



The Holy See

***SPEECH OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II
IN REPLY TO THE NEW YEAR GREETINGS
OF THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS
ACCREDITED TO THE HOLY SEE****

10 January 1998

*Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

1. The collective homage of the Diplomatic Corps, on the threshold of the New Year, always takes on the character of moving solemnity and heartfelt familiarity. I cordially thank your Dean, Ambassador Atembina-Te-Bombo, who has courteously presented your friendly good wishes and delicately evoked certain aspects of my apostolic mission.

At the beginning of this year 1998, let us allow to shine for all of today's men and women the light which rose over the world on the day of the birth of the Divine Child. By its very nature, that light is universal, its brightness illumines everyone without exception. It reveals both our successes and our setbacks in the management of creation and in our mission at the service of society.

2. Very fortunately there is no lack of positive achievements. Central and Eastern Europe have continued their progress towards democracy, gradually freeing themselves from the burdens and conditionings of the totalitarian regime of yesterday. Let us hope that this progress will prove effective everywhere!

Not far from us, Bosnia-Herzegovina is experiencing a more or less relative peace, although the recent local elections have shown the precarious nature of the peacemaking process between the different communities. In this regard, I would like to extend an earnest invitation to the international community to pursue its efforts in favour of the return of the refugees to their homes, and in favour of respect for the fundamental rights of the three ethnic communities which make up the country. These are preconditions necessary for the vitality of the country: my unforgettable pastoral visit to

Sarajevo, last Spring, made me even more clearly aware of this.

The enlargement of the European Union eastwards, and its efforts to achieve monetary stability, should lead to an ever greater complementarity among the peoples involved, in respect for each one's identity and history. In a way it is a question of sharing the heritage of values which each nation has succeeded in bringing into being: the dignity of the human person, his inalienable fundamental rights, the inviolability of life, freedom and justice, the sense of solidarity and the rejection of discrimination.

Also within this continent, we cannot but encourage the resumption of dialogue between the parties which for so many years have been opposed to one another in Northern Ireland. May all parties have the courage to persevere in order to overcome present perils, there as in other regions of Europe!

In Latin America, the process of democratization has continued, even though here and there pernicious reactions have hindered its advance, as shown by the tragic events which occurred in the Mexican Province of Chiapas, a few days before Christmas. At the end of this month, God willing, I will make a Pastoral Visit to Cuba. The first visit of a Successor of Peter to that Island will give me an opportunity to strengthen not only the courageous Catholics of that country but also all their fellowcitizens in their efforts to achieve a homeland ever more just and united, where all individuals can find their rightful place and see their legitimate aspirations recognized.

As regards Asia, where more than half of humanity lives, we must applaud the talks being held in Geneva between the two Koreas. Success here would considerably reduce tension in the whole region, and would undoubtedly encourage constructive dialogue between other countries in the region which are still divided or hostile, and would thus encourage them to undertake a dynamic process of solidarity and peace. The financial fluctuations which have recently occupied centre stage in certain countries of that part of the world call for serious reflection on the morality of the economic and financial markets which have led to the considerable development of Asia in recent years. Greater sensitivity to social justice and more respect for local cultures could in the future avoid unpleasant surprises, the victims of which are always the local peoples.

I do not need to insist in order to remind you of the interest with which the Pope and his collaborators are following the evolution of the situation in China, hoping that that evolution will favour the establishment of more friendly relations with the Holy See. This would enable Chinese Catholics to live their faith fully inserted into the communion of the whole Church as she approaches the Great Jubilee.

My thoughts likewise go to the Church in Vietnam which is still aspiring to better conditions of existence. I cannot forget the people of East Timor, and in particular the sons and daughters of the Church there, still awaiting more peaceful conditions in order to be able to look to the future with

greater confidence.

At this point I would like to address a cordial greeting to Mongolia, which has expressed the desire to establish closer links with the Apostolic See.

3. In a more general way, I would consider as being among the positive aspects of our review the increase of sensitivity in the world to questions connected with the preservation of an environment worthy of man, and the international consensus which made possible, just a month ago in Ottawa, the signing of a treaty banning antipersonnel mines (which the Holy See is preparing to ratify). All this shows an ever more concrete respect for human beings, considered individually and as members of society, as well as in their role as stewards of creation; and this also corresponds to the conviction that true happiness can only come about when we work with one another, not against one another.

