



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO H.E. MR HJÁMAR W. HANNESSON,
AMBASSADOR OF THE REPUBLIC OF ICELAND***

Thursday, 20 May 1999

Mr Ambassador, I am pleased to welcome you today and to accept the Letters of Credence appointing you Ambassador of the Republic of Iceland to the Holy See. I thank you for the greetings which you bring from the President, Dr Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, whom I was happy to welcome to the Vatican last year. I ask you to convey to Dr Grímsson, to the Government and to the people of Iceland my good wishes and the assurance of my prayers for the peace and prosperity of the nation. Your mission begins at an auspicious time. The world is about to cross the threshold of the Third Millennium of the Christian era, and this poses questions and presents challenges to us all. For the Church, this will be a time of thanksgiving for gifts received, sorrow for sins committed, and renewal of the commitment to preach the Gospel and to teach the ways of truth, justice and peace. But the year 2000 acquires special significance for Iceland because, as you have noted, the nation will celebrate one thousand years of Christianity. My hope is that your mission will promote a mutuality in our celebrations – that Iceland will enrich the Jubilee in Rome and that Rome will enrich the Millennium in Iceland. I am vividly conscious of what you yourself have noted, Mr Ambassador – that for a very long time the links between Iceland and the Holy See were deep and strong. How could it be otherwise in a land where the roots of Christianity reach so far back in time? It is true that Christianity was adopted as the religion of Iceland by the decision of the Parliament in the year 1000 at Thingvellir. But, still earlier, Christian hermits had made their home in Iceland, and then there came the Christian settlers who paved the way for the Parliament's historic decision. From that time onwards, the Catholic Church became a vital element in forging the distinctive character and culture of your people; and for centuries the Holy See played its part in sustaining the nation's hope in dark times and in fostering the flowering of Icelandic culture that produced masterpieces like the Sagas. I am glad that much of this will be recognized at the Millennium Celebrations next year at Thingvellir, where there will be a range of items from the Vatican collections recalling the historic links between Iceland and the Holy See. Although there have been troubled moments in the relationship between us, the diplomatic relations which we now enjoy are a sign of a common desire to move into the future not influenced by the misunderstandings which produced the tensions of the past, but upon the basis of the original deep and ancient bond of understanding. The Christian heritage of your nation is more than a superficial cultural form. At its core there lie those "common beliefs and convictions about basic principles" of which you yourself have spoken. These beliefs and convictions concern the truth of the human person and the understanding of human dignity and rights which flows from this truth. This is the true humanism which the Church seeks to promote at all times and in all places;

and it was also this which Iceland solemnly chose nearly one thousand years ago at Thingvellir. It is my hope now, as you prepare for the Millennium, that the nation will renew that choice in every aspect of its life. The Bible lies at the root of both the Church's witness and Iceland's culture; and on the first page of Scripture we read that God created human beings in his own image. Here is the ground of all that the Church has to say about human dignity and human rights, and in a sense therefore it is the foundation of the Holy See's diplomatic activity. Every man, woman and child is possessed of an inviolable dignity, and this implies a range of human rights which are conceded or denied by no-one but God. It is the task of government to protect that dignity and to guarantee those rights; and to the extent that governments succeed in that task a society will enjoy true freedom. But the totalitarian regimes that have so blighted this century show all too clearly how fragile freedom is and how quickly it vanishes once human dignity and human rights are disregarded. Iceland enjoys great freedom, which is also the fruit of the ancient Christian heritage of your nation, and the Catholic Church will be a willing partner in ensuring that, through the Millennium Celebrations and beyond, the roots of this freedom grow deeper and stronger in Icelandic society. Mr Ambassador, you represent a nation which is great in neither size nor population. Yet it is a nation which has made a considerable contribution to the history of the millennium now ending. One example of this are the voyages of Leifur Eriksson, which you have mentioned and of which Iceland is rightly proud. In the figure of Eriksson, we see the courage, tenacity and resourcefulness which have always marked the people of Iceland, especially in dealing with adversity as Eriksson had to do. He was, as you have said of Iceland itself, "armed with good ideas and strong convictions", and central to these ideas and convictions was his firmly held Christian faith. This is not only Iceland's past; it is also the sure path into a future worthy of the human person and worthy of the people whom you represent. I pray that in your country Christian faith may always be wedded to courage, tenacity and resourcefulness, so that Iceland may be more and more a place where human dignity and rights are safeguarded at all times and where the weakest are therefore the most cherished. Mr Ambassador, as you enter the community of diplomats accredited to the Holy See, I assure you of the ready collaboration of the various offices of the Roman Curia. May your mission serve to strengthen the bond of friendship between your Government and the Holy See, and may that bond contribute richly to the well-being of your nation. Upon you, your family and all the people of Iceland I invoke the abundant blessings of Almighty

God

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