



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE BENEDICT XVI TO THE MEMBERS OF THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS

Regia Hall

Monday, 10 January 2011

(Video)

*Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

I am pleased to welcome you, the distinguished representatives of so many countries, to this meeting which each year assembles you around the Successor of Peter. It is a deeply significant meeting, since it is a sign and illustration of the place of the Church and of the Holy See in the international community. I offer my greetings and cordial good wishes to each of you, and particularly to those who have come for the first time. I am grateful to you for the commitment and interest with which, in the exercise of your demanding responsibilities, you follow my activities, those of the Roman Curia and thus, in some sense, the life of the Catholic Church throughout the world. Your Dean, Ambassador Alejandro Valladares Lanza, has interpreted your sentiments and I thank him for the good wishes which he has expressed to me in the name of all. Knowing how close-knit your community is, I am certain that today you are also thinking of the Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Baroness van Lynden-Leijten, who several weeks ago returned to the house of the Father. I prayerfully share your sentiments.

As a new year begins, our own hearts and the entire world continue to echo the joyful message proclaimed twenty centuries ago in the night of Bethlehem, a night which symbolizes humanity's deep need for light, love and peace. To the men and women of that time, as to those of our own day, the heavenly hosts brought the good news of the coming of the Saviour: "*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined*" (Is 9:1). The mystery of the Son of God who became the son of man truly

surpasses all human expectations. In its absolute gratuitousness this saving event is the authentic and full response to the deep desire of every heart. The truth, goodness, happiness and abundant life which each man and woman consciously or unconsciously seeks are given to us by God. In longing for these gifts, each person is seeking his Creator, for “*God alone responds to the yearning present in the heart of every man and woman*” (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, 23). Humanity throughout history, in its beliefs and rituals, demonstrates a constant search for God and “*these forms of religious expression are so universal that one may well call man a religious being*” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 28). The religious dimension is an undeniable and irrepressible feature of man’s being and acting, the measure of the fulfilment of his destiny and of the building up of the community to which he belongs. Consequently, when the individual himself or those around him neglect or deny this fundamental dimension, imbalances and conflicts arise at all levels, both personal and interpersonal.

This primary and basic truth is the reason why, in this year’s *Message for World Day of Peace*, I identified religious freedom as the fundamental path to peace. Peace is built and preserved only when human beings can freely seek and serve God in their hearts, in their lives and in their relationships with others.

Ladies and Gentlemen, your presence on this solemn occasion is an invitation to survey the countries which you represent and the entire world. In this panorama do we not find numerous situations in which, sadly, the right to religious freedom is violated or denied? It is indeed the first of human rights, not only because it was historically the first to be recognized but also because it touches the constitutive dimension of man, his relation with his Creator. Yet is this fundamental human right not all too often called into question or violated? It seems to me that society, its leaders and public opinion are becoming more and more aware, even if not always in a clear way, of this grave attack on the dignity and freedom of *homo religiosus*, which I have sought on numerous occasions to draw to the attention of all.

I did so during the past year in my Apostolic Journeys to Malta, Portugal, Cyprus, the United Kingdom and Spain. Above and beyond the diversity of those countries, I recall with gratitude their warm welcome. *The Special Assembly for the Middle East of the Synod of Bishops*, which took place in the Vatican in October, was a moment of prayer and reflection in which our thoughts turned insistently to the Christian communities in that part of the world which suffer greatly because of their fidelity to Christ and the Church.

Looking to the East, the attacks which brought death, grief and dismay among the Christians of Iraq, even to the point of inducing them to leave the land where their families have lived for centuries, has troubled us deeply. To the authorities of that country and to the Muslim religious leaders I renew my heartfelt appeal that their Christian fellow-citizens be able to live in security, continuing to contribute to the society in which they are fully members. In Egypt too, in Alexandria, terrorism brutally struck Christians as they prayed in church. This succession of attacks is yet

another sign of the urgent need for the governments of the region to adopt, in spite of difficulties and dangers, effective measures for the protection of religious minorities. Need we repeat it? In the Middle East, *Christians are original and authentic citizens who are loyal to their fatherland and assume their duties toward their country. It is natural that they should enjoy all the rights of citizenship, freedom of conscience, freedom of worship and freedom in education, teaching and the use of the mass media*" (Message to the People of God of the Special Assembly for the Middle East of the Synod of Bishops, 10). I appreciate the concern for the rights of the most vulnerable and the political farsightedness which some countries in Europe have demonstrated in recent days by their call for a concerted response on the part of the European Union for the defence of Christians in the Middle East. Finally, I would like to state once again that the right to religious freedom is not fully respected when only freedom of worship is guaranteed, and that with restrictions. Furthermore, I encourage the accompaniment of the full safeguarding of religious freedom and other humans rights by programmes which, beginning in primary school and within the context of religious instruction, will educate everyone to respect their brothers and sisters in humanity. Regarding the states of the Arabian Peninsula, where numerous Christian immigrant workers live, I hope that the Catholic Church will be able to establish suitable pastoral structures.

