



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS ACCREDITED TO THE HOLY SEE
FOR THE TRADITIONAL EXCHANGE OF NEW YEAR GREETINGS***

Monday, 12 January 2004

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen, It always gives me pleasure to meet you for the *traditional exchange of greetings* at the dawn of a new year. I am particularly touched by the good wishes that H.E. Ambassador Giovanni Galassi has sensitively expressed to me on your behalf. I warmly thank you for the kind and noble sentiments with which you daily follow the activity of the Apostolic See. Through you, I feel close to the peoples whom you represent; may they all be assured of the prayer and affection of the Pope, who invites them to combine their talents and resources to build together a common future of peace and prosperity! This meeting is also a privileged moment that gives me the opportunity to take *a look at the world* with you, as it is shaped by the men and women of today. The celebration of Christmas has just reminded us of God's tenderness for humanity, manifested in Jesus, and has made the ever-new message of Bethlehem ring out once again: "On earth peace among men with whom [God] is pleased!" (Lk 2: 14). This message reaches us this year when many peoples are still enduring the consequences of armed conflict, are suffering from poverty or have fallen prey to forms of blatant injustice or pandemics that are difficult to control. H.E. Mr Galassi has outlined these situations with his characteristic insight. In turn, I would like to tell you of four convictions that occupy my thoughts and prayers at the beginning of the year 2004.

1. *Peace still threatened* In recent months peace has been overwhelmed by the events in the *Middle East* that appears once again as a region of disputes and wars. The many attempts made by the Holy See to avoid the grievous war in Iraq are already known. Today what matters is that the international community help put the Iraqis, freed from an oppressive regime, in a condition to be able to take up their Country's reins again, consolidate its sovereignty and determine democratically a political and economic system that reflects their aspirations, so that Iraq may once again be a credible partner in the International Community. The failure to solve the *Palestinian-Israeli issue* remains a permanent factor of destabilization for the whole region, not to speak of the indescribable suffering it has caused both the Israeli and the Palestinian peoples. I will never tire of repeating to the leaders of these two peoples: the choice of weapons, the recourse, on one side, to terrorism and, on the other, to reprisals, humiliation of the adversary and propaganda loaded with hate, lead nowhere. Respect for the legitimate aspirations of both parties, a return to the negotiating table and the concrete commitment of the International Community alone can be the first step towards a

solution. True and lasting peace cannot be merely reduced to keeping a balance between the forces in question; above all, it is the result of moral and juridical action. *Other tensions and conflicts*, especially in Africa, could also be mentioned. They have a dramatic impact on the populations. In addition to the effects of violence, impoverishment and the deterioration of the institutional fabric are plunging entire peoples into despair. I should also mention the dangers of the arms trade and the manufacture of weapons that are flooding these vulnerable regions. I would like to pay a special tribute this morning to Archbishop Michael Courtney, Apostolic Nuncio in Burundi, who was recently assassinated. Like all Nuncios and diplomats, he put his service to the cause of peace and dialogue first. I praise his courage and his concern to support the Burundian people in their journey towards peace and greater brotherhood, in the name of his episcopal ministry and his diplomatic task. I would also like to remember Mr Sergio Veira de Mello, Special Representative of the United Nations in Iraq, who was killed in an attack while fulfilling his mission. I would like to mention further all the members of the Diplomatic Corps who have lost their lives in recent years or who have been made to suffer on account of their mandate. And how can I fail to mention the international terrorism which by sowing fear, hate and fanaticism disgraces all the causes that it claims to serve? I shall merely say that every civilization worthy of the name presupposes *the categorical rejection of violent relations*. That is why - and I am saying so to an audience of diplomats - we will never be able to resign ourselves passively to allowing violence to keep peace hostage! It is more urgent than ever to return to a more effective collective security that gives the United Nations Organization its proper place and role; it is more urgent than ever to learn from the lessons of the distant and recent past. In any case, one thing is certain: war does not resolve hostilities between peoples!

