



The Holy See

***DISCORSO DI GIOVANNI PAOLO II
AL PRIMO AMBASCIATORE DELLA REPUBBLICA SLOVACCA
PRESSO LA SANTA SEDE, S.E. IL SIGNOR ANTON NEUWIRTH,
IN OCCASIONE DELLA PRESENTAZIONE
DELLE LETTERE CREDENZIALI**** *Lunedì, 4 luglio 1994*

Mr. Ambassador,

1. I am particularly pleased to receive the Letters of Credence accrediting you for a mission of considerable importance, for after becoming an independent, sovereign State on 1 January 1993, the noble Slovak nation is sending you as its first Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the Holy See. At this time my respectful thoughts turn to the President of the Republic, Mr. Michal Kováč, and to all the people of Slovakia, whose feelings of devotion to the Successor of Peter were graciously confirmed by you a few moments ago. As you rightly stressed, the singular nature of this occasion is reflected in the corresponding appointment of Archbishop Luigi Dossena as Apostolic Nuncio in Slovakia.

The Pope's relationship with the Slovak people is marked by a special affection and cordiality. Indeed, numerous pilgrims from the Archdiocese of Trnava and the Dioceses of Banská Bystrica, Košice, Nitra, Rožňava and Spiš, as well as from the Eparchy of Prešov come to visit me every week. In addition, my closest co-workers include an illustrious compatriot of yours, Cardinal Jozef Tomko, who puts the genuine faith you have inherited in the heart of Europe at the service of the evangelization of the whole world.

Indeed, the days of my Apostolic Visit in April 1990 to Bohemia, Moravia and Slovakia will remain unforgettable. I can still see before my eyes the enthusiastic celebration of the Eucharist at Bratislava Airport. Those were moments which it is not an exaggeration to call historic, and I like to think that your presence in Rome, Mr. Ambassador, is in some way the result of the intensity and value of those meetings.

I have wished to mention these events to stress how fine and important it is that diplomatic relations have their roots in the deeper and enduring links of culture and faith. And a similar consideration is more than ever relevant to the current phase in the life of the European continent, when the risk is obviously that of underrating the dimension of humanistic values to the advantage of the economic aspects, which certainly have great importance but are not such as to be able on their own to found and to sustain an «ethos», a shared way of feeling. This truth, which the Church has so much at heart, has a special value at the present time for Slovakia, which is passing through an encouraging but delicate phase of

transition towards a role of full national and international maturity.

2. On becoming a sovereign State, the Slovak Republic «inherited» all the legislation, on the one hand, concerning the regulation of relations with the international community, and on the other, concerning the drafting of domestic laws. It depends on respect for human rights, including religious freedom. A further development of these laws will enable Slovakia to occupy a worthy place in the concert of nations, and especially, to develop good neighbourly relations with those on its borders.

At the domestic level, an increasingly precise application of the above-mentioned legislation will offer every citizen including national minorities, legal security and the opportunity for harmonious development with respect for the particular features of every group of which the State is composed.

3. I have already mentioned the strong link binding Slovaks to the Church and to the See of Peter; this is certainly a result of the brilliant work of evangelization undertaken by Saints Cyril and Methodius.

The fact that the venerable remains of the former are kept in Rome, while those of the latter rest not far from Slovakia's borders in Velehrad, Moravia, which I had the joy of visiting as a pilgrim in prayer, is an eloquent indication of this spiritual relationship. Precisely tomorrow, by a fortunate and propitious coincidence, the solemnity of the two saintly brothers, the Co-patrons of Europe, is being celebrated in Slovakia and is also a national holiday.

One could say that Christianity is closely linked to the nation's history. The majority of Slovakia's citizens call themselves Catholic, claiming this more than 1,000-year identity which characterizes the country's rich historical and cultural heritage. And the five Dioceses into which the Ecclesiastical Province of Trnava is divided as well as the Eparchy of Prešov, which is immediately subject to the Holy See, pass on this priceless heritage from generation to generation.

However, we know that the relationship between the Gospel and a people is always a living relationship, to be constantly fostered and renewed in every generation. I therefore hope that our era, a time of transition from the second to the third Christian millennium, will see the efforts of wise, generous witnesses to the Truth from all walks of life, totally dedicated, like Cyril and Methodius, to spreading the Christian message in concrete sociocultural situations, so that the children and grandchildren of those who have suffered so much for the faith may in turn experience the joy of spending their life in service to God and man.

4. Concerning relations between the Slovak State and the Church, this is also a period laden with promises and developments. From January 1993 until today, the measures taken by the authorities of the Republic with regard to the Church are to be favorably considered. Important norms were issued with a view to reestablishing a system of justice and full legality. For example, I am thinking of the laws concerning the restoration of confiscated Church property, of religious teaching in the public schools, and of others as well.

It is certainly necessary to continue in this direction, Mr. Ambassador, as you convincingly stated in your address. It is a question of making the most of the favourable time granted to us by Providence, to complete the agreements already made, to regulate pending issues, and thus to progress in following common objectives. I am referring in particular to the

Church's presence in several sectors from which until recently she was excluded: hospitals, schools, prisons, the military, the media and the world of culture.

As you well know, the Church does not demand privileges, but only desires to serve the common good and to contribute to Slovakia's spiritual rebirth after the sad period of communist totalitarian oppression. In accordance with the mandate she has received from Christ, she will never tire of presenting moral norms and their unchanging foundations to all citizens, in order to help them discover or confirm the importance of ethical values in Private and public life.

To this end, it is more desirable than ever that collaboration between the State authorities and those of the Church continue more deeply and intensely, with respect for their reciprocal autonomy and scope. In the current year dedicated to the family, it is only right to remember that the protection and promotion of the family institution, the basic cell of the Church and of society, should become a privileged area for close collaboration between the ecclesial and political communities. For her part, obeying the Lord's invitation, the Church will devote ever greater attention to evangelization and human advancement, seeking to do the best she can to satisfy the needs of the poorest and most deprived.

5. Mr. Ambassador, I most appreciated, in your courteous words, a shared closeness with the Church's sentiments and goals. I am certain that this is the best premise for an increasingly useful cooperation, for the benefit not only of the country which you represent, but for the peaceful coexistence and development of the peoples of Europe as a whole.

I know how devoted the people you represent are to the Mother of God, which is particularly expressed in the shrines dedicated to her at Levoca and Sastin, and I therefore wish to entrust the mission you are undertaking to the constant protection of the Blessed Virgin. At the same time, I recommend the progress of all members of the Slovak people to the intercession of the heavenly protectress of Slovakia and to Sts Cyril and Methodius, so that they might live in peace and prosperity. I offer you my sincere good wishes, Mr. Ambassador, that you may undertake the mission entrusted to you with serene dedication. I gladly invoke an abundance of heavenly favours on it, as a pledge of which I impart to you from my heart the Apostolic Blessing you requested, which I extend to your co-workers, to their families and to all the citizens of the beloved Slovak

Republic.

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