



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
TO THE NEW AMBASSADOR
OF AUSTRIA TO THE HOLY SEE***

Tuesday, 13 February 2001

Mr Ambassador,

1. Please accept my sincere thanks for your words on the occasion of the presentation of your Letters of Credence as the new Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Austria to the Holy See. As you begin your mission, I cordially welcome you and offer you my best wishes for this noble and important task. At the same time I ask you to convey my warm greetings to the Federal President.

2. When I think of Austria, my thoughts inevitably turn to the three unforgettable Pastoral Visits that have taken me to your esteemed country during my Pontificate. Besides the personal meetings with many representatives of ecclesial and social life, I have an especially vivid memory of the cultural scene which marks that Alpine republic; but it is also rich in the wealth that Christianity has produced and which must be preserved and fostered in the new millennium just begun.

This task is all the more urgent, when one considers Austria's geographical location in Europe. I would like to emphasize what you mentioned in your address: the fall of the Iron Curtain also marked a turning-point for the role your country plays. Austria has changed from a borderland to a "bridge-land". The demarcation between two worlds has disappeared and has opened an Areopagus in which Europe's East and West can meet.

I note with satisfaction that Austria is becoming more and more aware of her responsibility as a country in the heart of Europe and, as her opportunities allow, is actively supporting the expansion of the European Union in the sense of a Europeanizing of the whole continent. That is also the

Holy See's desire: it is tireless in its efforts at this historical moment to call for a "cultural transformation" to defend and promote the dignity of the human person (cf. *Evangelium vitae*, n. 95).

3. Whoever looks at Austria cannot help broadening his gaze to the continent as well. European culture is a network woven of many strands: there is the spirit that inspired ancient Greece, as well as the *Imperium Romanum* with its Latin, Slavic, Germanic and Finno-Ugric peoples. When the Christian faith reached Rome, the Roman Empire was the basis for its inculturation in the individual peoples and in this way it effectively spread. The *Corpus Christianorum* steadily grew as a spiritual family of States, composed of Roman, Germanic and Slavic members, and unthinkable without Christian values. It has essentially moulded the face of Europe and deeply influenced the Western heritage, which it is our task to keep alive.

Precisely at a time when Christianity can look back on her 2,000 years of existence, we have the important duty to be not only custodians of the past but also creators of a future that will reawaken people's hope. Project "Europe" as a whole and the individual countries that are to find their place in it stand at a crossroads today: to become either a thriving garden or a stagnant pond. I wish to take this solemn occasion, then, to point out several areas where the Holy See and Austria can continue and deepen their proven collaboration in order to prepare the ground for a thriving garden.

4. If the garden is to bloom at all, it must be a place where life is fostered. In our societies, therefore, a "culture of life" must prevail. Whoever rightly maintains that personal dignity is an inalienable possession of every human being can harbour no doubts that this personal dignity finds its primary and fundamental expression in the inviolability of human life. When the right to life is not staunchly defended as a condition for all other personal rights, all other references to human rights - to health, housing, work, starting a family - remain false and illusory.

We cannot be resigned to the many offences inflicted on the human person regarding his right to life. For this reason the Church supports all political efforts in keeping with the principle I expressed in my first Christmas message and which today is more valid than ever: "For God and before God, the human being is always unique and unrepeatable, somebody thought of and chosen from eternity, someone called and identified by his own name" (*Urbi et Orbi*, 25 December 1978; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 1 January 1979).

5. Therefore man has a right to life *in all phases of his existence*, from the moment of conception until natural death. He retains this right *in every situation* in which he finds himself: in health or sickness, in wholeness or disability, in wealth or poverty. The fact that abortion is permitted during the first three months of pregnancy in many European countries, including Austria, therefore remains a bleeding wound in my heart.

What applies to the beginning of human life also applies to its end: unfortunately, it seems that in the growing discussion on euthanasia the assumption that man has been given life as a gift is becoming less and less common. It is thus becoming increasingly difficult to defend the human right to die when God wills it. Death too is a part of life. Whoever deprives a person of the right to life at the end of his earthly existence ultimately deprives him of life itself, even if he tries to conceal the crime of euthanasia under the cloak of "humane death".

Lastly, with deep concern I would like to mention the responsibility arising from the tremendous advances in the biological and medical sciences and from the immense technological possibilities connected with them: today man is in the position not only of "observing" human life at its beginning and in the first stages of its development, but also of "manipulating" and "cloning" it.

In view of these tremendous challenges, I encourage "concerted actions" with the aim of "calling culture back to the principles of an authentic humanism, so that the promotion and defence of the rights of the human being may find a dynamic and sure foundation in his own essence"

(*Christifideles laici*, n. 38).

6. A garden is in bloom when many flowers blossom together. This image also applies to people in the garden of society. Society is a sign that people are called to live in community. This social dimension of human existence has its first and primordial expression in marriage and the family. As the cradle of life in which human beings are born and grow, the family represents the basic cell of society.

Through her pastoral initiatives, therefore, the Church gladly allies herself with everyone who, through political decisions, legislative measures or financial means, supports marriage and the family as the privileged place for the "humanization" of the individual and society. The goal of building a "civilization of love" along with a "culture of life" by strengthening marriage and the family must be pursued all the more urgently, since attacks on the stability and fruitfulness of marriage are more and more widespread, as are the attempts to relativize the legal status of this primary cell of society.

Experience shows that the stability of nations is encouraged above all by flourishing families.

Moreover: "The future of humanity passes by way of the family" (*Familiaris consortio*, n. 86).

Therefore, the family requires respect and special protection from public authorities. The garden of our society will thrive when families bloom again.

7. The family, moreover, is a special place of learning. It is not only the "sanctuary of life" (*Evangelium vitae*, n. 94), but also a school of "social charity" in miniature (*Centesimus annus*, n. 10), which on a large scale is called "solidarity". This "is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the

good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all" (*Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n. 38). In this connection I would like to recall a principle that underlies every sound political order: the more defenceless individuals are in a society, the more they depend on the concern and care of others, especially on the intervention of the State authority.

So I welcome all the initiatives promoting a family and social policy that is marked by the allocation of appropriate aid and active forms of support for children and by care for the elderly, so that they will not be separated from their families, and relations will thus be strengthened between the generations. I also express my gratitude for all the efforts made in your country to create the closest possible social networks for families. Wherever possible, the Church will gladly support them with her charitable associations.

In this connection it should be said that many human needs require more than material aid; it is often a matter of listening to deeper, inner questions. One also thinks of the situation of immigrants and refugees, the disabled and all the needy who are really helped only when sincere fraternal aid is given in addition to outward measures. So I am firmly convinced that in the future Austria will continue to offer its generous solidarity and active love of neighbour to others in need.

This wish does not stop at the country's borders. It includes the whole continent, so that, as Europe grows closer together, it must measure itself by whether solidarity can increasingly blossom between rich and poor countries.

8. I cannot conclude my reflections without expressing my confidence that the friendly relations between the Republic of Austria and the Holy See, which you rightly stressed in your address, will develop productively.

In our present social context, marked by a dramatic struggle between the "culture of life" and the "culture of death", we are joined by the common goal, over 10 years after the political transformation, to bring about a cultural transformation as well, one which will lead to a general mobilization of consciences and set new priorities for the human will: the primacy of being over having, of the person over things (cf. *Evangelium vitae*, n. 98). It is the human person whose well-being must be the common concern of the State and the Church by working together as partners in promoting noble values and ideals.

Mr Ambassador, as I cordially wish you a pleasant stay in Rome, I gladly give you, your esteemed embassy staff and your family my Apostolic Blessing.

© Copyright 2001 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana