



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO H.E. MR ATIS SJANITS
NEW AMBASSADOR OF THE REPUBLIC OF LATVIA
TO THE HOLY SEE****

28 May 1998

Mr Ambassador,

It is with pleasure that I welcome you at the beginning of your mission as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Latvia to the Holy See. As I accept your Letters of Credence, I thank you for the warm greetings which you bring from President Guntis Ulmanis, and I ask that you convey to him and to the Latvian people my own good wishes and the assurance of my prayers for the peace and prosperity of the nation. Our meeting vividly reminds me of my Pastoral Visit to your country in 1993, when I saw and heard for myself how much the Latvian people had suffered through long years of oppression, and how deep was the yearning for freedom which had sustained them through those years. I witnessed the nobility of a nation in which the hope for freedom had never died; and in this hope I recognized the seed of the Gospel, sown long ago in Latvian hearts by Saint Meinhard, but bearing new fruit in the liberation of recent times. I trust most sincerely that this same hope will lead Latvia beyond the complex task of reconstruction into the future for which Latvians have struggled, a future at the heart of the European community of nations. For all the achievements of recent years, this remains a delicate time of transition for Latvia, a time when the country finds itself poised between the sorrows of the past and the promises of the future. The past is gone, but its wounds remain; and the process of healing is long and slow. The new Freedom Monument in Riga, built to commemorate the events of January 1991, is an enduring reminder that there is much to be forgiven and nothing to be forgotten. The future beckons, but its promises are more elusive and demanding than they seemed at first. The events of 1991 were extraordinary, but they did not suddenly bring a new world to birth. More than ever they seem now the beginning of a long journey. Yet, however daunting the task of reconstruction can seem, the strength which led your nation to independence will surely not fail the Latvian people as they face this challenge. The complexities of such a task can at times obscure the most basic demands. In the wake of economic devastation, it is tempting to see material reconstruction not only as an urgent task but as the only task. Yet material reconstruction without moral and spiritual reconstruction will only hinder the great venture of freedom which Latvia is now living. At the heart of all the challenges facing Latvia in this time of transition there lies the moral imperative. Freedom came in 1991 because the Latvian people were prepared to defend it, whatever the cost. That freedom still needs to be defended, although in different ways; and to defend it now the Latvian Government and people will need to

continue clear-sightedly and courageously on the path of moral reconstruction. Freedom is only freedom if it is directed towards the truth and governed by it; separated from truth, it withers and leads eventually to new forms of slavery. The oppression from which Latvia has only recently emerged rose from an ideology which did not tell the truth. It used the rhetoric of freedom, but what it produced was oppression. If the future is not to repeat the past, there is a need to build on the basis of the truth about man and about society. At the heart of this vision there lie certain fundamental values which provide the one sure foundation for a society worthy of man. These values cannot be ignored or rejected in the task of reconstruction. Among them, there is the need for a true notion of independence, which implies not only a rejection of the destructive dependence of the past, but also an acceptance of the creative interdependence which has become more and more a reality of international life and which calls for dialogue and mutual respect between peoples. Secondly, there is the need for a true notion of democracy, which does not coincide with the idea that rights and duties are conferred solely by majority vote, with the result that the strong overpower the weak. It involves respect for universal moral principles and demands a vivid sense of the common good. Thirdly, there is the need for an authentic notion of economic development, which does not place profit before people or reduce the individual to the status of a commodity valued on the basis of price or productivity. As she builds her future, Latvia has to seek true independence, democracy and economic development; and this search demands above all an acceptance of the governing truth about the human person and human society. It is at this point that the Church wishes to make her distinctive contribution within the dialogue which diplomatic relations make possible. When I was in Latvia, I made it clear that "the role that the Church claims as her own, with all respect for the State and the society in which it lives, is not a role of power, still less of privilege, but of witness, directed most of all towards the task of forming people in the highest values of existence" (Riga, 9 September 1993). This unique witness is based not upon ideology of any kind but upon the Gospel, in which, "by means of the Church's social doctrine, economic, political and social problems can find certainly not technical solutions but clear principles from which to draw inspiration" (Riga, 10 September 1993). This is a contribution which reaches beyond the circle of faith, since it involves principles which may be shared by those who do not consider themselves Christians or believers of any kind. The truth which the Church proposes is born of faith but it is offered to all, since it concerns not the interests of the Church narrowly conceived but the interests and well-being of all individuals and peoples. Latvia faces a magnificent new opportunity, and this brings a new responsibility. The future is yours to shape; but you are not alone in that task. The Church seeks to offer Latvia whatever she can to ensure that the promises of this time find their fulfilment in a society based on truth and the freedom which truth alone can bring. That is the pledge which I renew today and which I ask you to convey to the President and the Latvian people. It is a pledge motivated by a profound respect for your nation and by the solemn duty which the Gospel imposes upon the Church. Mr Ambassador, as you enter the diplomatic community accredited to the Holy See, I assure you of the ready collaboration of the various offices and agencies of the Roman Curia as you carry out your duties. May your mission serve to strengthen the bond of understanding between your Government and the Holy See; and may that bond contribute richly to your country's reconstruction. Upon yourself, your family and all the people of Latvia I invoke the abundant blessings of Almighty God.

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