



The Holy See

MEETING WITH REPRESENTATIVES OF POLITICAL LIFE, CULTURE, SCIENCE AND BUSINESS

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER

Saturday, 23 June 2001

Kyiv (Presidential Palace)

Mr President,

Honourable Representatives of the Government and Parliament,

Distinguished Authorities,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. I offer respectful and cordial greetings to one and all. With great pleasure I accepted your invitation, Mr President, to visit this noble country, a cradle of Christian civilization and a homeland where people of different nationalities and religions live together in peace. I rejoice that I am now standing on Ukrainian soil. I consider it *a great honour* to meet at last the people of a nation which, in these difficult years of transition, has succeeded in ensuring *conditions of peace and tranquillity for its inhabitants*. I thank you most cordially for your kind reception and your courteous words of welcome.

With great esteem I greet the Deputies and the Members of the Government, the Authorities of every rank, the Representatives of the people, the Diplomatic Corps, the men and women of culture, of the sciences, and all the vital forces which contribute to the welfare of the Nation. I embrace in sincere friendship the Ukrainian people, the majority of whom are Christian, as is evident from your culture, your native traditions, the numerous churches dotting the landscape, as well as the countless works of art found everywhere in your country. I greet a land which has known suffering and oppression, while preserving *a love of freedom which no one has ever managed to repress*.

2. I have come among you as *a pilgrim of peace*, impelled solely by the desire to testify that Christ is "the Way, and the Truth, and the Life" (Jn 14:6). I have come to pay homage to the shrines of your history and to join you in imploring God's protection upon your future.

With joy I greet you, splendid city of Kyiv, lying midway along the river Dnieper, cradle of the ancient Slavs and of

Ukrainian culture, so deeply imbued with Christian values. On the soil of your land, a crossroads between Western and Eastern Europe, the two great Christian traditions, Eastern and Latin, met and were given a favourable welcome. Over the centuries, there have been tensions between them, resulting in conflicts harmful to both sides. But today there is a growing *openness to mutual forgiveness*. There is a need to overcome barriers and mistrust, in order to join in building a country of harmony and peace, drawing, as in the past, from the wellsprings of your shared Christian faith.

3. Yes, dear Ukrainians! It is Christianity that has inspired the greatest figures of your culture and art, and richly nourished the moral, spiritual and social roots of your country. I gladly recall here the words of your fellow countryman, the philosopher Hrigorij Skovoroda: "Everything passes away, but love remains after all else is gone. Everything passes away, save God and love". Only someone profoundly imbued with the Christian spirit was capable of such an insight. In his words we hear an echo of the First Letter of John: "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (4:16).

Throughout Europe the word of the Gospel took deep root and in the course of the centuries brought forth wonderful fruits of civilization, learning and holiness. Tragically, the choices made by the peoples of the Continent have not always been consistent with the values of their respective Christian traditions, and history has thus been marked by painful episodes of oppression, destruction and sorrow.

The older among you remember *the terrible years of the Soviet dictatorship* and the dreadful famine of the beginning of the 1930s, when Ukraine, "the granary of Europe", was no longer able to feed its own children, who died by the millions. And how can we forget the host of your fellow citizens who perished during the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945 against the Nazi invasion? Unfortunately, liberation from Nazism marked the return of a regime which continued to trample on the most elementary human rights, deporting defenceless citizens, imprisoning dissidents, persecuting believers, and even attempting to erase the very idea of freedom and independence from the consciousness of the Ukrainian people. Happily, the great turning-point of 1989 finally permitted Ukraine to regain her freedom and full sovereignty.

4. Your people attained that greatly-desired goal *peacefully and without bloodshed*, and they are now firmly committed to a courageous programme of social and spiritual reconstruction. The international community cannot fail to admire the success which you have had in consolidating peace and in resolving regional tensions with due consideration for local differences.

I too encourage you to persevere in your efforts to overcome whatever difficulties remain and to guarantee full respect for the rights of national and religious minorities. A policy of wise tolerance will surely win *respect and goodwill for the Ukrainian people* and ensure you a particular place in the family of European peoples.

As Shepherd of the Catholic Church, I sincerely appreciate the fact that the Preamble to the Constitution of Ukraine reminds citizens of their "responsibility before God". Surely this was the viewpoint of your own Hrigorij Skovoroda, when he encouraged his contemporaries always to make every effort to "understand man", seeking paths which would enable humanity to emerge definitively from the dead end of intransigence and hatred.

The values of the Gospel, which are part of your national identity, will help you to build *a modern, tolerant, open and*

fraternal society, in which individuals can make their own specific contribution to the common good, while at the same time finding the support they need to develop as fully as possible their own talents.

Here I appeal especially *to the young people*: as they follow in the steps of those who sacrificed their lives for lofty human, civic and religious ideals, may they preserve unchanged this heritage of civilization.

5. "Do not allow the powerful to destroy mankind", wrote Volodymyr Monomakh (+ 1125) in his book *Instruction to My Children*. These words remain as valid today as when they were first written.

In the twentieth century, the totalitarian regimes destroyed whole generations, by undermining three pillars of any authentically human civilization: *recognition of God's authority*, from which come binding moral rules of life (cf. *Ex* 20:1-18); *respect for the dignity of the human person*, created in the image and likeness of God (cf. *Gn* 1:26-27), and the duty *to exercise power as a means of serving every member of society* without exception, beginning with the weakest and the most vulnerable.

Denial of God did not make man any more free. Rather, it exposed him to various forms of slavery and debased the vocation of political power to the level of brutal and oppressive force.

6. *Men and women of politics!* Do not forget this earnest lesson of history! Your task is to serve the people and to ensure peace and equal rights for all. Resist the temptation to exploit power for personal or group interests. Always be concerned for the needs of the poor and work in all legitimate ways to ensure that every individual is guaranteed access to a just degree of prosperity.

Men and women of culture! You are heirs to a great history. I am thinking in particular of the Orthodox Archbishop of Kyiv, Metropolitan Peter Mohyla, who in the seventeenth century founded the Academy of Kyiv which is still remembered as a beacon of humanistic and Christian culture. It is your responsibility to apply a critical and creative intelligence in every sphere of knowledge, by linking the cultural heritage of the past to the challenges posed by modernity, in such a way as to contribute to authentic human progress under the banner of the civilization of love.

And in a special way for you, *men and women engaged in scientific research*, may the fearful social, economic and ecological catastrophe of Chernobyl serve as a permanent warning! The potential of technology must be wedded to unchanging ethical values, if the respect due to man and his inalienable dignity is to be guaranteed.

Men and women of business and finance in the new Ukraine! The future of your Nation depends also on you. Your courageous contribution, inspired always by the values of competence and honesty, will help to relaunch the national economy. This in turn will restore confidence to all those who are tempted to leave the country in order to seek employment elsewhere.

7. Distinguished Authorities, Ladies and Gentlemen! Humanity has entered the third millennium and new prospects are appearing on the horizon. A global process of development is taking place, marked by rapid and radical changes. Everyone is called to *make their own contribution in a spirit of courage and confidence*. The Catholic Church stands at

the side of all people of good will and supports their efforts in the service of the common good.

For my part, I will continue to accompany you with my prayers, asking God to watch over you and your families, your undertakings and the aspirations of the whole Ukrainian people. Upon all of you I invoke the abundant blessings of Almighty God.

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