



The Holy See

***DISCORSO DI GIOVANNI PAOLO II
A S.E. IL SIGNOR KAZYS LOZORAITIS,
NUOVO AMBASCIATORE DELLA LITUANIA PRESSO LA SANTA SEDE****

Sabato, 11 luglio 1992

Mr. Ambassador,

1 Your Excellency's coming to the home of the Bishop of Rome today is much more than an ordinary ceremony for the presentation of the Letters of Credence because it involves a meeting for which the Apostolic See and Lithuania have long been hoping.

My joy is even greater in welcoming you with the special affection which the Church has always entertained for this European nation, the last to join the great Christian family. I do so with the same emotion which my predecessor, Pope Benedict XV, experienced in 1918 when he applauded your nation's regained independence.

Thank you, Mr. Ambassador, for your kind, enthusiastic words. Like you, I want to emphasize that today it is not a question of establishing new relations between Lithuania and the Holy See, but rather of restoring all their lustre after this long half century during which the Apostolic Palace has always remained open to the Lithuanian Legation which kept alive in Rome the faithful presence of your sorely-tried people.

Since the 13th century, as you have recalled, history has kept Lithuanians close to the papacy. The bonds have been close ever since the Baptism of the people following that of Vytautas and Jagellon. Furthermore, how could I fail to mention the union between Poland and Lithuania which was made at that time, and which would last for centuries?

Down through the ages the path followed by the Lithuanian people would often be one of trial and suffering, one characterized by the struggle to safeguard an identity which was often on the verge

of obliteration, marked by those who died for the homeland, who were also martyrs for the Catholic faith. We have a particularly vivid yet sad memory of recent times when Lithuania suffered the destructive assaults of two ideologies that wanted to impose by force upon Europe and the world concepts of life which are radically contrary to the human vocation to religious and civil freedom. We recall the extreme suffering of several Bishops, thousands of priests and believers, intellectuals and politicians labourers and farmers, and even of whole families, who were forcibly deported, more often than not without return. Many of them are now numbered among that great host of those who have been persecuted for the faith. History cannot pass over the same tragic fate experienced by the Jewish community, especially in Vilnius and Kaunas, because of a heinous racism which sought to obliterate them from the face of the earth. One hardly dares to mention that this terrible destiny shared by the sons and daughters of your land had been written into insidious agreements whose secrecy was intended to hide their dark nature.

2. Through Your Excellency's coming to the Holy See and the Apostolic Nuncio's presence in Vilnius, relations between Lithuania and the Holy See are now being fully exercised in mutual trust for an ongoing dialogue.

On this occasion, the first wish which I express to you is that Lithuania may see its future founded on the guarantees which ensure mankind a prosperous quality of life free from all fear. For your country this means patiently building its national life and democratic institutions, in the knowledge that all the effects of independence can be acquired only through a rather long, progressive process. The many changes which occurred through the course of history have especially led to the presence of sizable minority groups within your territory; to my satisfaction I heard you say that your leaders will make it their duty to ensure that these diverse groups experience the protection of their own cultural wealth which will be to everyone's benefit.

Mr. Ambassador, you placed religious freedom, which the Supreme Council and the Government want to promote, at the centre of your country's regained freedoms. This is in accord with the position of the Church, which is convinced that freedom of conscience and religion is the basis for all other human freedoms, and should be the object of widespread consensus rather than of particular choices of a philosophical or religious nature.

3. I am sure that all Lithuanians, as well as the Authorities who represent them, are counting on their Catholic compatriots to make their specific contribution to national life, beginning with those who are part of legislative or executive bodies. They will have recourse to the enlightenment provided by the social teaching of the Church which has continued to develop since the Second Vatican Council. In union with believers of other traditions and their brothers and sisters of good will, Lithuanian Catholics can draw inspiration from essential human values such as the profound relationship between development and peace; the respect for work as a condition of the dignity of the worker; the universal destination of the earth's resources; protection of creation; scrupulous respect for the dignity of the human person; the demands of love and justice; the respect due to

the family as the basic cell of society; human rights, beginning with the right to life.