2. *Faith: a force for building peace* Even if I am speaking here on behalf of the Catholic Church, I know that the different Christian denominations and the faithful of other religions consider themselves *witnesses of a God of justice and peace*. If we believe that every human person has received a unique dignity from the Creator, that each one of us is the subject of inalienable rights and freedoms, that serving others means growing in humanity, especially when we claim to be disciples of the One who said: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13: 35), we can easily understand the innate value of communities of believers in the building of a pacified and peaceful world. As for the Catholic Church, she makes available to all the example of her unity and universality, the witness of so many saints who were able to love their enemies, of so many politicians who found in the Gospel the courage to live charity in war. Everywhere that peace is at stake there are Christians to attest in words and actions that *peace is possible*. As you well know, this is the reason behind the interventions of the Holy See at international debates.

3. *Religion in society: presence and dialogue* Communities of believers, an expression of the religious dimension of the human being, exist in all societies. Believers, therefore, legitimately expect to take part in the public dialogue. Unfortunately, it must be noted that this is not always the case. In recent times, we have witnessed in some European countries an attitude that could endanger the effective respect for religious freedom. Everyone may agree to respect the religious sentiment of individuals but the same cannot be said of the "religious factor", that is, the social dimension of religions; here the engagements made in the context of what was formerly known as the "Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe" have been forgotten. People often invoke the principle of secularity, legitimate in itself if it is understood as the distinction between the political community and religions (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 76). But distinction does not mean ignorance! Secularity is not secularism! It is nothing other than respect for all beliefs on the part of the State that assures the free exercise of ritual, spiritual, cultural and charitable activities by communities of believers. In a pluralistic society, secularity is a place for communication between the different spiritual traditions and the nation. Church-State relations can and must, on the contrary, lead to a respectful dialogue conveying fruitful experiences and values for the future of a nation. There is no doubt at all that *a healthy dialogue between the State and the Churches* - which are not rivals but partners - can encourage the integral

development of the human person and harmony in society. The difficulty of accepting the religious factor in a public forum was revealed on the occasion of *the recent debate on the Christian roots of Europe*. Some people reinterpreted history through the prism of reductive ideologies, forgetting what Christianity has contributed to the culture and institutions of the Continent: the dignity of the human being, freedom, the sense of the universal, schools and universities, social services. Without underestimating other religious traditions, it remains a fact that Europe was consolidated at the same time of its evangelization. And in all fairness it should be remembered that only a short time ago Christians, by promoting freedom and human rights, contributed to the peaceful transformation of authoritarian regimes as well as to the restoration of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe.⁴ As Christians, we are jointly responsible for the peace and unity of the human family

You are aware that *ecumenical commitment* has been one of the concerns of my Pontificate. In fact, I am convinced that if Christians could overcome their divisions there would be greater solidarity in the world. That is why I have always encouraged meetings and joint declarations, seeing each one of these as an example and an incentive for the unity of the human family. As Christians, we are responsible for "*the Gospel of peace*" (Eph 6: 15). All together, we can effectively contribute to respect for life, to safeguarding the dignity of the human person and his or her inalienable rights, to social justice and to the preservation of the environment. Moreover, an evangelical way of life enables Christians to help their companions in humanity to control their instincts, to make gestures of understanding and forgiveness, to help those in need together. We do not give sufficient importance to the pacifying influence that Christians could have, were they united, on their own community as well as on civil society. If I say this, it is not only to remind all who claim to be followers of Christ of the pressing need to set out with determination on the road that leads to the unity that Christ desired, but also to point out to the leaders of societies the resources they could find in the Christian heritage as well as among those who practise it. On this subject, a practical example can be cited: teaching peace. You will recognize this as the theme of [my Message for 1 January this year](#). In the light of reason and faith, the Church proposes teaching peace in order to prepare for better times. She wishes to make all her spiritual energies available, convinced that "justice must find its fulfilment in charity" (n. 10). This is what we humbly propose to all people of good will, for "we Christians see the commitment to educate ourselves and others to peace as something at the very heart of our religion" (n. 3).***At this time when a new year is offered to us, these are the thoughts that I wanted to share with you, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen. They developed in front of the crib, in front of *Jesus who shared in and loved the life of men and women*. He continues to be a contemporary of each one of us and of all the peoples represented here. I entrust their projects and achievements to God in prayer, while I invoke upon you and upon your loved ones an abundance of his Blessings. Happy New

Year!

*L'Osservatore Romano. Weekly Edition in English n.3 pp.3, 5. © Copyright 2004 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana
