



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
TO THE NEW AMBASSADOR
OF THE DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST REPUBLIC
OF SRI LANKA TO THE HOLY SEE***

Friday, 18 May 2001

Mr Ambassador,

I am pleased to welcome you today to the Vatican and to receive the Letters of Credence whereby Her Excellency President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga appoints you Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka to the Holy See. I am grateful for the cordial greetings and good wishes which you bring from the President and the Government, and I ask you to convey to Her Excellency the assurance of my prayers for the peace, harmony and prosperity of the entire nation.

In 1995 I had the joy of visiting your country, whose natural beauty has earned it the name "Pearl of the Indian Ocean". The hospitality and unfailingly kindness of the people of Sri Lanka left a lasting impression on me, and during my stay I was able to see how the cultural and religious variety of the peoples of the island has deeply marked your nation's history and identity. The various religious groups have each made an important contribution to the development of the nation as a whole. You have drawn attention to the fact that the followers of these religions have a long tradition of living together in harmony and mutual respect. This is in keeping with the authentic spirit of all the major world religions, while intolerance and violence in the name of religion is a travesty of their genuine spirit.

Authentic religious conviction leads to the promotion of common values essential for the good of society, such as respect for the transcendent dimension of life, openness to others and a deep sense of the inalienable dignity of every human person. Attention to the place of the transcendent in human life is a prerequisite for genuine development, since the person and society need not

only material progress but spiritual and religious values as well (cf. *Centesimus Annus*, 61). As the tragic experiences of the century we have just left behind teach us, neglect of the spiritual dimension of life leads inevitably to various forms of injustice against the most vulnerable: the unborn, the elderly, the weak. For this reason, the traditional Sri Lankan respect for religion is a gift to be treasured and protected. It is also essential for spiritual leaders to work together in a spirit of dialogue and cooperation to ensure that religion remains a force for peace and mutual understanding. Civil society, for its part, must guarantee the religious freedom necessary to ensure the harmonious coexistence of the followers of all religions, a freedom which, as you have mentioned, is guaranteed by your country's Constitution.

In recent years Sri Lanka has been tragically affected by conflict, causing much suffering and terrible loss of life, sadly even in recent weeks. We must hope that the efforts being made to find a peaceful and equitable solution to the underlying causes will lead the parties involved to abandon the ways of violence and engage in patient and persevering negotiation. A just peace must be based upon the protection and promotion of the fundamental rights of all citizens, as well as upon respect for their cultural and religious traditions, in conformity with the demands of the common good. The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka, whose members come from all ethnic groups, is doing all it can to promote a climate of dialogue and foster peace. As you know, the Church always supports those initiatives which have as their aim the establishment of a just peace based on respect for human dignity.

One of the major challenges facing many countries and the international community as a whole is the need to promote a more intense dialogue between cultures and traditions. The United Nations Organization has drawn attention to the urgency of this need by declaring 2001 the "International Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations". Culture shapes individuals and peoples, who in turn express themselves through it. Every culture involves a particular vision of social, political and economic life, and at its heart is a specific understanding of the fundamental questions which affect people's lives, including religious ones. Man is a being who seeks the truth and strives to live in accordance with it. From the search for truth, which never fades and is renewed in every generation, the culture of a nation derives its character (cf. *Centesimus Annus*, 49-50). Different cultures "are basically different ways of facing the question of the meaning of personal existence" (*ibid.*, 24). There is a need to respect the uniqueness of every culture, but also to understand cultural diversity "within the broader horizon of the unity of the human race" (*Message for World Day of Peace 2001*, No. 7). Understanding and communion between cultures "opens the mind to the mutual acceptance and genuine collaboration demanded by the human family's basic vocation to unity" (*ibid.*, 10).

It is now twenty-five years since the first Ambassador of Sri Lanka to the Holy See, Mr Ediriwira R. Sarachchandra, presented his Letters of Credence to my predecessor Pope Paul VI. During these years, the bonds of friendship between your country and the Holy See have been strengthened and consolidated, and your presence here today is a testimony to these good relations. You have

spoken very kindly of the Church's contribution to the betterment of society in such areas as education and social development. In accordance with her Divine Founder's command to love our neighbour as ourselves, the Church will continue to make efforts to ensure that people have the possibility of living a more dignified and fulfilled life, in keeping with the transcendent calling of every human person.

Mr Ambassador, as you assume your responsibilities within the diplomatic community accredited to the Holy See, I offer you my good wishes for the successful fulfilment of your high mission. I assure you that the various offices and departments of the Roman Curia will always be ready to assist you. Upon yourself and upon the beloved people of Sri Lanka I invoke abundant divine blessings.

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