



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO CROATIA (OCTOBER 2-4, 1998)

SPEECH AT ARRIVAL IN ZAGREB

2 October 1998

*Mr President,
Distinguished Members of the Government,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,
Dear Brothers and Sisters!*

1. The Providence of God allows me to stand once again upon Croatian soil, as I begin my second Pastoral Visit to this beloved land. In a sense, this Apostolic journey continues the one which I undertook in September 1994, when I visited only the Capital.

I am happy that I have been able to accept the various invitations which came to me: from the Bishops of the country, from the President of the Republic, from Members of the Government and the Croatian Parliament, and from ordinary citizens as well. I thank the President of the Republic for the very kind words of welcome which he has just addressed to me. I greet the members of the Government and the other distinguished persons who honour this meeting with their presence.

And I greet all of you most warmly, you who have come to welcome me: through you, my greeting goes out to all the people of this noble nation, so rich in faith and culture.

2. I come among you as a pilgrim of the Gospel, following in the footsteps of the first confessors of the faith. I come to gather the fruits of the courageous witness given by Pastors and faithful since the first centuries of Christianity. They are fruits which appear in all their richness most especially in troubled times: during the Roman persecutions of the beginning, then the Turkish invasion and occupation, and most recently the terrible period of Communist repression. How can we not stand

in admiration before examples of faith such as the Bishop Saint Domnius, the Martyrs of Salona, Delminium, Istria, Sirmium, Siscia, right up to the Servant of God Alojzije Stepinac, who with other witnesses so brightly illumined this century which brings to a close the second Christian millennium?

In giving thanks to the Lord for the Church's two thousand years in this region and for the rich history of Croatian Catholics, I come today to confirm my brothers and sisters in the faith. I come to encourage their hope and to strengthen their love. This second Pastoral Visit to Croatia has two focal points: the beatification of the Servant of God Alojzije Stepinac as a martyr of the faith and the celebration of the seventeen hundredth anniversary of the City of Split. To these are linked two pilgrimages: to Marija Bistrica, the national Marian Shrine of Croatia, and to the Island of Solin to the first Marian shrine of Croatia – two places of great significance in the religious history of your region.

In this way the Croatian people's devotion to the Mother of God will shape the itinerary of this Visit. As I begin, therefore, I wish to entrust my journey through your land to her who is hailed as *Advocata Croatiae, fidelissima Mater*. To her I raise my prayer, that she may continue to watch over the progress of the Croatian people. May she protect Croatia and sustain you in witness to Christ and his Gospel, pointing out to you down the paths of time the way of eternal salvation.

3. It is fundamentally important that the Croatian people remain faithful to their Christian roots, while at the same time they remain open to the demands of the present which, if it has its difficult problems, offers as well consoling reasons for hope. After the violent and brutal war in which it found itself involved, Croatia is finally experiencing a period of peace and freedom. Now all the population's energies are dedicated to the gradual healing of the deep wounds of the conflict, to a genuine reconciliation among all the nation's ethnic, religious and political groups, and to an ever greater democratization of society.

I rejoice at this and I urge you to persevere in that commitment with generous determination. The obstacles created by the consequences of war and by the mentality shaped by the Communist regime are many. It is essential that you not yield to them. With the cooperation of everyone, it will be possible in a reasonably short time to find appropriate solutions even to the most complex problems.

I hope most fervently that in this part of Europe there will never again be a repetition of the inhuman situations which we have repeatedly seen in this century. May the sorrowful and tragic experience of recent times serve as a lesson to enlighten the mind and strengthen the will, so that the future of this country, as in Europe and throughout the world, may be gladdened by increased understanding and cooperation between peoples of different language, culture and religion.

I begin my Visit to the dear land of Croatia with words of love and hope: may the Visit contribute to

reconstruction on the basis of the enduring values of a country which is an integral part of Europe. My hope is that from the ancient Christian roots of this land there will come forth a powerful stream of life-giving sap which will ensure that, at the dawn of a new millennium, a true humanism will flourish for the generations to come. I trust especially that Christians will give a decisive impulse to the new evangelization, offering in all generosity their witness to Christ the Lord, the Redeemer of man.

Invoking divine assistance upon the entire Croatian nation, I bless you all from my heart.