



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS PAUL VI TO THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS ACCREDITED TO THE HOLY SEE*

Saturday 14 January 1978

Excellencies and Gentlemen,

We are happy to receive these warm wishes. We are very touched by the words full of goodwill and trust that your Doyen has just addressed to us on behalf of you all, recalling personal and ecclesial initiatives or events which are dear to us. We thank you also for your presence. Please accept very cordial wishes which, in our turn, we are happy to offer you; beyond you personally, they go to your families, your Embassies, and to the States which you represent to the Holy See. May God keep them in peace throughout the new year!

This traditional meeting in the month of January for the exchange of greetings permits us every year, to talk to you. Today we would like to choose, as the subject of reflection, the theme of human rights, so important and so relevant today.

People talk and discuss a great deal today about the rights of man. They do so passionately, sometimes angrily, nearly always with a view to greater justice, real or presumed. Not all these claims seem reasonable or feasible, for they are sometimes inspired by individualisms, enthusiasms or anarchical utopia; some are even inadmissible on the moral plane. But, on the whole, as aspiration and straining towards a higher hope, this increased concern for an extent of freedom and responsibility more favourable to the person is a positive fact which must be encouraged. The Church follows it and wishes to continue to follow it with sympathy, while bringing to it, in line with her own mission, the necessary light and clarifications.

Among the vast and complex set of themes which concern the rights of the human person, it seemed to us useful particularly to recall religious freedom, racial equality, and man's right to physical and psychical integrity. We were prompted to make this choice by the fact that these

three values are set in the sphere of the relations between persons and the public authorities and today it happens, we have as listeners you, who represent the Governments of so many countries.

One of the characteristics of our secularized society is, without any doubt, the tendency to relegate religious faith to the level of a private option. And yet, never so much as in our time has freedom of religion and conscience, wherever it is oppressed or limited, been involved and claimed so insistently, even passionately, as a value of existence calling for an exterior and community dimension. It is sufficient to see the appeals that reach us continually from persons and groups, even non-Catholics, men and women of all convictions, and also the wide consensus that the initiatives of the Holy See meet with when it puts before international authorities the request to respect for the religious freedom of everyone.

Some widespread ideologies also wish to catalogue faith in God among the signs of human weakness and alienation. And yet, rarely so much as in these last few decades, have believers more shown themselves to be free men, independent in their moral judgment, resistant in hardships, fearless under pressure and oppression and when faced with death. We have as proof the testimonies of those who shared prison or internment with them. We have also the sacrifices borne serenely, on the plane of civil life, work, studies and career, by a multitude of believers who are willing to undergo discrimination against themselves or their children, provided that it does not impinge on their own convictions.

It must be admitted that all or nearly all the Constitutions in the world, not to mention several solemn international documents, contain guarantees – often ample and detailed – in favour of freedom of religion and conscience, and of the equality of citizens regardless of religious faith. But one cannot help noting the limitations and prohibitions imposed in various countries, on the legislative and administrative plane, or merely in practice, on many manifestations of religious life, individual profession of faith, the education of the young, the pastoral action of priests or bishops, the internal autonomy of religious communities, the faculty of evangelizing, use of the press, access to the mass media, and so on. It is necessary to conclude, therefore, that believers are still considered as suspect citizens, who must be specially supervised.

We would like our talk here to be frank, respectful of the truth, and also friendly and constructive. It is true that the person who believes sincerely in God and endeavours, in spite of his weakness and his sins, to live in communion of love with him, feels strong and free. The strength is not his: it is that of the Other, to whom he entrusts himself. His freedom comes from the fact that he does not fear the powers «who kill the body» (Lk 12. 4). «It is a curious paradox», Sir Thomas More, a humanist and statesman, roguishly said to his daughter Margaret before his death, «that a man can lose his head without being harmed».

Less inclined to suggestion, the believer is open to truth and justice, his heart is at the service of his brothers, and he feels the imperative duty to be faithful to the responsibilities assumed. You

can ask him anything for other men and for society, except what his conscience forbids.

Christians draw from the faith a particular moral-force which commits them, at least as much and even more than others, in favour of a more just and more human society. This is beginning to be recognized even by those who, formerly, were in the habit of describing religious faith as a kind of escape from reality. It seems that one may then ask oneself: can a State fruitfully call for entire trust and collaboration while, by a kind of "negative confessionism", it proclaims itself atheist and; while declaring that it respects, within a certain framework, individual beliefs, takes up position against the faith of part of its citizen? How is it possible to think that a father or a mother will have the hope of a new and more just society, when a totalitarian ideological education is privileged in schools, and when it is difficult for families, even in the privacy of the home, to communicate to their children the values of the spirit which are the foundation of life? Although they cherish, with regard to the civil authority, sincere and motivated respect, in accordance with the words of St. Paul, "not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience" (Rom 13, 5), how can the Church and these Pastors feel tranquil, when there is still opposition to the opening of places of worship or to sending priests where their presence is demanded by the faithful, or when access to the priesthood or to religious consecration is limited?

On our side, we have always encouraged Pastors and faithful to show persevering patience, to be loyal to the legitimate authorities, and to commit themselves generously in the civil and social field in everything that serves the good of their country. We have publicly given proof of this, recently again, on the occasion of the respectful and courteous visits of high civil Authorities. For a long time now, except for some countries for which we have not been permitted to do so up to now, we have started a frank and open dialogue, which cannot be considered to lack results. This we should like to be deepened and also extended to difficult points that have not yet been tackled.

