



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO H.E. Mr. H.M.G.S. PALIHAKKARA
NEW AMBASSADOR OF THE DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST
REPUBLIC OF SRI LANKA TO THE HOLY SEE***

Thursday, 18 December 1997

Mr Ambassador, It is a pleasure for me to welcome you to the Vatican today and to accept the Letters of Credence whereby Her Excellency President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga names you Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka to the Holy See. I am grateful for the greetings you bring from the President and I ask you to convey to Her Excellency the assurance of my prayers for the peace and prosperity of the entire nation. I take this occasion to affirm once more my deep respect for the people of Sri Lanka and for the rich spiritual and cultural heritage of your country. The simultaneous presence of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity has been a source of enrichment for Sri Lankan society. The contribution of the various religious groups in Sri Lanka is of inestimable value for the development of the nation in its fullest sense. In her relations with other religions, the Catholic Church follows the path of dialogue, and on the occasion of my visit to your country in 1995 I was pleased to experience firsthand the climate of religious harmony which your people have fostered for centuries. In carrying out her spiritual mission the Church works within civil society to promote justice, compassion and respect for others. A society which ignores or neglects life's spiritual dimension becomes over-conditioned by material considerations, and respect for the superior values stemming from the dignity of the human person declines. This leads inevitably to injustice against the most vulnerable: the poor, the old, the weak. For this reason, the traditional Sri Lankan respect for religion is a gift to be treasured and protected. Spiritual leaders must face the challenge of ensuring that religion remains a force for understanding and peace. And civil society must guarantee and ensure the religious freedom necessary for the harmonious co-existence of all the various groups which make up the nation. The Holy See is aware that the Government of Sri Lanka is presently engaged on a project of Constitutional Reform, and it appreciates the Government's concern to safeguard the nation's long tradition of religious freedom and cooperation. It must be everyone's desire that the new Constitution will effectively help to resolve the ethnic conflict which has so gravely damaged the fabric of Sri Lankan society and caused so many victims. Your Excellency has referred to your Government's complex peace strategy, including the "peace caravan" which is meant to bring the question close to the people. Any such strategy can hope to

succeed only if it makes possible a true dialogue between all those involved in conflict. It is essential that all parties should have an attitude of openness and, when necessary, be willing to make the compromises necessary to balance opposing interests. A just peace must enshrine a guaranteed respect for the legitimate rights of everyone, independently of ethnic origin, political conviction or religious creed. Many of the threats to world peace today arise from the strident contrast between the wealth of some and the poverty of others. The Holy See has asked on many occasions for a more equitable distribution of resources and has encouraged the richer nations to be ever more sensitive to the true needs of developing nations. Attempts to resolve the major difficulties facing the world in the area of development must be inspired by appreciation of the transcendent mystery of the human person. For this reason, programmes of aid and assistance which impose conditions that degrade human dignity and freedom, or destroy important values in a nation's culture are unacceptable. Mr Ambassador, you have mentioned the contribution of the Catholic Church to your country's social progress. In the field of education, it is important to bear in mind the crucial importance of the all-round formation of the young people who are the future of the nation. The values they learn today will be those which affect the social fabric of your country tomorrow. It is essential that they should be made aware of the spiritual dimension of human life and that they be helped to overcome the temptations which a materialist culture can set before them. An appreciation of moral values and an attitude of respect for others are as important as any technical skill they may acquire. When the Catholic Bishops of Sri Lanka came to Rome last year on their *ad Limina* visit, I spoke of the fact that "the Church's contribution to the integral development of Sri Lankan society lies in putting forward a vision in which economic, political and social progress go hand in hand with religious, cultural and moral advancement". Deep within the individual is a yearning for something that no material prosperity can satisfy. The Church's presence in various kinds of social activity and in the area of health is based first and foremost on her Divine Founder's command to love our neighbour as ourselves. She bears a mission distinct from that of political authorities, but in the service of the human family she seeks active cooperation with all men and women of good will, and with the social institutions which maintain a just hierarchy of values and a true concept of the common good. The members of the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka, under the guidance of their Bishops, are always ready to cooperate with their Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim fellow citizens in the service of the common good. Some of them have suffered much in the ethnic conflict, but their hope is to support and cooperate in initiatives aimed at securing a just and lasting peace. They will continue to make their specific contribution in the various areas of social development, the defence of life, and the moral and religious progress of the nation. Mr Ambassador, as you undertake your responsibilities, it is my hope that the bonds of friendship which exist between the Holy See and Sri Lanka will be further strengthened. I assure you that you can rely on the help of the various offices and departments of the Roman Curia in fulfilling your mission. I extend to you, to your family and colleagues my heartfelt good wishes, and I invoke upon you and the people of Sri Lanka abundant divine

blessings.

* *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, vol. XX, 2 p. 1040-1043.

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