Among the norms prejudicing the right of persons to religious freedom, particular mention must be made of the law against blasphemy in Pakistan: I once more encourage the leaders of that country to take the necessary steps to abrogate that law, all the more so because it is clear that it serves as a pretext for acts of injustice and violence against religious minorities. The tragic murder of the governor of Punjab shows the urgent need to make progress in this direction: the worship of God furthers fraternity and love, not hatred and division. Other troubling situations, at times accompanied by acts of violence, can be mentioned in south and south-east Asia, in countries which for that matter have a tradition of peaceful social relations. The particular influence of a given religion in a nation ought never to mean that citizens of another religion can be subject to discrimination in social life or, even worse, that violence against them can be tolerated. In this regard, it is important for interreligious dialogue to favour a common commitment to recognizing and promoting the religious freedom of each person and community. And, as I remarked earlier, violence against Christians does not spare Africa. Attacks on places of worship in Nigeria during the very celebrations marking the birth of Christ are another sad proof of this.

In a number of countries, on the other hand, a constitutionally recognized right to religious freedom exists, yet the life of religious communities is in fact made difficult and at times even dangerous (cf. *Dignitatis Humanae*, 15) because the legal or social order is inspired by philosophical and political systems which call for strict control, if not a monopoly, of the state over society. Such inconsistencies must end, so that believers will not find themselves torn between fidelity to God and loyalty to their country. I ask in particular that Catholic communities be everywhere guaranteed full autonomy of organization and the freedom to carry out their mission, in conformity with international norms and standards in this sphere.

My thoughts turn once again to the Catholic community of mainland China and its pastors, who are experiencing a time of difficulty and trial. I would also like to offer a word of encouragement to the authorities of Cuba, a country which in 2010 celebrated seventy-five years of uninterrupted diplomatic relations with the Holy See, that the dialogue happily begun with the Church may be reinforced and expanded.

Turning our gaze from East to West, we find ourselves faced with other kinds of threats to the full exercise of religious freedom. I think in the first place of countries which accord great importance to pluralism and tolerance, but where religion is increasingly being marginalized. There is a tendency to consider religion, all religion, as something insignificant, alien or even destabilizing to modern society, and to attempt by different means to prevent it from having any influence on the life of society. Christians are even required at times to act in the exercise of their profession with no reference to their religious and moral convictions, and even in opposition to them, as for example where laws are enforced limiting the right to conscientious objection on the part of health care or legal professionals.

In this context, one can only be gratified by the adoption by the Council of Europe last October of a resolution protecting the right to conscientious objection on the part of medical personnel vis-à-vis certain acts which gravely violate the right to life, such as abortion.

Another sign of the marginalization of religion, and of Christianity in particular, is the banning of religious feasts and symbols from civic life under the guise of respect for the members of other religions or those who are not believers. By acting in this way, not only is the right of believers to the public expression of their faith restricted, but an attack is made on the cultural roots which nourish the profound identity and social cohesion of many nations. Last year, a number of European countries supported the appeal lodged by the Italian government in the well-known case involving the display of the crucifix in public places. I am grateful to the authorities of those nations, as well as to all those who became involved in the issue, episcopates, civil and religious organizations and associations, particularly the Patriarchate of Moscow and the other representatives of the Orthodox hierarchy, as well as to all those – believers and non-believers alike – who wished to show their sympathy for this symbol, which bespeaks universal values.

Acknowledging religious freedom also means ensuring that religious communities can operate freely in society through initiatives in the social, charitable or educational sectors. Throughout the world, one can see the fruitful work accomplished by the Catholic Church in these areas. It is troubling that this service which religious communities render to society as a whole, particularly through the education of young people, is compromised or hampered by legislative proposals which risk creating a sort of state monopoly in the schools; this can be seen, for example, in certain countries in Latin America. Now that many of those countries are celebrating the second centenary of their independence – a fitting time for remembering the contribution made by the Catholic Church to the development of their national identity – I exhort all governments to promote

educational systems respectful of the primordial right of families to make decisions about the education of their children, systems inspired by the principle of subsidiarity which is basic to the organization of a just society.

