



# The Holy See

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**DISCORSO DI GIOVANNI PAOLO II  
AL PRESIDENTE DELLA REPUBBLICA  
DI BOSNIA ED ERZEGOVINA\***

*Giovedì, 8 settembre 1994*

*Mr. President. The Civil and Religious Authorities, Brothers and Sisters,*

1. For a long time I have been anxious to make this journey to see the agony of this city with my own eyes in order to share your pain, to lift my gaze to heaven together with you and pray to the God of life and peace.

In these long, unending years of war, Sarajevo has truly been at the centre of my heart. I was spiritually present here, together with our brothers and sisters of different Christian confessions and the believers of other creeds, during the Day of Prayer which took place in Assisi on 9 and 10 January 1993. I made a spiritual pilgrimage here on 23 January this year, during the Mass for peace in the Balkans, celebrated in St Peter's Basilica. You have constantly been in my mind, on the many occasions when I have launched heartfelt appeals to hasten the peace process.

Only now has the Lord granted my wish to be physically among you as well, close at hand to share your hopes and your tears. It is unfortunately a brief visit, but I ardently hope that it heralds the beginning of a new dawn of peace and harmony for this beloved and tormented country

2. Thank you, Mr. President, for your kind welcome, As I offer you my cordial greetings, which I respectfully extend to the authorities present and to all those who have helped to make this visit possible, I have before me the citizens of Sarajevo and of the whole of Bosnia-Herzegovina: Bosnians who are Muslim, Serbian and Croatian, as well as the members of national minorities. I desire to enfold you all in a single embrace. I think affectionately of the beloved Catholic community, of our brothers and sisters who belong to the venerable Orthodox Church, of the numerous Muslim community; of the small and cherished Jewish community, dispersed once

again. All have been the victims of violent acts of nationalism which is insensitive to the values of peaceful coexistence among peoples.

I think with grateful admiration of the religious and humanitarian organizations, in particular those of the United Nations, and of all the people who have offered their concrete solidarity in many ways and with various means, indifferent to danger, who have sometimes reached the point of facing death so that others might live.

I share the grief of all those who are mourning the loss of their dear ones, especially their young sons and daughters, cut down by the horrors of a war that spares nothing and no one,- I have come as a messenger of harmony and peace, motivated only by the wish to be beside the victims of abuse and violence, to repeat yet again «You are not abandoned; we are with you and we will always be with you».

My visit is intended to be a pilgrimage of peace in a region afflicted by deep suffering and injustice; a region where people have perished by the thousands, where there are countless wounded and many have become refugees because of senseless and blind violence No, an end must be put to this war, it cannot continue!

3. Sarajevo, this city at the cross-roads of the tensions between different cultures and nations, can be considered as «the city of our century». It was precisely here in fact, that the First World War broke out in 1914. And it is here we have had to return at the end of the century, in 1994. But what has happened in Europe during these 80 years? A great many things have happened. First and foremost, the great powers established in the last century toppled 1918 signified the start of independence for many Central European countries. That Europe lasted 20 years. New powers took over from the old – in the West, the Nazi regime, in the East, the Communist regime of the Soviet Union. Two powers, hostile to each other but each willing to compromise in order to achieve their imperialistic aim.

The end of the War in 1945 marked the defeat of German Nazism, The victorious Communist Front then moved towards the West. On this side of the Iron Curtain, in the West, the new European Community was taking its first steps. In the East, on the other hand, nations were obliged to fight hard to keep their own identity and political independence.

1989 was a moment of historical importance in this conflict. That year marked the end of the communist regime and also the start of the tensions and subsequently the terrible war in the Balkans between the peoples of the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. This was a new challenge for all, since Catholics, Orthodox and Muslims were all involved in the Balkan war; all of them believers who trusted in the power of prayer and who found they shared a common concern.

4 What concern? Let us think back to 1945. Emerging from the Second World War, the nations

which had experienced unspeakable atrocities became aware of an urgent need to form a coalition against war. One of their first achievements on the way to peace was the Declaration of Human Rights. War is against man. If one wants to avoid war, it is essential to guarantee respect for the fundamental rights of the human person, which include in the first place the right to life, which every man has from conception until natural death. Other rights follow, such as religious freedom for example and the freedom of conscience, that define the principles of human coexistence in its spiritual dimension. The Second Vatican Council devoted a specific Declaration to these rights, *Dignitatis humanae*.

In addition, the coexistence of individuals and peoples is based on the «rights of nations». As for each individual person so too every nation has the right to life and to its development in accordance with its cultural resources. Families draw on these in raising children, and hand on the nations cultural heritage to future generations. I have had the opportunity to speak about this several times, in particular at UNESCO, during my visit in 1980 (cf. *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, Vol III, I, [1980], pp 1636-1655).

Peace comes about and thus is established and defended by respecting the rights of individuals and nations.

5. This is therefore an important task entrusted to all. A very great deal depends of course, on all those who hold positions of public responsibility, both in the context of the parties in conflict and in international agencies. How can we fail to encourage the international community's renewed efforts to promote peace in Bosnia-Herzegovina? These efforts must be consistent with the principles sanctioned by International Law and affirmed by numerous resolutions taken for that purpose.

It is, however, obvious that the peace process relies to a large extent not only on institutional formulae which nonetheless are effectively drawn up in sincere dialogue with respect for justice; the peace process depends above all on a new found solidarity of soul and against the background of such bloodshed and such hatred, this implies the courage to forgive. It is essential to know how to ask forgiveness and how to forgive!

This does not mean that crimes should not also be penalized by human justice – which is necessary and obligatory – but justice is very far from any blind instinct of revenge, and allows itself rather to be guided by a strong sense of the common good that aims at winning back those who err.

6. Only this spiritual framework can prepare the ground for peace and can foster the successful outcome of the negotiations under way. The proposals and contacts of this recent period, so praiseworthy in their attempt to bring the conflict to an end at last, have not yet produced the necessary understanding to reach the desired goal. These contacts must continue and be

intensified. It is no longer possible to ignore the plea of all those – men, women, young, old, and children – who are anxiously waiting for the conflict to end so that a genuine encounter may take its place!

This is why I would like to repeat what I said at the beginning of this year: «what is taken or destroyed by force will never do honour to a man or to the cause he claims to uphold»(Address to the Diplomatic Corps, 15 January 1994, L'Osservatore Romano English edition, 19 January 1994, p.6).

The method of dialogue, which despite resistance is gradually being asserted, requires loyalty, perseverance and unanimity in those who take part. Only on the basis of these principles will it be possible to settle the existing disagreements and divergences and to make room for the concrete hope of a better future for all the peoples who live together in this land.

7. Mr. President, I entrust these considerations to you. They are intended to strengthen hope in a more serene future for each inhabitant of this beloved country. Of course, in the present situation in Sarajevo and in so many other towns and villages, hope might appear an illusion or very far from the harsh daily reality. All the same, it is necessary to have hope and trust in God who is ever faithful. My ardent wish is that when this time of turbulence and division is over at last, an era of tolerance, agreement, and regained solidarity among kindred peoples should begin without delay.

As I have stated on other occasions, «war is not inevitable; peace is possible». It is possible because man has a conscience and a heart. It is possible because God loves each one of us, just as each one is, so as to transform and make him or her grow (ibid.).

May God, Creator and Lord of every person console each one, strengthening in souls the gifts of dialogue, understanding, and constructive commitment to up building peace. Mr. President, this is my prayer to the Almighty, as I invoke his Blessing on the whole of Bosnia-Herzegovina and especially on those who have been most deeply and visibly marked by the war and who, above all, desire peace.

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