



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE NEW AMBASSADOR OF BULGARIA
TO THE HOLY SEE***

Monday, 21 December 1998

Mr Ambassador,

1. I am pleased to welcome Your Excellency for the presentation of the Letters accrediting you as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Bulgaria to the Holy See. I would be grateful if you would kindly convey my thanks to H.E. Mr. Petar Stoyanov, President of Bulgaria, for his message which you have delivered to me, and express to him my fervent best wishes for him and for his lofty mission at the service of the Bulgarian nation. I hope that all the country's inhabitants may achieve their deepest aspirations, in an increasingly united and fraternal society.

I am particularly moved by what you have just said in expressing the sentiments you feel as you begin your mission as the second Ambassador to the Holy See. You are adding a page to the long history of your country's relations with the Apostolic See. You mentioned my Predecessor, Pope John XXIII, who was Apostolic Delegate in Sofia and left in your compatriots' hearts the memory of a warm-hearted person whom they adopted to the point of calling him the *Bulgarian Pope*. I am pleased with the attention that you and your Government have paid to the activity of the Successor of Peter and of the Holy See in European and international affairs.

2. Since your State was founded, the Bulgarian people have developed down to our day a humanistic and religious culture which is rich in its depth and in its literary, theatrical and musical expression. Thanks to the followers of Sts Cyril and Methodius, evangelization has given a new impetus to the moral and spiritual values which are now part of the tradition and heritage of the Bulgarian nation (cf. Encyclical Epistle *Slavorum Apostoli*, n. 24). It is a treasure of wisdom from which your compatriots can draw abundantly to find the inspiration to encourage, enlighten and strengthen them in the difficulties they currently face. By deepening their contact with what constitutes their own identity, they will find new ways to respond to the questions they encounter and to strengthen social life with respect for particular sensitivities and concern for the unity of society. In seeking the common good, leaders have an important role in ensuring the stability of

institutions, so that the whole people will be able to enjoy the essential goods. Indeed, they are called by their fellow citizens to administer the *res publica* in a spirit of service and with a keen sense of the common good, paying special attention to the weakest and poorest. Economic development, to which all aspire and to which each must contribute, will thus be a human development because it will be at the service of the dignity of every person, of the rights of the family and of the common good.

In this century your people have been harshly tried by many tragedies which have deeply affected the European continent. Your nation has had witnesses of peace and reconciliation who are models and examples for the future. One of them, who is a symbol for everyone, is the martyred Bishop Eugene Bossilkov, whom I beatified last 15 March in the presence of a considerable number of your fellow citizens. As I said on that day, "he is one of the many victims sacrificed by atheistic communism ... in its plan to destroy the Church" (L'Osservatore Romano English edition, 18 March 1998, p. 1). In a letter Bishop Bossilkov wrote towards the end of 1948 he said that the blood shed by the people would pave "the way to a splendid future; and even if we will not see it ourselves, others will reap what we sowed in suffering". May our contemporaries see this period come in our day, for the good of all!

3. You have recalled the fruitful relations, based on mutual esteem, which Bulgaria and the Holy See have maintained for centuries. The Catholic community of Bulgaria is small, but it is deeply rooted in the nation's life. Lay Catholics wish to be involved in public life and to see good opportunities opened to them for serving their country along with their compatriots. They would also like to pursue cordial ecumenical relations with their Orthodox brothers and sisters, by fostering sincere mutual knowledge and joint action at the spiritual and charitable levels, as the Second Vatican Council has already invited Christians to do (cf. Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio*, nn. 2-4). The Church wants to be close to the unfortunate through the many social institutions and she attaches paramount importance to the task of education.

All your compatriots are also invited to take part in the formation of the younger generation, so that they will become aware of the values of their heritage, of their responsibilities in building their country and of what they can do to achieve the civilization of love and truth. It is particularly important to give them a spiritual, moral and civic education that will make them young people who can lead a personal life rich in meaning and commit themselves to their homeland.

4. The different religious traditions are a treasure which should be shared more and more. The eminent figure of Bishop Bossilkov should be an example for everyone because of his constant ecumenical concern. For their part, Catholics want to devote all their energies to ensuring that relations among the Churches will support the country's material and spiritual development. You know that the co-cathedral of St Joseph in Sofia, now in need of repair, is an important sign of the centuries-old presence of the Catholic Church in your country. The faithful must have places of worship where they can gather round their pastors to pray. It is to be hoped that every effort will be made for all believers to benefit, not only in theory but also in their daily lives, from freedom of worship, which is one of the significant aspects of human rights.

In this spirit, I recently said in my *Message for the World Day of Peace*, 1 January 1999: "Religion expresses the deepest aspirations of the human person, shapes people's vision of the world and affects their relationships with others: basically it offers the answer to the question of the true meaning of life, both personal and communal. Religious freedom therefore constitutes the very heart of human rights" (n. 5). Another form of essential freedom, especially at a time when the European continent is changing, consists in the natural right of every person to freedom of movement in his own country

and from one country to another, with respect for the local culture and lawful institutions, but without imposing restrictions based on race or creed. Europeans as a whole must be attentive to the rights of displaced persons and their families.

5. Recent history, which has seen so many victims of various ideologies, particularly invites us never to tire of promoting respect for human life, which has a sacred character, and for the dignity of every individual. In this spirit, I am pleased with the decision your leaders have recently made to abolish the death penalty, thereby showing that every human being's life, even that of a sinner or criminal, has immeasurable value and that "the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity 'are very rare, if not practically non-existent'"? (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2267; cf. *Evangelium vitae*, n. 56. 6. With you I hope that the Great Jubilee will be an invitation to justice and peace in the world. May Bulgaria make its voice heard in the concert of nations and be recognized for its significant contribution in this domain!

As you begin your mission as representative of Bulgaria to the Holy See, may I offer you my best wishes for its success. Rest assured, Mr. Ambassador, that those who work with me will always offer you the attentive understanding and sincere support you may need to fulfil your office.

I cordially invoke an abundance of divine blessings upon Your Excellency, your staff and your family, and upon the Bulgarian people and their leaders.

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