We would like now, making way for a wider perspective and speaking not only for Catholics but in favour of all believers, to formulate a question. It is the following: are not the times ripe now, is not the historical evolution advanced enough for a certain inflexibility of the past to be overcome, for the supplication of millions of persons to be accepted and for everyone – in the equality of condition of fellow citizens and in the united contribution of all to the civic and social good of their country – to be able to enjoy the rightful extent of freedom for their faith, in its personal and community expressions? Is there not in the vicissitudes of peoples, even after the most radical upheavals, a natural maturing event, a relaxation of spirit, an advance of the generations starting on a new and more human stage, in which elements of opposition and division are consumed and dissolved, and in which elements of acceptance, fraternization and reunification are also reborn and recognized? It seems to us that justice, wisdom and realism converge to support a founded hope and the heartfelt wish that such a moment, capable of giving happiness to many hearts, will not be postponed or evaded.

Solemn international document, such as the United Nations Convention of 21 December 1965

against every form of racial discrimination, to which the Holy See also adhered, are dedicated to equality without distinction of origin or race. We would like to draw attention here, more than to its juridical and political aspect, to the religious and moral meaning of the equal dignity of all men. For those who believe in God, all human beings, even the least privileged, are sons of the universal Father who created them in his image and guides their destinies with thoughtful love. The fatherhood of God means brotherhood among men: this is a strong point of Christian universalism, a common point, too, with other great religions and an axiom of the highest human wisdom of all times, that which involves the promotion of man's dignity.

For a Christian, no man is excluded from the possibility of being saved by Christ and of enjoying the same destination in the Kingdom of God. It is therefore inconceivable for those who accept the Gospel message, even taking into account physical, intellectual or moral differences, to deny fundamental human equality in the name of the alleged superiority of a race or ethnic group. We still remember with emotion the strong expressions used by our great predecessor Pius XI, of venerated memory, in the encyclical Letter that he published forty years ago to condemn those who wished to attack the universality of Christian Redemption through the so-called «revelation» of a «myth of blood and race».

The Catholic Church, that is, a universal Church by her mission and expanse, in the same way as she suffers from every recrudescence of antagonistic nationalisms, is also concerned by the aggravation of racial and tribal rivalries which instigate division and rancour among men and peoples, and may go so far as to affect even brothers in the faith. We propose here to draw attention especially to the more general racial conflict which, in the African history of the last few decades, has taken on a paradigmatic character, because it is bound up with decolonization and the accession of African peoples to independence. It is a question of the attempt to create juridical and political foundations in violation of the principles of universal suffrage and the self-determination of peoples which precisely European and Western culture has helped to affirm and spread in the world.

The Church understands the just reasons why the African populations reject such situations. Certainly, she cannot encourage or justify violence that sheds blood, sows destruction, gives hatred excessive proportions and triggers off reprisals and vengeance. But the Church cannot keep silent with regard to her teaching, namely that all racist theories are contrary to Christian faith and love. The very horror that Christians have of violence, must urge them to reaffirm the equal dignity of all men more clearly and courageously. Recalling the approval aroused, some years ago, by our formula launched for the Peace Day: «Every man is my brother», we would like to see expressed more and more strongly and with more conviction, legitimately but effectively, the real solidarity of all in favour of a just solution, particularly in South Africa, a solution that has been attempted in vain so far by different initiatives and proposals.

For those who believe in God, human life is a gift that comes from him, a sacred trust which must

be preserved in its integrity. The Church feels committed to teaching respect for it in every circumstance and in all stages of existence, from the moment of conception when life begins to form in the mother's womb, to the appointment with our "sister Death". From the cradle to the grave, every human being, even the weakest and most under-privileged, deprived or left aside, possesses an element of nobility which is the image of God and resemblance to him. And Jesus taught his disciples that his own Person is represented, particularly clearly, in the person of these poor people and these little ones.

The Church and believers cannot remain insensitive and passive; therefore, before the multiplication of denunciations of torture and ill-treatment practised in various countries on persons arrested, interrogated or else put in a state of supervision or confinement. While Constitutions and legislation make room for the principle of the right to defence at all stages of justice, while proposals are put forward to humanize places of detention, it is obvious, nevertheless, that techniques of torture are being perfected to weaken the resistance of prisoners, and that people sometimes do not hesitate to inflict on them irreversible injuries humiliating for the body and for the spirit. How can one fail to be troubled when one knows that many tormented families send supplications in vain in favour of their dear ones, and that even requests for information pile up without receiving an answer? In the same way we cannot pass over in silence the practice, denounced on so many sides, which consists in putting on the same footing those guilty, or presumed such, of political opposition and persons who need psychiatric treatment, thus adding to their pain another motive, perhaps even harder to bear – bitterness.

How could the Church fail to take up a stern stand as she did towards duelling and still does towards abortion, with regard to torture and to similar acts of violence inflicted on the human person? Those who order them or carry them out commit a crime, really a very serious one for Christian conscience which cannot fail to react and to do everything in its power to get adequate and effective remedies adopted.

Such are in short, Excellencies and Gentlemen, the reflections that we wish to express to you. We are sure that you will appreciate and welcome them. With our good wishes for prosperity and peace for the Authorities and countries that you represent, we entrust them to him who presides over the destiny of men and peoples, and open hearts to truth, justice and love. May the year that has just started be enriched by a new gift of God, considerable progress in favour of human rights.

We add this wish to all those we form for yourselves and for the members of your families, begging the Lord to lavish his blessing on you.

*ORa n.4 p.6-7.