The initiatives undertaken by the leaders of the international community on behalf of children, who are all too frequently victimized in their innocence, the battle against organized crime and drug trafficking, the efforts to oppose every form of contemptible trafficking in human beings: these clearly show that, with political determination, it is possible to strike at the causes of the disorders which too often disfigure the human person.

These advances are all the more in need of being consolidated, since the world around us is still so changeable and since its equilibrium can be compromised at any moment by an unexpected conflict, a fresh economic crisis or the baneful effects of the disturbing spread of poverty.

4. The fragility of our societies is painfully demonstrated by the "crisis spots" which are in the forefront of the news and which have once more cast a shadow over the joyful atmosphere of the celebrations of recent days.

I am thinking in the first place of Algeria, which practically every day is thrown into mourning by deplorable massacres. We see a whole country held hostage to an inhuman violence which no political cause, far less a religious motivation, could legitimate. I insist on repeating clearly to all, once again, that no one may kill in God's name: this is to misuse the divine name and to blaspheme. It would be appropriate for all people of good will, in that country and elsewhere, to unite in ensuring that the voice of those who believe in dialogue and fraternity is finally heard. And I am convinced that they are the majority of the Algerian people.

The situation in Sudan still does not permit us to speak of reconciliation and peace. Furthermore, the Christians of this country continue to be the object of grievous discriminations which the Holy See has time and again brought up with the civil authorities, unfortunately without any notable improvement.

Peace seems to have moved further away from the Middle East, since the peace process begun in Madrid in 1991 is practically at a standstill, when it is not altogether endangered by ambiguous or even violent incidents. My thoughts turn at this time to all those Israelis and Palestinians who in recent years had hoped that justice, security, peace and a normal everyday life would finally dawn on this Holy Land. Today, what remains of this desire for peace? The principles of the Madrid Conference and the guidelines of the 1993 Oslo meeting paved the way to peace. They still remain the only effective means of moving forward. There is no need at all to attempt other paths. I would like to assure you and, through you, the whole international community, that the Holy See will for its part continue to dialogue with all the parties concerned in order to encourage the determination of both sides to salvage peace and to heal the wounds of injustice. The Holy See maintains a constant concern for this part of the world and it conducts its activity in accordance with the principles which have always guided it. The Pope, in particular, in these years preceding the celebration of the Jubilee of the Year 2000, turns his gaze towards Jerusalem, the Holy City par excellence, praying daily that it will become soon and for ever, together with Bethlehem and Nazareth, a place of justice and peace where Jews, Christians and Muslims will finally be able to walk together before God.

Not far from there, an entire people is the victim of a constraint which puts it in hazardous conditions of survival. I refer to our brothers and sisters in Iraq, living under a pitiless embargo. In response to the appeals for help which unceasingly come to the Holy See, I must call upon the consciences of those who, in Iraq and elsewhere, put political, economic or strategic considerations before the fundamental good of the people, and I ask them to show compassion. The weak and the innocent cannot pay for mistakes for which they are not responsible. I therefore pray that this country will be able to regain its dignity, experience normal development, and thus be in a position to reestablish fruitful relations with other peoples, within the framework of international law and world solidarity.

We cannot pass over in silence the tragedy of the Kurdish peoples, which in these very days has drawn everyone's attention; the immediate demands of compassion towards refugees in extreme situations must not make us forget the quest of millions of their brothers and sisters who are also calling for secure and acceptable conditions of life.

Finally, it is my duty, unfortunately, to draw your attention to the drama of the peoples of the central part of Africa. In these last months we have witnessed a regional recomposition of ethnic and political balances. All of your chanceries know about the events which have taken place in Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and just recently in Congo-Brazzaville. I shall not therefore recall the facts here, but mention essentially the trials inflicted on these peoples: armed conflict, displacement of persons, the tragedy of refugees, deficient health conditions, a defective administration of justice... Faced with such situations, no one's conscience can remain at peace. Today, in the greatest silence, intimidation and killing still continue. This is why I wish to address myself to the political leaders of these countries: if violent attainment of

power becomes the norm, if insistence on ethnic considerations continues to override all other concerns, if democratic representation is systematically put aside, if corruption and the arms trade continue to rage, then Africa will never experience peace or development, and future generations will mercilessly judge these pages of African history.

