



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 17 November 1999

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. Today I would like to reflect on the visit I made a few days ago to India and Georgia. Remembering this journey gives me the opportunity first of all to thank the heavenly Father "for whom and by whom all things exist" (*Heb 2: 10*). With his help I was also able to fulfil this task of my service to the Gospel and to the cause of Christian unity.

The first destination on my spiritual pilgrimage was the city of New Delhi in India, for the signing and promulgation of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, in which I gathered the fruit of the study and suggestions of the Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of Bishops which was held in Rome in 1998. India is the cradle of ancient cultures, religions and spiritual traditions, which continue to shape the life of millions of people in a social context marked for centuries by a notable degree of mutual tolerance. Christianity, which has had a considerable share in this history of peaceful relations, has been present there, according to the Christians of southern India, since the preaching of the Apostle Thomas himself.

Today that spirit of mutual respect is threatened in some ways, and so it was important to reaffirm the Church's keen desire for fruitful dialogue with the followers of all religions, which will lead to renewed relations of understanding and solidarity at the service of the entire human family.

2. The synodal document *Ecclesia in Asia* helps us to understand that this interreligious dialogue and the Church's mandate to spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth are not mutually exclusive; indeed they complement one another. On the one hand, the proclamation of the Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ must always be made with deep respect for the conscience of those who hear it and with respect for all that is good and holy in the culture and religious tradition to which they belong (cf. *Nostra aetate*, n. 2). On the other hand, freedom of conscience and the free

practice of religion in society are basic human rights, rooted in the value and dignity inherent in every person and recognized in many international documents and agreements, including the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

With great pleasure I recall the Mass I concelebrated with numerous Bishops from India and other Asian countries at Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium on Sunday, 7 November. I again thank Archbishop Alan de Lastic and the Archdiocese of Delhi for organizing the solemn liturgy, marked by active and devout participation and enlivened by carefully selected hymns and colourful traditional local dances. The theme of the Mass was: *Jesus Christ, Light of the World*, become flesh in the land of Asia. At that Eucharistic celebration, the Catholic community of India represented in a way all of Asia's Catholics, to whom I entrusted the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* as a guide for their spiritual growth on the threshold of the new millennium. I am sure that with God's grace they will be steadfast and faithful!

3. The second stage of my journey was Georgia, to repay the visit which President Shevardnadze and His Holiness Ilia II, Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia, had previously made to Rome. I ardently desired to pay homage to the witness borne by the Church in Georgia down the ages and to establish new points of contact between Christians, so that at the beginning of the third Christian millennium they can join forces in proclaiming the Gospel to the world with one heart and one mind.

Georgia is going through a very important period. As it prepares to celebrate the 3,000th anniversary of its history in a context of regained independence, it faces great economic and social challenges. However, it is determined to meet them with courage in order to become a trustworthy member of a united Europe. Christian Georgia can boast a glorious millenary history, which began in the fourth century when the testimony of a woman, St Nino, converted King Mirian and the whole nation to Christ. Since that time a flourishing monastic tradition has given that land lasting monuments of religious culture, civilization and architecture, such as the Cathedral of Mtskheta, which I was able to visit in the company of the Catholicos-Patriarch after the cordial meeting I had with him privately.

4. Now, after 70 years of communist repression, when many Orthodox and Catholic martyrs bore heroic witness to their faith, the small but fervent Catholic community of the Caucasus is gradually strengthening its life and structures. The joy I noted among the priests, religious and lay people who had gathered in unexpectedly large numbers for Mass at the stadium in Tbilisi is a sign of sure hope for the Church's future throughout this region. The meeting with them at Sts Peter and Paul Church in Tbilisi, the only Catholic church which remained open during the totalitarian period, was a particularly joyful occasion. I pray that Georgian Catholics will always be able to make their own specific contribution to building their homeland.

The meeting with the men and women of the world of culture, science and art, chaired by

President Shevardnadze and held in the presence of the Catholicos-Patriarch, was an intense moment of reflection on Georgia's specific vocation as a crossroads between East and West. As I said at that meeting, the century now coming to an end, one marked by many shadows but also full of light, stands as a witness to the enduring power of the human spirit to triumph over all that tries to stifle the irrepressible quest for truth and freedom.

5. I thank the civil authorities and all those in both countries who worked to make this visit successful and peaceful. With heartfelt gratitude, I think of the Bishops, priests, religious and lay people of India and Georgia, and cherish an unforgettable memory of them all.

I entrust those I was able to meet to Mary, Mother of the Church; to her I commend the Church in Asia and the Caucasus, "trusting absolutely that hers is an ear that always listens, hers a heart that always welcomes, and hers a prayer that never fails" (*Ecclesia in Asia*, n. 51).

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, the Holy Father said:

I extend a special welcome to the members of the *NATO Defense College*, and I encourage you always to see your commitment as a service of peace. I pray that the pilgrims from Los Angeles, San Bernardino and Brooklyn will be strengthened by their profession of faith at the tomb of Peter.

Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from England, Kenya, the Philippines, Japan and the United States of America, I invoke the abundant blessings of almighty God.