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## CHRISTMAS MESSAGE 2024

In these days leading up to Christmas, I'm very pleased to have the chance to say hello and offer you my best wishes as we prepare for the feast. I wish you peace and joy as we celebrate the birth of Christ. I hope your Christmas has something of the joyful spirit of the recent celebration at Notre Dame cathedral in Paris.

Five years ago, Notre Dame was severely damaged by fire. Yet, through the wonderful work of many people, the cathedral has been restored to its former beauty.

The restoration is a tribute to the cooperation of a team of dedicated workers. Architects planned the project. Carpenters fashioned the oak beams that support the roof. Workers in stone carved the figures that adorn the cathedral. Experts in stained glass restored the windows. So many skilled people combined their talents to achieve a magnificent result. Together they rebuilt the cathedral, and the reopening was celebrated with great joy.

Sadly, this contrasts with the pain of other events in our world at the moment. For many people, this is not a time of celebrating the joy of building. Rather, it is a time of feeling the sorrow of destruction.

So many places are enduring the devastation of war – the destruction of buildings and the destruction of people's lives. There is suffering in Ukraine and Israel and Gaza and Lebanon and many other places. In each case there is destruction and sorrow.

In a few weeks' time we'll be celebrating Christmas. We'll read of the angel appearing to the shepherds, announcing the birth of the Saviour. We'll hear that a host of angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace." (Luke 2:8-14)

We might feel some sadness in hearing these verses as we think of the strife in so many countries. Yet, it's important not to lose hope. Pope Francis has highlighted this in the theme for the coming Holy Year. The theme is "Pilgrims of Hope". The Pope is encouraging us to be pilgrims of hope, to walk on together in a spirit of hope – hope in God and hope in one another as brothers and sisters in the one human family. Hope can give us the strength to persevere in our search for peace.

Jesus said to his first disciples, "Peace be with you." As we move towards Christmas, I pray the same for you. Peace be with you. We reflect in sorrow on the suffering in so many places. Yet, we continue to pray that conflicts might be ended, and sorrow might turn to joy.

May this Christmas bring peace and joy to you and your family. May this Christmas bring peace and joy to our world. Merry Christmas, one and all. God bless us, everyone.

*Bishop Paul Bird CSSR*