I would also like to appeal to the solidarity of the countries of the continent. Africans ought not to rely on outside assistance for everything. Within their own ranks there are many men and women with all the human and intellectual aptitudes to meet the challenges of our time and to manage societies in an appropriate way. However, more "African" solidarity is needed to support countries in difficulty, and also to avoid discriminatory measures or sanctions being imposed upon them. They should all assist one another in the analysis and evaluation of political options, and should also agree not to take part in arms trafficking. Rather the countries of the continent should favour peace-making and reconciliation, if necessary through peace forces composed of African soldiers. In this way the credibility of Africa will be more real in the eyes of the rest of the world and international help would doubtless become more intensive, with respect for the sovereignty of nations. It is urgently necessary that territorial disputes, economic initiatives and human rights should mobilize the energies of Africans to arrive at equitable and peaceful solutions which will allow Africa to face the twenty-first century with better opportunities and more confidence.

5. In reality, all these problems show the vulnerability of the women and men of the end of this century. Certainly, it is fortunate that the International Organizations, for example, are concerning themselves more and more with indicating criteria to improve the quality of human life and with implementing concrete initiatives. The Apostolic See considers itself in solidarity with these activities of multilateral diplomacy, in which it willingly collaborates through its Observer Missions. In this regard, I would merely mention this morning that the Holy See is formally associated with the workings of the World Trade Organization, with the aim of promoting human and spiritual progress in a sector which is vital for the development of peoples.

However, we should not forget that modern men and women are often subject to ideologies which impose models of society or of behaviour which claim to decide about everything, about life and death, about the private domain and even thought, about procreation and genetic heritage. Nature would be no more than simple matter, open to every experiment. One sometimes has the impression that life is appreciated only in terms of utility or the prosperity it can procure, that suffering is considered to be without meaning. The handicapped and the elderly are neglected because they are seen as an encumbrance, the child to be born is too often considered an intrusion into an existence planned in terms of subjective interests not marked by generosity. Abortion and euthanasia then rapidly come to be seen as acceptable "solutions".

The Catholic Church and the majority of spiritual traditions know from experience that man is unfortunately capable of betraying his humanity. He must then be enlightened and accompanied so that, in his wanderings, he can always find again the sources of life and order which the Creator

has inscribed in the most intimate part of his being. Wherever man is born, suffers and dies, the Church will always be present in order to signify that, precisely at the moment when man experiences his limits, there is Someone who calls him in order to welcome him and give meaning to his fragile existence.

Conscious of my responsibility as Pastor at the service of the universal Church, I have often had the opportunity in the acts of my ministry to recall the absolute dignity of the human person from the moment of conception to his last breath, the sacred character of the family as the special place able to protect and ensure the proper development of the person, the greatness and beauty of responsible parenthood, and the noble aims of medicine and scientific research.

These are some of the questions which the conscience of believers must take into account. When man runs the risk of being regarded as an object which can be manipulated or made subject to one's will, when one no longer sees the image of God in man, when the for love and self-sacrifice is deliberately obscured, when selfishness and profit become the prime driving force of economic activity, then anything is possible and barbarism is not far away.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, these reflections are not new to you who witness day by day the work of the Pope and his collaborators. But I wanted to put them before you once again for your consideration, because one has the impression at times that the leaders of society and the heads of International Organizations allow themselves to be influenced by a new language, which recent technologies seem to accredit and which certain legislative systems allow or even endorse. What we have, though, are ideologies finding a voice or pressure groups seeking to impose their ideas and their way of life on everyone. The social pact is then seriously weakened and citizens lose their points of reference.

Those who are guarantors of the law and of a country's social cohesion, or those in charge of organizations created for the good of the community of nations, cannot escape the duty of fidelity to the unwritten law of the human conscience, of which the ancients spoke and which is for everyone believer and nonbeliever alike the foundation and universal guarantee of human dignity and of life in society. Regarding this, I cannot but restate what I have already written: "If there exists no ultimate truth which guides and directs political action, then ideas and convictions can be easily exploited for the benefit of the powerful" (Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, 46). In the forum of conscience, "there are no privileges or exceptions for anyone. Whether one be the master of the world or the most wretched on the face of the earth, it makes no difference: faced with moral demands, we are all absolutely equal" (Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor*, 96).

6. With this I conclude my presentation, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, and upon each of you, your families, the leaders of your countries and your fellow citizens I invoke divine protection throughout the year now beginning. May Almighty God help each of us to forge new paths where people may meet and walk together! This is the prayer which I raise to God each day

for the whole of humanity, that it may be ever more worthy of this name!

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