



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO THE PHILIPPINES,
PAPUA NEW GUINEA, AUSTRALIA AND SRI LANKA

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
AT A MEETING WITH REPRESENTATIVES OF OTHER RELIGIONS**

*Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall
(Colombo, Sri Lanka)
Saturday, 21 January 1995*

Distinguished Religious Leaders,

1. I am very pleased to have this opportunity during my visit to Sri Lanka to meet *representatives of the various religions* which have lived together in harmony for a very long time on this Island: especially *Buddhism*, present for over two thousand years, *Hinduism*, also of very long standing, along with *Islam* and *Christianity*. This simultaneous presence of great religious traditions is a source of enrichment for Sri Lankan society. At the same time it is a challenge to believers and especially to religious leaders, to ensure that *religion itself always remains a force for harmony and peace*. On the occasion of my Pastoral Visit to the Catholics of Sri Lanka, I wish to reaffirm *the Church's, and my own, deep and abiding respect* for the spiritual and cultural values of which you are the guardians.

Especially since the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church has been fully committed to *pursuing the path of dialogue and cooperation with the members of other religions*. Interreligious dialogue is a precious means by which the followers of the various religions discover shared points of contact in the spiritual life, while acknowledging the differences which exist between them. The Church respects the freedom of individuals to seek the truth and to embrace it according to the dictates of conscience, and in this light she firmly rejects proselytism and the use of unethical means to gain conversions.

2. The Catholic community hopes that through a continuing "dialogue of life" all believers will co-operate willingly in order to defend and promote moral values, social justice, liberty and peace. Like many modern societies, *Sri Lanka is facing the spiritual threat represented by the growth of a materialistic outlook*, which is more concerned with "having" than with "being". Experience makes it clear that mere technological progress does not satisfy man's inner yearning for truth and communion. Deeper spiritual needs have to be met if individuals, families, and society itself are not to fall into a serious crisis of values. There is ample room for co-operation among the followers of the various religions in meeting this serious challenge.

For this reason, I appeal to you and encourage you, as the religious leaders of the Sri Lankan people, to consider *the concerns which unite believers*, rather than the things which divide them. The safeguarding of Sri Lanka's spiritual heritage calls for strenuous efforts on the part of everyone to proclaim before the world the sacredness of human life, to defend the inalienable dignity and rights of every individual, to strengthen the family as the primary unit of society and the place where children learn humanity, generosity and love, and to encourage respect for the natural environment. Interreligious co-operation is also a powerful force for promoting ethically upright socio-economic and political standards. Democracy itself benefits greatly from the religiously motivated commitment of believers to the common good.

3. Perhaps nothing represents a greater threat to the spiritual fabric of Sri Lankan society than the continuing ethnic conflict. *The religious resources of the entire nation must converge to bring an end to this tragic situation*. I recently had occasion to say to an international group of religious leaders: "violence in any form is opposed not only to the respect which we owe to every fellow human being; it is opposed also to the true essence of religion. Whatever the conflicts of the past and even of the present, it is our common task and common duty to make better known the relation between religion and peace" (John Paul II, *Address for the Opening of the Sixth World Assembly of the World Conference on Religion and Peace*, 2) . The only struggle worthy of man is "the struggle against his own disordered passions, against every type of hatred and violence; in short against everything that is the exact opposite of peace and reconciliation" (John Paul II, *Message for the World Day of Peace 1992*, 7).

4. Very dear esteemed friends: I am certain that the principles of mercy and non-violence present in your traditions will be a source of inspiration to Sri Lankans in their efforts to build a peace which will be lasting because it is built upon justice and respect for every human being. I express once more my confidence that your country's long tradition of religious harmony will grow ever stronger, for the peace and well-being of individuals, for the good of Sri Lanka and of all Asia.

[At the end of the meeting the Holy Father added the following words:]

And now I offer you a gift memorable of these days and of the meeting. I am very grateful for your presence and very grateful for this meeting with you that we are together... not against, but

together!

Not to be together is dangerous. It is necessary to be together, to dialogue. I am very grateful for that. I see in your presence the signs of the goodwill and of the future, the good future, for Sri Lanka and for the whole world. And so I can return to Rome, more hopeful. Thank you.