



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
TO THE NEW AMBASSADOR
OF TURKEY TO THE HOLY SEE***

Friday, 7 December 2001

Your Excellency,

With great pleasure I welcome you to the Vatican and accept the Letters of Credence appointing you Ambassador Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary of Turkey to the Holy See. I thank you for the greetings which you bring from President Ahmet Necdet Sezer, and I would ask you to convey my own good wishes to His Excellency, and to the Turkish Government and people, and assure them of my prayers for the nation in these unsettled and economically difficult times.

My visit to your country in 1979 enabled me to see at first hand a society grappling with complex questions of identity in a changing world, and showing that it is possible for peoples to live together in a spirit of what you have called understanding and conciliation between different cultures. It also allowed me to pay homage to a land which, as you have noted, was so much a part of Christianity's development. It was there that Saint Paul was born and where he and other Apostles preached the Gospel; it was there that many of the great Fathers of the Church in later centuries built upon the apostolic tradition; and it was there that the first Councils made momentous decisions defining the Christian faith. That memorable visit left me with a profound esteem not only for Turkey's past, but also for what the nation has achieved in more recent times.

During the last millennium relations between Turkey and the Holy See were not always untroubled. Happily, the twentieth century saw fresh attempts to build a constructive relationship, based upon the trust and respect which at times require what I have called *a healing of memories*. The need for such healing is everywhere evident, for in so many parts of the world we see that wounds of past grievances continue to fester from generation to generation. Encouraging signs of a new cordiality were the visit to the Vatican of the President of Religious Affairs, whom I was

pleased to receive on 16 June 2000, and the celebrations in Istanbul in honour of my revered Predecessor Pope John XXIII in December of last year, to which you have referred.

Richly symbolic occasions such as these help to strengthen the determination of Turkey and the Holy See to work together for the good of the international community. Recent events make it clear that such cooperation is all the more necessary when new conflicts, of which there are not a few in your region, are added to older ones. At a time when there is a risk of increasing tension between different cultural and religious traditions, your country has a particular role to play.

Turkey stands both geographically and culturally between East and West, and this is the first sense in which it can be an important bridge. It is a largely Muslim society, profoundly marked by the great religious and cultural heritage which came from the early centuries of Islam through the Seljuk and Ottoman periods. Yet Turkey also looks to the West with its Christian roots, and there are communities of Turkish immigrants in many Western countries, as well as Christian communities in Turkey itself. The ancient interaction between the Christian West and the Muslim East, more intense and complex than is often recognized, continues still in Turkey. And therefore, at a time when the cause of peace must be served by promoting dialogue between the religious cultures of the world, in particular between Islam and Christianity, the international community looks hopefully to your nation.

Yet Turkey is also an avowedly secular state, in which Islamic culture has opened to those forces of modernization, usually associated with the West, which have led to a distinction between religion and politics, the sacred and the secular, making Turkey what you yourself have referred to as a synthesis of East and West. Yet distinction at this point cannot mean total separation: and your nation is well placed to serve as a society which builds bridges between religion and politics. For if distinction becomes separation, the transcendent dimension vanishes from public life. It is then that totalitarianism appears, with its customary disregard for freedom and human dignity.

For a secular state, the challenge is to be genuinely open to transcendence: that is, to base itself upon a vision of the human person created in the image of God and possessed therefore of inalienable and universal rights. There are in fact certain rights which are universal because they are rooted in the nature of the human person rather than in the particularities of any culture.

Among the most basic of these rights is religious freedom, which includes but goes beyond freedom to worship as one chooses; for religion cannot be relegated to the purely private realm. In a secular state which is open to the transcendent, religious freedom also includes the right to bring personal values to bear upon public life, in the belief that these values contribute to the common effort to build a society genuinely open to every dimension of the human person.

In Turkey, Catholics are a small minority. They see no contradiction of any kind in being Catholic and Turkish and they look forward, as I do, to seeing the juridical status of the Church recognized.

They are confident that in their homeland they will continue to find the respect for minorities which is "the touchstone of social harmony and the index of the civic maturity attained by a country and its institutions" (*Message for the World Day of Peace 1989*, 12). This too is a point where Turkey can serve as a bridge, by making clear that justifiable concerns for national unity are not in conflict with respect for the rights of individuals and minorities. On the contrary, it is this respect, sanctioned by law, which is the surest guarantee of a nation's cohesion and security.

Your Excellency, as you assume your responsibilities within the diplomatic community accredited to the Holy See, I offer my good wishes for the success of your high mission, confident that it will further strengthen the good relations between us. I assure you that the various offices of the Roman Curia will always be ready to assist you. Upon you and the beloved Turkish people I cordially invoke the abundant blessings of Almighty God.

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