



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO H.E. MRS SARALA MANOURIE FERNANDO,
AMBASSADOR OF THE REPUBLIC OF SRI LANKA TO THE HOLY SEE****

Thursday, 27 May 2004

Your Excellency,

I am pleased to welcome you today as you present the Letters accrediting you as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka to the Holy See. I thank you for bringing me the courteous greetings of President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga and I ask you kindly to convey to her my good wishes, together with the assurance of my prayers that Almighty God will bless all the people of Sri Lanka with a future of peace and prosperity. Your Excellency has pointed to the importance of the resumption of peace talks and the promotion of dialogue and negotiation in order to achieve a political resolution of the continuing civil unrest in Sri Lanka. The present cease-fire in fact represents a precious opportunity for both sides in the conflict to concentrate on building trust and a lasting peace grounded in respect for differences and a commitment to reconciliation, justice and solidarity. It is my hope that progress made in the peace process will also serve as an incentive to the international community to offer support and aid as Sri Lanka faces the challenging task of rebuilding and pursuing a sound development which will benefit all its people. In this context, I very much appreciate your reference to Sri Lanka's long tradition of religious tolerance and diversity as a precious gift which must be protected and promoted. In cooperation with all men and women of good will, the followers of the various religions have a particular role to play in fostering reconciliation, justice and peace in every sphere of society. Precisely because of their shared convictions about the sacredness of creation, the dignity of each individual and the unity of the whole human family, they are challenged to work together in laying the spiritual foundations for genuine social harmony. I renew the hope I expressed during my Pastoral Visit to Sri Lanka that all will continue "to pursue this path, which is surely the one most in accord with its history and the genius of your people" (*Farewell Address*, Colombo, 21 January 1995). A multi-ethnic and religiously diverse society like Sri Lanka will surely find in its rich cultural and spiritual traditions the inspiration needed to building unity within diversity, in a spirit of solidarity which acknowledges and values the contribution of each of its members. Although the Catholic community in Sri Lanka is a minority, it is fully committed to this goal, and strives through its schools and charitable institutions to be an instrument of peace by teaching tolerance and respect, above all to the young people who are the future of the nation. The Church wishes to make every possible contribution to the ongoing process of pacification. As citizens of Sri Lanka, Catholics rightly expect that their religious and civil freedoms will be fully guaranteed, including their right to propose to others the saving truth which they

have come to know and have embraced. Religious freedom, as an expression of the inviolable dignity of the human person in the search for truth, is in a real way the foundation of all other human rights. This freedom, which, as you have noted, also includes the right to adopt a religion or belief of one's choice, has long been recognized as a fundamental human right by the international community and has been enshrined in your country's constitution. It is precisely in the name of religious freedom that the Catholic Church, in carrying out her mission, firmly deplores all violence perpetrated against others in the name of religion. She likewise rejects any form of proselytization, understood as the attempt to violate another person's freedom of conscience through moral or financial coercion. Such acts represent an offence against the authentic nature of religion, which is meant to be "an inexhaustible wellspring of respect and harmony between peoples; religion is, in fact, the chief antidote to violence and conflict" (*Message for the 2002 World Day of Peace*, 14). I take this opportunity to reiterate my conviction that respectful dialogue and ongoing cooperation between religious leaders and the civil authorities remain the best way to a lasting solution to the troubling issues raised by acts of fanaticism and aggression associated with certain individuals or groups, while at the same time guaranteeing the demands of justice and the exercise of religious freedom. Your Excellency, I offer you my prayerful good wishes as you take up your high responsibilities. I am confident that the fulfilment of your diplomatic duties will contribute to a further strengthening of the friendly relations between Sri Lanka and the Holy See. Upon you and upon all whom you serve I cordially invoke Almighty God's blessings of wisdom, joy and

peace.

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