

I have before me the photograph of a little child, running playfully through the billowing folds of a huge rainbow coloured peace banner. Taken at a peace gathering in Assisi during the past year, this is the image we have chosen in Pax Christi to illustrate Pope Benedict's World Peace Day message "*The Human Person - the Heart of Peace.*" This child, playing in safety and freedom, reminds me that all children, indeed all people, and especially the weakest among us, have a right to life and protection.

Over the Christmas season we see many images of another child, the Christ-child. Small, beautiful, vulnerable, lovable. We are drawn to protect such life. It makes sense to want to protect such life. But sometimes the real life of those around us is not so neat, so beautiful or lovable.

Those whose lives are damaged by poverty, domestic violence, armed conflict, prejudice, hatred and fear are seldom beautiful in the eyes of the world, if, indeed they are seen at all. They become an affront to the culture of celebrity, success and achievement that so dominates our world. So, they may be silenced, hidden and ignored.

In his World Peace Day message, Pope Benedict reminds us that it is when we begin to see and respect the human person - the woman, the man, the child before us, however they may appear to us - that we truly begin to build peace in our world. The needs, the rights, the protection of others becomes the measure of all that is important in building deep and meaningful relationships.

One of the great insights which our faith and its teachings offer us is the ability to make connections between the personal and the social, the private and the political. So, we challenge the practice of abortion and we also challenge the use of the death penalty. We speak out against the use of torture and we also speak out against the possession and threatened use of weapons of mass destruction. We reject so-called 'mercy-killings' and we also reject structural poverty that degrades thousands of the world's people. We strive to be consistent in the way we place the human person at the heart of all the choices and decisions we make in life.

The image of the Seamless Garment, the Seamless Cloak - or indeed the rainbow peace banner that flowed around the child in Assisi - illustrate well this all-enveloping approach to life. From the cradle to the grave, from the womb to the tomb, the human person is held and protected by acts of love, acts of justice and acts of peacemaking.

With these images in mind we begin our New Year - seeking ways of sheltering one another and upholding one another with dignity and in justice.

From the world-wide family of Pax Christi, the international Catholic movement for Peace I wish you all a happy and joy-filled New Year.