



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
ON THE OCCASION OF THE EXCHANGE OF GREETINGS
WITH THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS
ACCREDITED TO THE HOLY SEE****

*Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

1. I thank you for your presence and for the good wishes formulated by your Dean with such refinement of sentiment and expression. Please accept in return my own fervent wish that God will bless you, your families and your nations; may he grant to everyone a year of happiness!

It is with joy that each year I see an increase in the number of countries which maintain diplomatic relations with the Holy See. Today there are more than a hundred and sixty. Such a development seems to us to show the genuine esteem which many have for the Apostolic See and its mission among the nations. This constitutes, for the Pope and those who assist him, a constant reminder to cooperate ever more intensely with the greatest number of people and organizations who, out of respect for morality and law, endeavour to ensure that justice and peace reign on our earth. I wish to say how much I appreciate the words of Ambassador Joseph Amichia, who in your name has kindly emphasized some of the initiatives thanks to which the Pope and, with him, the Holy See have given voice to all those people throughout the world who ardently yearn for peace, tranquillity and solidarity.

2. Today we cannot but rejoice to see here, for the first time, the Representative of the Palestinian People. For more than a year, as you know, the Holy See has enjoyed diplomatic relations with the State of Israel. We had been looking forward to this happy state of affairs, because it is the eloquent sign that the Middle East has resolutely taken the path of peace proclaimed to mankind by the Child born in Bethlehem. May God assist the Israelis and Palestinians to live from now on side by side, with one another, in peace, mutual esteem and sincere cooperation! Future generations demand this and the whole region will benefit from it.

But allow me to confide that this hope could prove ephemeral if a just and adequate solution is not also found to the particular problem of Jerusalem. The religious and universal dimension of the

Holy City demands a commitment on the part of the whole international community, in order to ensure that the City preserves its uniqueness and retains its living character. The Holy Places, dear to the three monotheistic religions, are of course important for believers, but they would lose much of their significance if they were not permanently surrounded by active communities of Jews, Christians and Muslims, enjoying true freedom of conscience and religion, and developing their own religious, educational and social activities. The year 1996 should see the beginning of negotiations on the definitive status of the territories under the administration of the National Palestinian Authority, and also on the sensitive issue of the City of Jerusalem. It is my hope that the international community will offer the political partners most directly involved the juridical and diplomatic instruments capable of ensuring that Jerusalem, one and holy, may truly be a "crossroads of peace".

This serene and resolute quest for peace and brotherhood will contribute without any doubt to providing other still existing regional problems with solutions which will respond to the aspirations of peoples still worried about their fate and their future. I am thinking especially of Lebanon, whose sovereignty is still threatened, and of Iraq, whose peoples are still waiting for the chance to lead a normal life, safe from all arbitrary action.

3. A climate of peace also seems to be advancing in certain parts of Europe. Bosnia-Herzegovina has been able to benefit from an agreement which should - we hope - safeguard its territorial integrity while taking into account its ethnic composition. Sarajevo especially, another city of symbolic significance, should likewise become a crossroads of peace. Is it not in fact called the "Jerusalem of Europe"? If the outbreak of the First World War is linked to this city, from now on its name ought to be synonymous with a city of peace, and cultural, social and religious meetings and exchanges ought to foster its multi-ethnic harmony. This involves a process which will be long and is not without difficulties. In this regard I would like to point out that an enduring peace in the Balkans can only be achieved if certain conditions are met: the free flow of people and ideas; the unhindered return of refugees to their homes; the preparation of truly democratic elections; and finally, sustained material and moral reconstruction, in which not only the international community but also the Churches and Religious Communities are called to take part unreservedly. Although this war, which I have often described as "useless", seems to be over, the work of building and consolidating peace looms as a great challenge in the first place to Europeans - but not only to them, - to ensure that indifference or selfishness do not reach the point of causing the shipwreck of a whole region of Europe, with unforeseeable consequences.

Northern Ireland also continues to move towards a more serene future and the peace process offers hope of a stable and permanent peace. From now on all are called upon to banish for ever two evils which are in no way inevitable: sectarian extremism and political violence. May the Catholics and Protestants of that region respect one another, build peace together, and cooperate in everyday life!

