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The Church begins each New Year with a day of prayer for peace. Yet each New Year peace seems as elusive and as far off as ever. The names of the war zones may change, but conflicts remain, and war and terrorism never seem to go away.

All too often we see humanity try to resolve conflict with the bullet and the bomb. All too often we see property destroyed, communities shattered and innocent human life snuffed out.

Pope Paul VI went to the United Nations in 1965 and pleaded: No more War. Pope Francis, marking 50th anniversary of the end of World War II in 2015, pleaded yet again: No more war. We all feel that plea in our heart, and every time we see death and destruction we feel the senselessness of human conflict and our desire for peace increases, along with our frustration at being unable to bring peace to a troubled world.

Women and men from all nations, cultures, backgrounds, and religions have in their hearts a deep longing for peace. It is the frailty of our fractured human nature that means we are unable to achieve it. The conflict in our families and communities at home - the harsh word, the selfish act, the arrogant condemnation - is multiplied on the national and international scale.

The failings and weaknesses of our individual human relationships are mirrored in the failings between communities and states.

We can call that human failure, sin, and it is our sinfulness that stops us achieving peace in our homes, never mind peace in our world.

We may be focussed now on religious fundamentalism as the cause of conflict, but history is littered with “isms”: nationalism, imperialism, communism, capitalism, racism - which at one time or another have been the spark and the drive and the justification for violence. What is unchanging is the human condition.

The birth of Jesus into our world 2000 years ago is a reminder to us that we cannot save ourselves. Our flawed human nature means that any peace we achieve is often a flawed peace carrying in itself the seeds of its own destruction.

That is why we have a day of prayer for peace, for we need God to change us. This year we pray for peace during the Year of Mercy. We need God’s mercy to touch our hearts and the hearts of our fellow human beings. We need God’s mercy to heal the rifts and divisions that fracture our relationships. We need God’s mercy to soothe away the hurts and pains that keep bitterness alive in our hearts. We need God’s mercy to teach us to be merciful ourselves. For only human beings who are merciful to each other can ever live in peace and harmony and in a world free of violence and war.

Keeping in mind the theme of this Holy Year, may our prayer for peace enable us to become *Merciful like the Father*.

Signed,

+William Nolan
Bishop of Galloway
President of the Justice and Peace Commission of the Bishops Conference of Scotland