



# The Holy See

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APOSTOLIC PILGRIMAGE  
TO NORWAY, ICELAND, FINLAND,  
DENMARK AND SWEDEN

## ECUMENICAL MEETING

### *ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II*

*Iceland's National Shrine, Thingvellir*  
*Saturday, 3 June 1989*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

1. Thingvellir. This National Shrine is forever linked to the Christian and civil history of Iceland, and I am well aware of the particular significance of holding this ecumenical service in this place.

“Höfum allir ein lög og einn sid”  
 (“We all have one law and one religion”)

It was here, at “*All Men’s Chasm*”, *Almanagja*, that Thorgeir Ljosvetningagodi uttered this decision after the twenty-four hour “vigil of the cloak”. It was *then, almost a thousand years ago, that Iceland became Christian.*

Madam President: thank you for your presence at this special event which is also in tribute to great moments of the history of your country.

Bishop Jolson, and brothers and sisters of the Catholic faith: again I greet you all in the love of our Lord Jesus Christ.

To you, Bishop Pétur Sigurgeirsson, I wish to extend a special word of thanks for all you have done to underline the significance of this event, as an expression of friendship and Christian charity. Your presence is dear to me, and I greet you in the fellowship which is ours through Christ.

I also cordially greet you, Bishop Olafur Skulason and wish you well in the new ministry you will undertake shortly.

In the grace of God and the peace of Jesus Christ I salute this ecumenical gathering. Together with you, my Catholic and Lutheran brothers and sisters, I give thanks to the Father for the Good News of our salvation through *our Baptism and faith in Jesus Christ*.

2. The Christian religion was brought to Iceland by missionaries who responded to the words of Christ which we have just heard from the Gospel according to Saint Matthew: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (*Matth. 28, 19-20*). Your ancestors answered this call *by accepting Christ and striving to forge a society based on his teachings*. A great Christian era of religion, culture and sanctity began so that the words of the Psalmist can well express what was accomplished by faith for centuries afterwards: “O Lord; you have been our refuge from one generation to the next” (*Ps. 89, 1*).

More than five hundred years later the divisions which shook Christian Europe were brought here. A painful time in Christian history had begun, and the effects of it persist to this day. The staunch Bishop Jon Arason resisted the shifts taking place in Icelandic faith and culture and gave his life for his beliefs. Frail and human though he was, he showed the typical courage of an Icelander, a churchman and a bishop, by shedding his blood at Skalholt.

Yet the changes became accepted. In this new context, too, many Icelanders served the Lord in holiness and were generous in works of evangelical love and mercy. To mention one example, the great *Hallgrimur Petersson called the nation to the Lord* through his *Hymns of the Passion*. A prayer which he wrote fits well the spiritual hopes and struggles of many in our own times:

“Oft am I unbelieving –  
 Thou knowest me, my Lord,  
 Fast to my error cleaving,  
 Unmindful of thy word.  
 Yet I would now seek truly  
 Thy counsels to obey,  
 Turn from my ways unruly.  
 Grant me thy grace, I pray”.

3. *Deep wounds were inflicted on the western Christian world, wounds which are still in need of healing*. We must persevere on the path to unity, not for reasons of convenience, but because this is the declared will of Christ, “the head of the Church, his body” (*Eph. 5, 23*).

It is important to remember that *down the centuries Lutherans and Catholics and other Christians*

*have continued to have much in common.* Through Baptism we are all incorporated into the crucified and glorified Christ. In the reading we have just heard, Saint Paul addresses the Corinthians and, in recognition of the fact that they are united with him in one and the same faith, he reminds them that they “were all baptized into one body... and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (1Cor. 12, 13). Baptism, as the beginning of salvation in each individual, contains an internal dynamism which is “wholly directed towards the acquiring of the fullness of life in Christ” (Cfr. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 22). It is thus “oriented towards a complete profession of faith, a complete incorporation into the system of salvation *as Christ himself willed it to be*, and finally towards a complete participation in Eucharistic communion” (*Ibid.*). The challenge before us is to overcome little by little the obstacles to this communion and grow together into that unity of the one Church of Christ, that unity with which he endowed her from the beginning. The seriousness of the task forbids rashness or impatience, but the duty of responding to Christ’s will demands that *we remain steadfast on the path towards peace and unity among all Christians.*

We know that it is not ourselves who will heal the wounds of division and re-establish unity – we are merely *instruments* that God can use. Unity among Christians will be *God’s gift, in his own moment of grace.* Humbly we strive towards that day, growing in love, in mutual forgiveness and trust.

4. While we honour Iceland’s Christian foundations, our eyes turn to the future. We see on the horizon *the approach of a new millennium*, only a decade away. The headlong pace of modern life shows that this nation, indeed the world, is facing new challenges as we move towards the twenty-first century. Developments in economic and political life, and new possibilities in the life-sciences, call you to *a wise discernment of the truths and values inherent in your best traditions.* They are truths and values which must be firmly upheld if the spiritual freedom and genuine well-being of future generations of Icelanders is to be safeguarded.