Among the encouraging signs, I cannot fail to mention the political evolution of South America, where the majority of the people are Catholics, and whose spiritual vitality is a treasure for the Church. Numerous elections have taken place in recent months and have been conducted in conditions which international observers have judged to be normal. But social inequalities are still very marked, and the problem of the production of drugs and drug-trafficking remains unsolved. These are factors which ought to spur political and economic leaders of that Continent to manage public affairs and the economy in a way which is ever more attentive to the aspirations and real needs of the people. This kind of approach, let us not forget, has enabled the peace process in Central America to go forward. In Nicaragua and El Salvador arms have fallen silent. In Guatemala reconciliation is going well. To be sure, the end of hostilities does not always mean social peace. Demilitarization is difficult to impose, and respect for human rights is not absolute. But there too a new climate is gradually emerging. For her part, the Catholic Church does not fail to contribute to this process.

This new climate, offering hope, which is developing thanks to the strenuous work of courageous negotiators to whom gratitude is due, must not only be a truce. Between threatening forms of extremism, peace must become a reality. And if this is achieved, it will be contagious.

4. But there are still too many hotbeds of conflict, more or less disguised, which keep people under the unbearable yoke of violence, hatred, uncertainty and death.

I am thinking of course of Algeria, very near to us, where blood is spilled almost daily: we cannot but ardently hope to see established at last, in a just respect for differences, a reasonable settlement and a national plan in which everyone can be considered a partner.

Still in the Mediterranean region, I would like to mention an island which has been divided since 1974: Cyprus. No solution has yet been found. Such a situation, which prevents people who are separated or dispossessed of their property from building their future, cannot be maintained indefinitely. May the negotiations between the parties involved be intensified and inspired by a sincere desire to bring them to a successful conclusion!

Cooperation in the Mediterranean is an indispensable factor for European stability and security, as was stated by those taking part in the recent European Summit in Barcelona. In this context, we must not overlook questions of identity, territory and neighbours, as well as of religion: these are all elements to be reconciled in order to make this Mediterranean zone an area of cultural, religious and economic cooperation which could benefit all the peoples of the countries bordering it.

5. If we look towards the East, we must again note, unfortunately, that fighting is continuing in Chechnya. Afghanistan is still in a political stalemate, with the people being treated without respect and plunged into the greatest distress. In Kashmir and Sri Lanka fighting has continued to take its

toll among the civilian populations. The people of East Timor too are still waiting for proposals capable of allowing the realization of their legitimate aspirations to see their special cultural and religious identity recognized.

We must admire and support the courage of the many men and women who manage to safeguard the identity of their peoples and who hand on to the younger generations the torch of memory and hope.

6. Turning to Africa, we are compelled to deplore the continuing presence of hotbeds of war and ethnic conflicts which constitute a permanent handicap for the Continent's development. The situation in Liberia and in Somalia, to which international assistance has not succeeded in bringing peace, is still governed by the law of violence and of special interests. Widespread armed activity has also plunged Sierra Leone into a situation of tension and increased insecurity. The Southern Sudan remains a region where dialogue and negotiation are not welcomed. We would also like to see more decisive progress in Angola, where political antagonisms and social disintegration prevent normalization. Rwanda and Burundi are still affected by a wave of ethnic and nationalist rivalry, the tragic consequences of which the people have already experienced in the extreme.

Last year, on this same occasion, I had asked for more international solidarity for Africa, and in the present circumstances I cannot but earnestly renew this appeal. But today I would like to direct my comments most particularly to the consciences of Africa's political leaders: if you do not commit yourselves more resolutely to national democratic dialogue, if you do not more clearly respect human rights, if you do not strictly administer public funds and external credits, if you do not condemn ethnic ideology, the African Continent will ever remain on the margin of the community of nations. In order to be helped, African governments must be politically credible. The Bishops of Africa, meeting in the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, underlined the urgent need for the competent management of public affairs and the proper training of political leaders - men and women - who "profoundly love their own people and wish to serve rather than be served" (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, 111).

7. These situations of conflict which I have just mentioned briefly are not inevitable. The positive developments which certain regions have experienced, regions themselves caught up in the meshes of violence, show that it is possible to restore trust in others, which is really trust in life. A guaranteed and courageously safeguarded peace is a victory over the ever lurking forces of death.

