



The Holy See

**LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO DR. PAVEL SMETANA
SYNODAL SENIOR OF THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH
OF THE CZECH BRETHREN
AND PRESIDENT OF THE ECUMENICAL COUNCIL
OF CHURCHES IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC**

*To Dr Pavel Smetana
Synodal Senior
of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren
and President of the Ecumenical Council
of Churches in the Czech Republic*

It is almost time for my visit to the Czech Republic, a land which I have always held dear because of the brave testimony given by the followers of Christ during the period of atheistic oppression, which affected indiscriminately both Catholics and Protestants. I have long looked forward to the joy of this visit and, what I consider very important, to meeting in a spirit of brotherhood the Representatives of the various Churches and Christian Denominations.

I am very much aware of the apprehension and concern which the planned canonization of Blessed Jan Sarkander at Olomouc, in Moravia, has caused you, dear Brother, as well as many others. I hope you will be reassured to know that I have decided to take this step, not only at the invitation of the Bishops of the Czech Republic, but also because I see it as a providential opportunity to express, in a place marked by great significance, a critical evaluation of the religious wars of the seventeenth century, with their numerous victims, both Protestant and Catholic. Blessed Jan Sarkander was himself a victim of those unfortunate conflicts, which caused so much suffering for your own community at that time.

If I have agreed to accept the Bishops' invitation, it is because I also see this as an occasion for all of us to pledge ourselves to ensure that such sins against Christian love must never again be

committed.

On several occasions I have visited countries where memories remain strong of conflicts between Catholics and Protestants. I have always made urgent appeals for the members of the various Churches and Ecclesial Communities, and especially the members of the Catholic Church, not to allow past injustices to determine present relations. I am deeply convinced, especially as we approach the Third Millennium of the Christian era, that this is a time of grace for all of us, a time to ask pardon and to offer pardon, to look beyond the sufferings of the past and to work together to bear clearer witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, "so that the world may believe" (Jn. 17: 21). It is a time for the Church "to express profound regret for the weakness of so many of her sons and daughters who sullied her face, preventing her from mirroring the image of the Crucified Lord, the supreme witness of patient love and humble meekness" (John Paul II *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 35).

In this spirit, the canonization of Jan Sarkander is not intended in any way to justify or approve of past violence, but only to recognize the personal merits of this son of Moravia: indeed, he has always been greatly loved and venerated there, by the Catholic clergy as well as by the laity, who undoubtedly do not look on him as the victim of religious hatred destined to reopen the wounds which time should by now have healed, but as a humble and steadfast example of sincere love of Christ, of dedication to souls, of fidelity to his pastoral ministry, and specifically to the Sacrament of Penance and the duties which it imposes.

I am confident that the new relationship that in recent years has happily developed between the Catholic Church and the other Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities in the Czech Republic will continue to grow and be strengthened.

It is my ardent wish and prayer that my visit will contribute to further fostering this spirit of Christian unity, in accordance with the firm commitment made by the Second Vatican Council, a commitment which is one of the priorities of my own pastoral activity.

For this reason, I have asked Cardinal Edward Idris Cassidy, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, to deliver this letter of mine and to express to you my regret for not having written earlier, and to convey to you above all my sentiments of respect and esteem in Jesus Christ, the one Shepherd and Guardian of our souls (Cf. 1Pt. 2: 25).

From the Vatican, 2 May 1995.

IOANNES PAULUS PP. II

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