



The Holy See

VISITA PASTORALE NEI PAESI BASSI

INCONTRO DI GIOVANNI PAOLO II CON I CORPI COSTITUITI E CON IL CORPO DIPLOMATICO*

Bruxelles (Belgio)

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Your Majesties, Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. It is with much joy that I once again meet with their Majesties the King and Queen, and that I encounter in their company the various authorities of Belgium, the representatives of all those men and women who work for the common good in this country: at the level of the central government – Ministries, the Senate, the House of Representatives – at the level of regional governments, of linguistic communities, of provinces, in the capacity of Burgomasters, of representatives of the Magistracy, of the Army, of political and social groups, as well as the other Belgian personages whom I hope not to have omitted and whom I wish to personally greet one by one shortly.

The pastoral visit which I am making in your country offers me the occasion to directly communicate with a population whose every community and city has its own personality, enriched by a long history characterized by a humanism which, in its origins, was tied to Christianity. I am happy now to bring my testimony before those who exercise an elevated responsibility in the service of this people.

I greet with equal cordiality those persons who are foreigners, in particular the members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the King: ladies and gentlemen, you represent numerous countries, many of which maintain relations with the Holy See as well.

To all of you who have wished to honour my visit by your presence here I express my respectful regards and my warm wishes for the carrying out of your important duties. Meetings like this one

are customary in the course of my apostolic journeys. It is not a privilege reserved by the Church for those in power, but the expression of the deep interest that the Pope and the Church have in the qualified contribution that you are called to make towards the development of your task; the good of your fellow countrymen, or international peace.

2. Permit me first of all to manifest my esteem for and attachment to the Belgium which welcomes me today. Last Saturday, with my brothers in the episcopate, I recalled the salient points of the history of Christianity in this country, which has left so many traces in monuments, the arts, traditions, customs, or in the form of present-day institutions. I did it in order to give thanks to God, and with the desire to infuse new zeal into the evangelization effort within the current context.

But the civil history of your nation is no less enthralling. From eras long past this country has forged a civilization imbued with the Christian faith. It has been able to defend 'its own originality and its own civic responsibilities, especially around its prestigious cities. Certainly for a long time it belonged to other states, kingdoms or empires, either by force, or by reason of alliance; sometimes it suffered from this, sometimes it offered resistance, often it was able to integrate the influences, making of them an enrichment. But in every case the nation remained itself, with its own personality, its own taste for independence, for freedom. In more recent times, beginning in 1830, the country has sought to realize its destiny in full independence, associating in a democratic way – and democracy is always difficult – all the components of the nation, with their different political, religious and humanistic convictions, as well as their diverse cultures.

Yes, it is a rich history – with its lights and shadows – to which I pay tribute. My native country, which has links with this country in various fields, feels close to it. And the Holy See considers the Church in' Belgium a precious part of the universal Church.

3. I want to dwell for a moment upon the modern cultural physiognomy of Belgium, which resembles that of Europe itself, of which I will speak this afternoon before the Council and the Commission of the Communities. Belgium is situated at the confluence of the great cultural currents that have fecundated this continent, and it incorporates in itself the diversity of Europe, with its riches and its inevitable tensions. A diversity which requires a difficult equilibrium, a wise dosage of responsibility and of power, the creation of suitable institutions, the desire for openness, for recognition of others, the seeking of constructive compromises, of exchanges and of collaboration. A diversity which is an opportunity if it is lived well in mutual respect and love between the various communities, having a clear sense of what is required for the common good of all. I ardently hope that it will always be thus, in the interest of all the citizens of this country. From this point of view Belgium, which hosts important communitarian institutions, could also constitute an example for the whole of Europe. I would like to see in that a vocation and an original role for your country.

4. Whatever may be the delicate internal problems in need of resolution – to which are added the

difficulties of the economic crisis and changes – Belgium, like Europe itself, could not live turned in upon itself. And here too it pleases me to point out in history the interest which the men and women of this nation have constantly shown in the countries of other continents. The motives can be diverse, and must be placed in the context of their era: the spirit of adventure, of conquest, of economic and commercial initiative, of cultural expansion, the missionary spirit.

As far as missionary work is concerned, it sought to be an unselfish sharing of the faith: the faith in fact belongs to no one, and each person who has received it through grace must contribute to offering it, together with the Church, to all nations. Well then, the missionary service of this country is even today extraordinary for the number and quality of Belgian priests, religious and laity who have consecrated their energies to evangelization in Africa, but also in the Great North of America, in Latin America, in China, in India, and even elsewhere. The representatives of those countries here present can testify to it.

Yes, Belgians have had a radiating influence out of all proportion to the size of their territory. It pleases me to underline their merits, their universal openness; today such a commitment can only be lived as a reciprocal service and exchange between sister nations, between sister Churches.

5. And now, Ladies and Gentlemen, I express my wish that you all do what you can so that the solutions to internal problems, as well as actions directed outwards, might enter into a grand human design. Man must not permit himself to become absorbed by the pursuit of compromises or balances that assure a precarious peace, to suit particular interests. There is a certain number of principles which it is the task of all of you to put into effect in a sincere joint effort, because it is a question of essential goods upon which the value of every society and of the world community is founded. They concern those who have responsibilities in this country, and in the same measure the members of the Diplomatic Corps. Moreover, I often have occasion to mention these ethical principles. I will content myself with enumerating some of them, confident that your consciences already adhere to them.

