



The Holy See

DISCORSO DI GIOVANNI PAOLO II

AL PRESIDENTE DELLA LITUANIA

S. E. IL SIGNOR ALGIRDAS BRAZAUSKAS *Venerdì, 2 dicembre 1994* Mr. President, I offer you a cordial welcome which I gladly extend to your wife and all the members of your entourage. I am pleased to meet you again, on the occasion of today's official visit to the Holy See. I am reminded of the unforgettable days I spent in Lithuania during my historic trip to the three Baltic Republics in September last year. I have learned that there is a remembrance of my visit in the name given to a square near the Apostolic Nunciature. I am grateful for this thoughtful gesture, as well as for all the courteous hospitality offered me by the Lithuanian people and their leaders during my four-day stay in Vilnius. Among the significant moments of that Apostolic visit, I would like to recall my moving visit to the «Hill of Crosses» in Siauliai on 7 September. I remember that moment with even greater emotion, knowing that you, Mr. President, recently wished to pay a tribute to that authentic «memorial» of the sufferings of so many Lithuanian citizens. Those crosses, set up by the people, remain as a witness to the terrible trial endured under a totalitarian regime; they are, at the same time, a sign of the greatness of soul of a people who have been able to find in their own cultural and spiritual traditions the necessary courage to continue to hope for a better future. Awareness of such a painful past must be the basis of future plans for the whole of Lithuania, which is facing very important tasks and challenges at the present time. It will be able to grow in a climate of freedom, dialogue and progress, if it can respond to its own natural vocation as a link between European countries advancing towards an ever deeper understanding, with respect for individual national identities.² Today the noble Lithuanian nation is experiencing a season of freedom and hope. In thanking divine Providence, I am particularly satisfied that, after regaining constitutional freedom, fitting recognition has been given to religious freedom. As well as indicating a high level of civility, this is also a sure guarantee of genuine progress for society. In fact, in the new democratic atmosphere, the Church can set up her apostolic and catechetical activities both within her own pastoral structures and in the state schools where the majority of the students are following courses in religious formation. This makes it possible to provide an irreplaceable service to society. In directing youth to rediscover their heritage of faith and civilization as developed in Lithuania over the centuries, it helps them to shape those values which constitute the nation's true soul. In this way, the Church knows she can contribute to the country's true good by her presence and activity, since only by returning to its cultural roots and drawing on the values of its own tradition will the nation be able to affirm its own identity and participate in the dialogue with other countries, making its original contribution. In addition, the Church intends to strengthen her proclamation of Gospel truth through the witness of charity and through acts of concrete human advancement that rely on the effective solidarity of the ecclesial communities in other European nations.³ The spring, which was heralded by the collapse of the communist totalitarian regime, has caused many expectations and hopes to blossom in people's hearts. Individuals and society itself are now exposed to the risk of being reduced to following false ideals and fallacious prospects of material well-being, putting aside the endeavour to reach more demanding spiritual

goals. In this case, a providential and historic opportunity would be lost, and plans to build the future on the solid basis of respect for man and the sincere search for progress in freedom and solidarity would be seriously jeopardized. It is vital guarantee the country basic social justice, which ensures the protection of the weakest groups in the community, through honest dialogue with all Lithuanians. The Catholic Church is ready to work in this direction. As I recalled in my farewell speech in Vilnius, «the Church's social doctrine, which is always better understood especially in what it teaches about human rights, development and the fostering of solidarity, will be a valuable tool of renewal and a timely contribution to building a society of true freedom and solidarity» (Vilnius Airport, Lithuania, 8 September, L'Osservatore Romano English edition, 15 September 1993, p. 7)⁴. Returning to Church-State relations, it appears that the time has come when they should be regulated, if necessary, by an official agreement. The task of finding a just solution to problems in this sector will thus be facilitated. Problems caused by the normal restoration of religious life, both as regards the Catholic Church and the other confessions traditionally present in Lithuania certainly include the restitution of buildings intended as places of worship. A country with great religious traditions, free Lithuania has always seen the various structures belonging to religious denominations as instruments at the service of the country's spiritual and material progress. For this reason, while taking into account the various and sometimes complex human problems linked to the restoration of the previous situation, the hope is that the pastoral structures which ecclesiastical institutions once had at their disposal should be restored to their original religious use; As regards the Catholic Church, this would help the educational, charitable and social programmes promoted by the Episcopal Conference as well as by individual Bishops. The advantage which the country would derive from this is obvious.⁵ The Church is well aware that direct political involvement is not part of her mission. At the same time, she is also aware that she cannot refuse an involvement in the life of the country that is expressed in contributing to its rebuilding especially through her own specific interventions and her particular institutional contribution. Mr. President, I am pleased with the atmosphere of mutual trust and frank collaboration which marks the mutual relations between the State and the Church in your country, and I would like to express my best wishes for a future of peace and well being for Lithuania, hoping for the strengthening of the democratic process and of respect for human rights, including those of national minorities and of the whole community. As I again offer my cordial thanks to you and to all the illustrious members of your entourage for today's meeting, I invoke upon the beloved Lithuanian nation the protection of the Lord and the heavenly Mother of God, Mother of Mercy, particularly venerated at the Shrine of the «Dawn Gate» in Vilnius, where I had the privilege to stop and pray during my pilgrimage on 4 September 1993. May God, through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin, support the Lithuanian people on their way towards a future of genuine progress and true

peace.

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