Continuing my reflection, I cannot remain silent about another attack on the religious freedom of families in certain European countries which mandate obligatory participation in courses of sexual or civic education which allegedly convey a neutral conception of the person and of life, yet in fact reflect an anthropology opposed to faith and to right reason.

Ladies and Gentlemen, on this solemn occasion, allow me to state clearly several principles which inspire the Holy See, together with the whole Catholic Church, in its activity within the intergovernmental International Organizations for the promotion of full respect for the religious freedom of all. First, the conviction that one cannot create a sort of scale of degrees of religious intolerance. Unfortunately, such an attitude is frequently found, and it is precisely acts of discrimination against Christians which are considered less grave and less worthy of attention on the part of governments and public opinion. At the same time, there is a need to reject the dangerous notion of a conflict between the right to religious freedom and other human rights, thus disregarding or denying the central role of respect for religious freedom in the defence and protection of fundamental human dignity. Even less justifiable are attempts to counter the right of religious freedom with other alleged new rights which, while actively promoted by certain sectors of society and inserted in national legislation or in international directives, are nonetheless merely the expression of selfish desires lacking a foundation in authentic human nature. Finally, it seems unnecessary to point out that an abstract proclamation of religious freedom is insufficient: this fundamental rule of social life must find application and respect at every level and in all areas; otherwise, despite correct affirmations of principle, there is a risk that deep injustice will be done to citizens wishing to profess and freely practise their faith.

Promoting the full religious freedom of Catholic communities is also the aim of the Holy See in signing Concordats and other agreements. I am gratified that states in different parts of the world, and of different religious, cultural and juridical traditions, choose international conventions as a means of organizing relations between the political community and the Catholic Church, thus establishing through dialogue a framework of cooperation and respect for reciprocal areas of competence. Last year witnessed the signing and implementation of an Agreement for the religious assistance of the Catholic faithful in the armed forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and negotiations are presently under way with different countries. We trust that they will have a positive outcome, ensuring solutions respectful of the nature and freedom of the Church for the good of society as a whole.

The activity of the Papal Representatives accredited to states and international organizations is likewise at the service of religious freedom. I would like to point out with satisfaction that the Vietnamese authorities have accepted my appointment of a Representative who will express the

solicitude of the Successor of Peter by visiting the beloved Catholic community of that country. I would also like to mention that in the past year the diplomatic presence of the Holy See was expanded in Africa, since a stable presence is now assured in three countries without a resident Nuncio. God willing, I will once more travel to that continent, to Benin next November, in order to consign the Apostolic Exhortation which will gather the fruits of the labours of the second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops.

Before this distinguished assembly, I would like once more to state forcefully that religion does not represent a problem for society, that it is not a source of discord or conflict. I would repeat that the Church seeks no privileges, nor does she seek to intervene in areas unrelated to her mission, but simply to exercise the latter with freedom. I invite everyone to acknowledge the great lesson of history: *“How can anyone deny the contribution of the world’s great religions to the development of civilization? The sincere search for God has led to greater respect for human dignity. Christian communities, with their patrimony of values and principles, have contributed much to making individuals and peoples aware of their identity and their dignity, the establishment of democratic institutions and the recognition of human rights and their corresponding duties. Today too, in an increasingly globalized society, Christians are called, not only through their responsible involvement in civic, economic and political life but also through the witness of their charity and faith, to offer a valuable contribution to the laborious and stimulating pursuit of justice, integral human development and the right ordering of human affairs”* ([Message for the Celebration of World Peace Day](#), 1 January 2011, 7).

A clear example of this was [Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta](#): the centenary of her birth was celebrated at Tirana, Skopje and Pristina as well as in India, and a moving homage was paid to her not only by the Church but also by civil authorities and religious leaders, to say nothing of people of all religions. People like her show the world the extent to which the commitment born of faith is beneficial to society as a whole.

May no human society willingly deprive itself of the essential contribution of religious persons and communities! As the [Second Vatican Council](#) recalled, by guaranteeing just religious freedom fully and to all, society can *“enjoy the benefits of justice and peace which result from faithfulness to God and his holy will”* (Declaration [Dignitatis Humanae](#), 6).

For this reason, as we exchange good wishes for a new year rich in concord and genuine progress, I exhort everyone, political and religious leaders and persons of every walk of life, to set out with determination on the path leading to authentic and lasting peace, a path which passes through respect for the right to religious freedom in all its fullness.

On this commitment, whose accomplishment calls for the involvement of the whole human family, I invoke the blessing of Almighty God, who has reconciled us with himself and with one another through his Son Jesus Christ our peace (*Eph 2:14*).

A Happy New Year to all!

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