Family life has already been deeply affected by change, and not always for the good. *The traditional Icelandic home has always been a school of faith, love and moral teaching.* Its spirit is reflected in a story written by your late beloved Father Jon Svensson, of the Society of Jesus, affectionately known as “Father Nonni”. Nonni’s mother bids farewell to him in simple words which go to the heart of your traditions: “Be honest”, she says, “and don’t forget God”. But the fact is that *families are facing new and serious pressures* which can only be met by a renewed and deeper respect for *life and love.* It is essential to recover an awareness of the primacy of moral values, *to reflect on the ultimate meaning of life and its transcendent destiny.*

In this important matter there is so much that all Christians *can do together.* I encourage you to continue to cooperate in identifying the deeper questions affecting your society and to answer these questions with evangelical wisdom.

5. The uncertainty and confusion brought by certain changes in social and family life call to mind

*three priorities which are pastoral in nature and which are fully in conformity with the decision to accept Christianity which was made here a thousand years ago.* These priorities have great meaning for Christians always and everywhere.

The first is this: *as Christians, our lives must be rooted firmly in Christ.* He is the “rock of our salvation” (Ps. 93, 22), “the Way, and the Truth and the Life” (Io. 14, 6). *Iceland recognized this in the year 1000, and Iceland is called to renew that faith in our own time.* It is significant that Jesus’ command to his disciples to go and teach all nations is immediately followed by his promise: “I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matth. 28, 20). Yes, “*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and for ever*” (Hebr. 13, 8). In the midst of change, Christ remains our steadfast hope. No one should think that the Christian message is in some way contrary to human progress or to humanity’s legitimate aspirations to truth, freedom and justice.

Does not the Gospel of Saint John promise the fulfilment of such aspirations in the deepest possible sense when it proclaims: “the Son continues for ever... if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (Io. 8, 35-36).

The second priority is this: *because we are rooted in Christ we must also bear public witness to him.* It is of the very nature of being a Christian to evangelize, to spread the word in season and out of season (Cfr. 2Tim. 4, 2), to witness to the Gospel in times of calm and in times of turmoil, by the way we live. It is especially when civilization is in transition, and when it seems that a new set of secular values is emerging, that humanity needs to hear the Gospel of God’s love for us in Christ, the good news that “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us... therefore we are now... reconciled to God” (Rom. 5, 8-10). Now especially is the time for all Christians *to bear witness with vigour to the great act of reconciliation accomplished for us by God through Jesus Christ.*

The third priority involves *our responsibility for unity.* Is it not obvious that those who witness to Christ, “through whom we have now received our reconciliation” with the Father (*Ibid.* 5, 11; cfr. 2Cor. 5, 18-20), *must also be reconciled to one another?* We cannot ignore the ecumenical task. In this predominantly Lutheran country, I wish to express my encouragement for the international dialogue now taking place between the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, a dialogue which seeks to resolve the historical and doctrinal difficulties which have been obstacles between Lutherans and Catholics. Let us support these efforts and pray for their success.

6. It is true that the world is facing new challenges. But *the Gospel of Jesus Christ is our hope.* For Christians a time of change is not a time for fear, but a time to build and a time to bring the Good News of salvation to all. The decade ahead, leading to the third Christian millennium, offers the Christians of this celebrated nation of explorers, brave seafarers, hardy farmers and dedicated men and women a great opportunity to bear common witness to the Gospel in response to society’s deepest needs.

Here in “*All Men’s Chasm*” *Almanagja*, can we not imagine a decade in which Icelandic Catholics and Lutherans will go forward together in facing the tasks of our time? Prayerful dialogue can help clarify what you have in common and where the points of difference and division lie. You can come to know one another better, in order *to build on the real though imperfect communion already existing between fellow Christians* by reason of their Baptism and faith in Christ.

May this podium – specially built to mark this historic meeting – stand as a symbol of your determination to walk hand in hand as brothers and sisters in the One Lord.

7. Your ancestors worshipped the Lord and centred their lives in him. Among the ways in which they praised God down the centuries was *the special reverence they showed to Mary, the Mother of the Redeemer*. Children from generation to generation have been given her name: *Maria*. This reverence is immortalized in the *Maria Saga*. The Marian Hymn *Lilja* composed in 1350 sings Mary’s praises. Stefan fra Hvitadal reflected this devotion when he wrote:

“Lystu theim hédan  
Er lokast bra  
Heilaga Gudsmodir  
Himnum fra”.

Today, when the Catholic Church is celebrating the feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, it is fitting for me to ask her to intercede for you and for Iceland. May the prayers of the Blessed Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ accompany you always!

Dear brothers and sisters: I thank you for your welcome and for this time of prayer we are sharing together in Thingvellir. “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all” (*2Thess. 3, 18*). Amen.

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