In this spirit, I cannot but encourage the work which will resume in Geneva in a few days, of the Conference on revising the Convention on conventional arms which are the cause of so much suffering, and the conclusion, during 1996, of the treaty on the banning of nuclear tests. In this regard, the Holy See is of the opinion that, in the sphere of nuclear weapons, the banning of tests and of the further development of these weapons, disarmament and non-proliferation are closely linked and must be achieved as quickly as possible under effective international controls. These

are steps towards a general and total disarmament which the international community as a whole should accomplish without delay.

8. As I have had occasion to recall several times, what the International Community brings together is not just States but Nations, made up of men and women who weave a personal and collective history. It is their rights which must be defined and guaranteed. But, as happens in the family, these rights have to be qualified on the basis of the importance of corresponding duties. On the occasion of my recent visit to the headquarters of United Nations Organization in New York, I used the expression "family of nations". I pointed out that: "the ideal of 'family' immediately evokes something more than simple functional relations or a mere convergence of interests. The family is by nature a community based on mutual trust, mutual support and sincere respect. In an authentic family the strong do not dominate; instead, the weaker members, because of their very weakness, are all the more welcomed and served" (Address to the Fiftieth General Assembly of the United Nations Organization, 5 October 1995, No. 14).

This is the true meaning of what international law proposes in theory as the concept of "reciprocity". Each people must be ready to accept the identity of its neighbour: this is the exact opposite of the despotic nationalistic ideologies which have torn apart Europe and Africa, and continue to do so! Each nation must be prepared to share its human, spiritual and material resources in order to help those whose needs are greater than the needs of its own members. Rome is preparing to host next November the World Summit on Food, called by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. I hope its work will be inspired by a sense of solidarity and sharing, especially as 1996 has been declared by the United Nations Organization the "Year for the Eradication of Poverty".

9. Recognition of others and of their heritage, this latter term being understood in a broad sense, is obviously applicable as well to a specific area of human rights: that of freedom of conscience and of religion. In fact I consider it my duty to return once more to this fundamental aspect of the spiritual life of millions of men and women, for the situation — and I say this with genuine sadness — is far from being satisfactory.

Just as countries of Christian tradition welcome Muslim communities, certain countries with a Muslim majority also generously welcome non-Muslim communities, allowing them even to build their own places of worship and to live in those countries in accordance with their beliefs. Others however continue to practise discrimination against Jews, Christians and other religious groups, going even as far as to refuse them the right to meet in private for prayer. It cannot be said too often: this is an intolerable and unjustifiable violation not only of all the norms of current international law, but of the most fundamental human freedom, that of practising one's faith openly, which for human beings is their reason for living.

In China and Vietnam, in contexts which are certainly different, Catholics face constant obstacles,

especially with regard to the external manifestation of the bonds of communion with the Apostolic See.

Millions of believers cannot be indefinitely oppressed, held in suspicion or divided among themselves, without this involving negative consequences not only for the international credibility of those States but also for the internal life of the societies concerned: a persecuted believer will always find it difficult to have confidence in a State which presumes to regulate his conscience. On the other hand, good relations between Churches and the State contribute to the harmony of all members of society.

10. Ladies and Gentlemen, the purpose of these simple remarks has been to make the good wishes which we exchange more relevant. They have sketched a picture made up of lights and shadows, a reflection of the human soul.

But it is the pressing duty of the Successor of Peter to remind national leaders, whom you so worthily represent here, that world stability cannot be achieved if certain values are disregarded, values such as respect for life, conscience, fundamental human rights, concern for the most needy, solidarity, to name but a few.

The Holy See, being sovereign and independent among the nations, and for this reason a member of the international community, wishes to make its specific contribution to this common commitment. Without political ambition, it is eager above all that humanity's path should be illuminated by the light of the One who, in coming into this world, became our travelling companion, the One "in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2:3).

To him once more I commend your persons, your families and your nations, in particular the younger generation of whom I thought when I launched the appeal: "Let us give children a future of peace!" (Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, 1 January 1996). Upon everyone, for the year now beginning, I invoke abundant divine blessings.

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