



New Years Message - World Day of Peace 2026

Bishop Alan McGuckian, SJ
Diocese of Down and Connor

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

"One year older and still no wiser!" was the rueful remark of an old priest friend every year when I wished him a happy birthday. I am reminded of my old friend now as we usher in another New Year.

Each New Year's Day, the Pope calls on us to pray for peace and Pope Leo reminds us: "Goodness is disarming. Perhaps this is why God became a child. The mystery of the Incarnation, which reaches its deepest descent even to the realm of the dead, begins in the womb of a young mother and is revealed in the manger in Bethlehem." In this beautiful paradox — God choosing vulnerability over power, an infant's cry over triumphant declaration — we discover the true nature of divine peace.

Throughout the Gospels, the words "peace be with you" echo like a sacred refrain, marking the profound peace that has entered our world. The angel Gabriel came to Mary, declaring "Peace be with you." On that first Christmas night, the angels sang "Peace on earth" to shepherds keeping watch. When he rose from the dead Jesus' first words to the disciples were: "Peace be with you" (John 20:19), offering hope, victory over death, and a peace the world cannot give.

Consider that remarkable moment: Jesus entered a room full of frightened disciples who had been in hiding since his crucifixion. To these fearful men, he offered not rebuke but peace, and then commissioned them: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you," empowering them to spread that peace throughout the world. This is a commission that we, as missionary disciples, all share in today.

Like the rueful old priest, I look on a world that is no wiser. I am conscious that we in Ireland live in what are called "peace times," yet the reality is far more complex. The lingering paramilitary presence, the scourge of drugs and criminality, and the unresolved hurts of so many families who have failed to see justice — particularly those who have lived with the long and unnecessary heartache of loved ones who were disappeared — means that our peace is merely relative. There is also the deep pain within our homes, those places where our families should thrive, but which are too often blighted by domestic violence. Families experience enormous distress while social and mental health services struggle to meet the demands of so many in crisis. Violent crimes that leave people with life-changing injuries and the terrible loss of life do not speak of a peaceful society.

We have much work to do in our own place to support people in our communities to experience both the love of Christ and the transforming love of Christ's disciples — those who will help people transform their lives from ones marked by violent acts to acts of love that build up our communities. I thank God for the work of so many groups, both those linked to the Church and those inspired by the Gospel, who reach out with practical help to love the poor, the homeless and the stranger among us. One picture that stays with me and that captures the work of so many others is the fact that St Mary's Church on Chapel Lane in Belfast provides a welcome to all the street-dwellers in Belfast on those winter nights when freezing temperatures create an absolute emergency.

Across the world we have brothers and sisters whose lives are torn asunder by the ravages of war. As Christians, we are called to see in every conflict the face of Christ suffering anew, to recognise that wars and violence anywhere diminish our shared humanity. We cannot close our eyes to the suffering in East Africa, Palestine, Somalia, Syria, Ukraine, Yemen and countless other places where the drums of war drown out the angels' song of peace.

Moreover, those who arrive on our shores, displaced by the terrors of war and persecution, must find welcome and opportunity among us. They are not statistics or problems to be managed; they are our brothers and sisters, bearers of Christ's image, seeking the peace that we ourselves cherish. In offering them hospitality, we become instruments of the very peace Christ commissioned his disciples to spread.

Even if the evidence of our eyes tells us that we are no further forward on the way to peace, Christ calls us to be people of undying hope for peace. Finally, please listen to the words of Pope Leo and let him inspire us to be carriers of hope and peace:

“Just as on the evening of Easter Jesus entered the place where his disciples were gathered in fear and discouragement, so too the peace of the risen Christ continues to pass through doors and barriers in the voices and faces of his witnesses.” (World Day of Peace message 2026)

Peace be with you! Síocháin libh!

Pope Leo's prayer intentions for 2026.

January: For prayer with the word of God. Let us pray that praying with the word of God be nourishment for our lives and a source of hope in our communities, helping us to build a more fraternal and missionary Church.

February: For children with incurable diseases. Let us pray that children suffering from incurable diseases and their families receive the necessary medical care and support, never losing strength and hope.

March: For disarmament and peace. Let us pray that nations move toward effective disarmament, particularly nuclear disarmament, and that world leaders choose the path of dialogue and diplomacy instead of violence.

April: For priests in crisis. Let us pray for priests going through moments of crisis in their vocation, that they may find the accompaniment they need and that communities may support them with understanding and prayer.

May: That everyone might have food. Let us pray that everyone, from large producers to small consumers, be committed to avoid wasting food and to ensure that everyone has access to quality food.

June: For the values of sports. Let us pray that sports be an instrument of peace, encounter, and dialogue among cultures and nations, and that they promote values such as respect, solidarity, and personal growth.

July: For respect for human life. Let us pray for the respect and protection of human life in all its stages, recognising it as a gift from God.

August: For evangelisation in the city. Let us pray that in large cities often marked by anonymity and loneliness we find new ways to proclaim the Gospel, discovering creative paths to build community.

September: For the care of water. Let us pray for a just and sustainable management of water, a vital resource, so that everyone may have equal access to it.

October: For mental health ministry. Let us pray that mental health ministry be established throughout the Church, helping to overcome the stigma and discrimination of persons with mental illnesses.

November: For the proper use of wealth. Let us pray for the proper use of wealth, that not succumbing to the temptation of selfishness, it may always be put at the service of the common good and solidarity of those who have less.

December: For single-parent families. Let us pray for families experiencing the absence of a mother or father, that they may find support and accompaniment in the Church, and help and strength in the faith during difficult times.