



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO H.E. Mr MAKRAM OBEID
AMBASSADOR OF THE SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC
TO THE HOLY SEE***

*Consistory Hall
Thursday, 14 December 2006*

Mr Ambassador,

I am pleased to welcome you to the Vatican and to accept the Letters accrediting you as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Syrian Arab Republic to the Holy See. I thank you for your words and for the greetings which you bring from your President, Mr Bashar Al Assad. Please assure him of my sincere good wishes and my continuing prayers for the well-being and prosperity of your nation.

As you have indicated, Syria from ancient times has witnessed a great flowering of civilizations and religions. Your capital city, Damascus, is dear to Christians as the site of Saint Paul's baptism, following his dramatic experience of conversion during his journey there. And many great saints have led lives of exemplary holiness on Syrian soil. For centuries now, there have been harmonious relations between the Christian and Muslim communities in your country. Syria, then, is uniquely placed to offer to the world an example of peaceful coexistence and tolerance between the followers of different religions. In this regard, I can assure you of the support of the Holy See for the efforts your Government has made both at home and abroad to promote dialogue between religions and cultures. As I recently had occasion to reaffirm, "all people are linked by profound solidarity with one another, and must be encouraged to assert their historical and cultural differences not for the sake of confrontation, but in order to foster mutual respect" (*Address to the Diplomatic Corps*, Ankara, 28 November 2006).

You have spoken of your Government's concern over the annexation of the Golan Heights by

Israel in 1967. With a heavy heart, I note that a wide range of territorial and other disputes have led to armed conflicts in recent times that threaten the peace and stability of the entire Middle East. Repeatedly I have pleaded for a cessation of violence in Lebanon, in the Holy Land and in Iraq. The world looks on with great sadness at the cycle of death and destruction, as innocent people continue to suffer and targeted individuals are kidnapped or assassinated. Like many impartial observers, the Holy See believes that solutions are possible within the framework of international law through the implementation of the relevant United Nations resolutions. In this regard, I have frequently urged that the various nations of the Middle East should be supported in their aspirations to live in peace within secure internationally recognized borders.

The Church, as you know, emphatically rejects war as a means of resolving international disputes, and has often pointed out that it only leads to new and still more complicated conflicts. Sadly, from the current situation in the Middle East it is only too evident that this is the case. In particular, the scourge of terrorism increases the fear and insecurity experienced by so many in the region today (cf. [*Message for the 2006 World Day of Peace*](#), 9) and in this regard, I am glad to note your words about the Syrian Government's commitment to counter this growing threat to peace and stability. The world looks especially to countries with significant influence in the Middle East in the hopeful expectation of signs of progress towards the resolution of these long-standing conflicts.

The Catholic community in Syria, as you know, is eager to play its part in national life, in cooperation with fellow Christians from the various Eastern Churches represented there. Your country is certainly fertile ground for progress in ecumenical relations between the followers of Christ and I would like to pledge the continued support of the Catholic Church for this important work. Indeed, I was recently able to do so publicly when I had the joy of visiting the Ecumenical Patriarch in the Phanar; together we signed a [*Common Declaration*](#) expressing the commitment of both Catholic and Orthodox Churches to work in every way towards the goal of full visible communion. I particularly appreciate the recent legislation implemented by the Syrian Government to recognize the juridical status of the Catholic Churches present in your country, in accordance with the norms of canon law. This step augurs well for a future of growing reciprocal understanding between the members of different Churches and different religions in Syria. Moreover, it sets the scene for increasing cooperation between the Church and the Government, that should facilitate the discovery of a solution to differences, such as the question of Church property taken over by the State. It is a sign of real maturity in relations when such matters can be discussed with openness, honesty and mutual respect.

Your Excellency, I am confident that the noble task which you begin today will consolidate these good relations between the Syrian Arab Republic and the Holy See. In offering you my best wishes for the success of your mission, I would like to assure you that the various departments of the Roman Curia are always glad to provide help and support in the fulfilment of your duties. Upon you, your family and all the people of Syria I cordially invoke God's abundant blessings.

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