In general, we must promote a certain conception of man which is founded upon an authentic humanism. We must not allow the human person to suffer from undue diminishing actions, becoming in some way an object in a materialist vision which sees only his economic value, or which is willing to sacrifice him as a means, to manipulate him in various ways. The same thing holds true regarding the dignity of every people.

The fundamental principle will always be the dignity of the human person, respect for his inalienable fundamental rights, which are invoked by the majority of our contemporaries but which in reality are trampled upon in a certain number of regions of the earth. Among these rights is naturally found respect for human life in all the phases of its development, from conception to old age, and also respect for the human embryo, which cannot be subjected to experiments as though it were an object. These rights also regard the dignity of life, that is the material possibilities for

living decently, but also freedom of mind, of opinions, of convictions and of beliefs, in so far as these beliefs themselves respect others. This implies the banning of torture, of internment, and of the other degrading practices designed to punish crimes of opinion. Dignity demands in particular that no obstacles be placed before conscience, religion and religious practice, or before the means necessary for the formation of the faith and participation in worship, in stable communities. Dignity is also the refusal of every compromise with terrorism – which uses the lives and goods of innocent persons as means – and this no matter what the motives invoked by it; it would be absolutely necessary to banish terrorism from humanity by means of a genuine agreement among all countries. Dignity is the seeking of a just solution for the refugees who have had to leave their own countries because of war or political intolerance and who live in great numbers in camps, isolated and often in a state of intolerable neglect. Finally, dignity is clearly respect for the cultures of diverse human groups, and the elimination of all racial discrimination.

I have no doubt that such convictions, simple and fundamental, are shared by all those who listen to me here, especially in this land of Belgium which so loves freedom. I mention them because it is my mission to recall these intangible principles before mankind, and I hope that you yourselves can contribute to the promotion of these requirements in the world, with the means at your disposal.

But it is not solely a question of rejecting violence or that which offends against fundamental rights in a flagrant way. It is a question of undertaking positive actions that express our solidarity in order to help men to respond to their profound needs; and it is a question of educating them towards this solidarity. For example, we must promote the values of the family, help families to be stable, united, disposed to welcome new life; watch over the education of the young towards authentic human love, see to it that they do not close themselves off in behaviour marked by hedonism and individualism, but rather that they understand the positive meaning of freedom, of responsibilities, as well as the requirements of the common good. On the social plane we must do what is possible in order that economic progress remains at the service of man and not vice versa. In each country there are initiatives to undertake in assisting the unemployed, outcasts, those who are victims of living conditions that are too precarious, in protecting the weak and providing a place in society for immigrant workers. Belgium knows these problems well, having generously welcomed many foreigners.

Then if one looks at other countries it becomes evident that it is necessary to dedicate ourselves to reducing the striking disparity between the Northern and Southern hemispheres, to undertake an effective solidarity with countries that suffer hunger and the complete lack of the means of subsistence and medical care.

In order to realize this international assistance and at the same time to safeguard peace, decreasing the threat of grave destruction, agreement between Nations must be strengthened, with the purpose of reducing the arms race, especially reducing the investments in weapons of

mass destruction. It is necessary, furthermore, to remedy the situation of a world divided into various blocs which are too closed off for reasons of ideology. And what must one do when faced with wars that continue here and there in an absurd manner, with their harvest of ruins and death? Today how can one fail to think of Lebanon, driven back and forth for so many years between fear and hope, while innocent people continue to be threatened, exiled or massacred? Given the interdependence which today links the various members of the world community, each country is called to do what is in its power to lead the diverse peoples towards wisdom, to convince them to renounce attempts to impose themselves upon others by force and instead to seek solutions negotiated in justice.

6. All that I have just underlined for the improvement of the lot of mankind certainly goes beyond the competencies and responsibilities of each of you as individuals, and doubtless of each of your countries as well. Yet they are objectives that all men of good will must tenaciously desire and seek, not just with words but with concrete acts that prepare their realization. They are ethical principles that indicate the obligatory path of a total humanism and true peace that correspond to God's design for the world. What is directly in your power are political measures within each of your countries or within the communities to which you belong; they are at least proposals of political measures, or measures of an administrative character, or finally ways of intervening in education, in schools or in the means of social communication. Nonetheless, you know well that political desire, however generous it might be, is not effective unless it is based on prepared public opinion and, let us say it, on a consensus of consciences. In this area is the world perhaps not in need of new animation, of greater spiritual strength?

The Church for her part does not have direct competence in the realm of political options. Yet you know the important contribution which she can make in the formation of the consciences of leaders and the consciences of the people. The Church not only has the possibility to educate, but also to establish ethical principles upon a certain idea of man, created in the image of God and liberated from evil by Jesus Christ. She appeals to the resources of charity and of reconciliation. This means that she is the ally – the demanding ally – of all who have at heart the destiny of mankind.

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