



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
TO THE NEW AMBASSADOR
OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA
TO THE HOLY SEE***

Friday, 18 May 2001

Your Excellency,

It is a pleasure for me to welcome you to the Vatican and to accept the Letters of Credence appointing you Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of South Africa to the Holy See. I am grateful for the cordial greetings which you bring from President Thabo Mbeki and the people of your beloved nation, and I ask you kindly to convey to them the assurance of my continued prayers for the progress, peace and prosperity of your country.

The World Conference on Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance which South Africa will be hosting later this year provides an excellent opportunity — not only for your nation and the continent of Africa, but indeed for the entire international community — to address a matter of crucial importance for all peoples. Even though conflicts based on ethnic and national origins have already exacted a devastating toll on humanity in the century just past, such deplorable attitudes continue to represent an ominous spectre on the world stage. At the dawn of the new millennium, therefore, the entire family of nations does well to reaffirm its commitment to recognize, uphold and promote the fundamental dignity and inalienable rights of every human being. This is the sure path to overcoming prejudices and to combatting every form of racism; it is the way that will increase awareness that all people belong to a single human family, willed and gathered together by Almighty God himself.

The recent "rebirth" of your own nation, based on the rejection of segregation and discrimination so that all citizens together may walk the path of unity and brotherhood, is a hope-filled and encouraging sign for societies that are struggling with similar problems. Peace itself starts to

become a tangible reality when the human spirit is determined to reject the path of division and conflict in order to follow that of forgiveness and reconciliation. Such peace calls for the strength of an unyielding courage capable of overcoming the blind vindictiveness which would resort to forms of violence. As your own history has shown, although it is important that the truth about the past should be known and responsibility laid where it is due, it is even more important that the delicate process of building a just and harmonious multiracial society should go forward.

What is essential now is that individuals, families and entire peoples should be enabled to become truly active participants in and beneficiaries of that economic and political development envisaged by the leaders of various African nations in the "Millennium African Programme". In its forward-looking and far-reaching objectives, this joint endeavour should be built on the vision of the uniqueness of every human being, founded on the inviolability of the dignity of the human person. We would all like to see a world in which individuals are not forced into the anonymity that comes from collectivity or the overpowering influence of institutions, structures or systems. As an individual, a person is not a number or simply a link in a chain, and even less an impersonal element in some system. In the same way, peoples and nations too have a right to their own full development, which includes not only economic and social aspects but also, importantly, their individual cultural identity and their religious character. For this reason, the need for development must never become an excuse for imposing on others life-styles or cultural expressions which do not reflect a people's individuality and history.

I am pleased to note Your Excellency's recognition of the significant contribution made by the Catholic Church to the building up of South African society, both in the past and today. The Catholics of your country remain committed to working hand in hand with their fellow citizens as active participants in the political, social and cultural advancement of the nation, especially in the battle against poverty, illiteracy and AIDS. To this end, Church personnel, including many missionaries, members of religious communities as well as lay men and women, dedicate their services in the fields of education, social services and health care. The work they do is not for the benefit of Catholics alone, but for the good of all the people. It is my hope that your Government and the public authorities will welcome this service on the part of the Church by assisting the missionaries and others as they seek to continue these efforts aimed at ensuring an ever brighter future for South Africa and its people.

Madame Ambassador, as you begin your diplomatic mission to the Holy See, please know that you can count on any assistance which you may need in the fulfilment of your responsibilities. As I express my good wishes for the success of your work, I cordially invoke upon you and upon the leaders and people of the Republic of South Africa the abundant blessings of Almighty God.

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