Luke's Gospel, and for the past 2,000 years, people have been inspired by this hymn of glory and peace. God takes on human form and puts an end to the conflict that is at the root of all conflicts: the conflict between God and humanity. When people give God the glory, then everything that leads to human conflict loses its justification. This is particularly the case in those places where conflicts are legitimized on religious grounds.

"Peace on Earth" is not a mere wish but a commitment. Through the birth of Jesus, peace has been given to us. From then onwards, God's peace towards all people has been reaffirmed. It is God's gift to us. The peace of God is more than a written declaration, an agreement or a programme. It does not aim at tranquillity, harmony or the absence of conflict and fighting. The Bible has a global conception of peace which is about life in right relationships, the well-being of all, not only human beings but also the whole of creation. Peace reigns when – according to the will of God – all have enough of the basic necessities of life.

The Gospel invites us to live this way. It is a message that needs to be retold, particularly at the end of a year which has been so marked by war and violence. When Christians and churches support peace and justice as they did in their unanimous protest against the war in Iraq, then they are strengthening God's covenant of peace with humanity. The ecumenical Decade to Overcome Violence – launched by the World Council of Churches in 2001 – has been taken up, supported and further developed by many churches and groups. The Decade aims to strengthen individual Christians and churches in their work for a just and peaceful world and to demonstrate ways of non-violent and peaceful conflict resolution.

An important part of the commitment to ensure that the message of peace and justice in life reaches one and all is the adequate response of the churches to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. More than 8,000 people a day die of this preventable and controllable disease. This is much more than the number of deaths due to all the conflicts around the world put together. If churches remain silent or ignore this reality, we will be guilty of causing the suffering and death of people whose lives could have been saved. The peaceful message of life in right relationship with God is a call to struggle against the stigmatisation and discrimination of people who live with HIV and AIDS. It is an urgent call to mobilise all our energies to promote education and prevention work and ensure the availability of treatment for all. Above all, the message of peace calls us to show care, concern and respect for each other in our human relationships.

In both overcoming violence and responding to the threat of HIV and AIDS, it is a case of trying to make visible in different areas of life the covenant of peace that God has made with humanity: in relationships between the sexes; in families, which are so often places of violence; in politics, which is marked by the desire for power and rule over

others; and in an economic system which wages war on the poor and disadvantaged. The Christmas message of "peace on earth" is about overcoming hopelessness and resignation and giving people courage to take both small steps and long strides forward. It invites all people to become peace-makers and, by so doing, to become children of God (Matt 5.9) who join in the angels' hymn of praise to God's glory.

The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches, now 342, in more than 120 countries in all continents from virtually all Christian traditions. The Roman Catholic Church is not a member church but works cooperatively with the WCC. The highest governing body is the assembly, which meets approximately every seven years. The WCC was formally inaugurated in 1948 in Amsterdam, Netherlands. Its staff is headed by general secretary Konrad Raiser from the Evangelical Church in Germany.