4. The Lithuanian Bishops, for their part, together with their clergy, want to engage in a great catechetical effort to form Christians and make the Catholic community more attentive to the spiritual and social message of the Second Vatican Council. These important meetings of the Church took place at a time when many prelates, priests and faithful were forced to relive the experience of the catacombs; at the present, it seems more than necessary for this message to become known in Lithuania. The nation's present condition seems quite favourable for openly proclaiming the truths of the faith, including through the mass media, and for helping imbue daily life with solidarity, a spirit of fraternity, charity and the commitment to justice which the faith inspires. Believing in the incarnation of the Son of God, the Church wants to «become incarnate» in every situation which demands a spirit of service and self-giving.

All this presupposes that the clergy and laity blaze new trails of personal holiness and fraternal commitment to serving the whole person. In order to face the difficulties resulting from decades of trial, the Episcopal Conference, under the presidency of the distinguished Cardinal Vincentas Sladkevicius, is in the process of preparing new statutes in order to broaden and improve their ecclesial and social activity. Priests are open to forms of the apostolate which they were prevented from performing just a short time ago. Religious orders, both of men and women, are in the process of reorganization. Candidates for the priesthood are already receiving a formation preparing them to assume responsibilities which were previously excluded from their pastoral horizon. The great lay movements which have enriched the Church in recent decades want to offer their help to their Lithuanian brothers and sisters. The Church which is in Lithuania is preparing to take an active part in the «new evangelization of Europe» which has become necessary after the tormented period which is ending.

5. Mr. Ambassador, in your country and in the world there is no lack of situations which are cause for concern; they are the painful aftermath of years in which the nation's freedom was shackled and its dignity ridiculed. We must hope that these difficulties will be resolved in a climate of frank, constructive dialogue between the States involved, a dialogue desired by everyone, beginning with the United Nations and the various European organizations. On its part, the Holy See trusts in this capacity for dialogue and is always ready to make its specific contribution, free from all temporal interest, in order to arrive at a rapid solution, one worthy of the whole country, which democratically seeks to be open to new paths of peace and of internal and international harmony. In the various organizations now existing, I hope that Lithuania can make its original contribution and will find the support it needs to strengthen its economy, ensure its security, reinforce its institutions and develop its cultural life or, to put it simply, to expand its national dignity.

In your country and in the world at large, however, reasons for hope are not lacking either. All things considered, even if it is not always noticed, reasons for optimism prevail over those causing pessimism. In particular it bodes well that there is a growing consciousness of a world which is

increasingly interdependent and an awareness of the duty incumbent on the international community to build a peace which is more firmly guaranteed in solidarity. Today let us keep that perspective, giving thanks to God and asking him to give wisdom, strength and courage to all peacemakers.

6. As a testimony of the esteem and respect which I have for Lithuania and the two other Baltic countries, its geographic neighbours who have shared the same trial, I am happy to take the opportunity provided by the occasion of the presentation of Your Excellency's Letters of Credence to announce that I am happy to accept the invitation of the ecclesial and civil authorities to make a Pastoral Visit to the Baltic countries. This invitation which you have just renewed in the name of the President of the Supreme Council and of your compatriots, fulfils a desire which I have had for a long time, I expressed this particularly in 1984, the fifth centenary of the Baptism of St Casimir, patron of Lithuania, and in 1987, the sixth centenary of the «Baptism» of Lithuania. With the help of God I hope to be able to visit these three countries next year, in September 1993. I entrust these plans to the motherly intercession of Mary whom Baltic Catholics venerate in the shrines of the Dawn Gate in Vilnius of Siluva in Lithuania, and Aglona in Latvia.

7. Mr. Ambassador, I would be grateful if you would convey to His Excellency Mr Vytautas Landsbergis, President of the Supreme Council, my gratitude for the deferential message and the invitation which he has entrusted to you. Please assure him of my fervent wishes for the fulfilment of his mission and the happiness of the noble, beloved Lithuanian nation.

Your Excellency, your presence in Rome goes back to the time that your country lost its independence; now, it is as the Ambassador of Lithuania that you are continuing your activity. I express my best wishes for you and your family. I hope that you will have much satisfaction in the exercise of your tasks to develop the excellent relations which unite your country and the Holy See. Know that my assistants will gladly give you the aid and support which you need. I invoke upon all Lithuanians the watchful intercession of our Lady, St Casimir and Blessed Jut kris Matularthis. With all my heart I ask God to give an abundance of blessing to the leaders and members of your nation, yourself, your family and your staff.

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