



JESUS, THE PRINCE OF PEACE

*2025 Christmas Message of His Eminence, Peter Ebere Cardinal Okpaleke
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My dear Brothers and Sisters,

When he stepped onto the Central Balcony of St. Peter's Square after his election on May 8, 2025, the first public words of Pope Leo XIV, was "Peace be with you!" I was there and this struck me deeply. The Pope then continued: "dearest brothers and sisters, this is the first greeting of the Risen Christ, the good shepherd who gave his life for God's flock. I, too, would like this greeting of peace to enter your heart, to reach your families, to all people, wherever they are, to all peoples, to the whole earth. Peace be with you!"

In Isaiah's prophecy, the Messiah will restore cosmic peace. "The wolf will live with the lamb, the panther lie down with the kid" (Is 11:6). This is more than the absence of conflict. It includes wholeness, holiness and love. In His days, justice shall flourish and peace till the moon fails (Ps. 72:7). Therefore, in union with the Risen Christ and with the angels at His birth we say, "glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace to people of good will" (Lk 2:14). Our prayer is that peace may flow like a river, at the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, despite the sorrows of insecurity, senseless killings, untold hardship, etc., like sea billows, roaring around us.

Indeed, peace is the yearning of every heart, even the hearts of those who seem to thrive on conflict, violence and confusion. Behind their façade of toughness are emptiness and despair. Having given up on the possibility of peace based on mutual trust, they succumb to the deception of violence. Some become so wanton in their aggression and engage in genocidal acts. Others subscribe to sayings such as: "good fence makes good neighbors," "if you want peace you must prepare for war," "peace from the barrel of the gun," "the best defence is an attack," "*agwo e meghi ihe o ji buru agwo, umuazi achia ya n'aka*," etc. These perspectives recommend fight or flight as the default mode of human existence.

The Good News is that peace is a gift, not just to Christians but to humanity. It is a deep longing that has been met in Jesus, the prince of peace (Is 9:6), the Father's gift to the world (Jn 3:16). Jesus is the way, truth and life (Jn 14:6). He is our peace, a peace unlike any that the world can ever give (Jn 14:27). At Christmas and in everyday life, all are invited to accept Jesus, to

accept his way and to share his light. His light not only dispels the darkness of violence but also the mistrust and self-centredness that generate that darkness. His light gives the courage to trust, to be vulnerable, to stand for truth, to believe in the goodness of human beings despite betrayals and to remain open to reconciliation.

At the heart of the journey to peace is truth. When the truth is known, told and things are arranged accordingly, there is a greater likelihood of understanding, trust, cooperation, and thus peace. A false narrative, on the other hand, is likely to elicit contestation, recrimination, and breach of the peace. Where the truth cannot be established in any way acceptable to the parties, rival truth claims are made and backed up by the threat of real or imagined violence. This is the situation in some families and communities. Because of the predominance of oral tradition, the death of an elder implies the loss of salient segments of the history of families and communities. More significantly, there is a generation of elders who are not grounded in the history and traditions of their families and communities because they left the village or their families for the urban centres early in life. They are, therefore, forced to rely, for information about, for example, their family land, family history and interconnection, on others who have stayed longer in the village. The result is divergent and often conflicting information about a piece of land under contention. Such rival claims might end up in court and be disposed of on technical grounds. This perpetuates enmity and acrimony in the community or what amounts to the peace of a graveyard.

It is very significant that Jesus was born when Mary and Joseph went up to Bethlehem to be counted and documented in the census ordered by Caesar Augustus (Lk 2:1). Similarly, Christmas season is a wonderful period for family members, estranged from each other, to seek reconciliation. The family reunions that take place during the season are golden opportunities for families and communities to retell and possibly put in writing, for posterity, their shared history. As past mistakes are remedied, efforts should be made by heads of families and individuals to have records of significant events in their individual lives as well as the life of the family. This will provide true accounts preserved in more undisputable forms for future generations.

Truth conduces to peace. Christmas shows us the truth of God's love. Accepting this truth in one's life is the first step in becoming an instrument of God's peace. As we celebrate this wonderful event, may we participate actively in the search for peace which, the Holy Father, Pope Leo XIV, in his message for the World Day of Peace 2026, calls the "most silent of revolutions."

Peace be with you!