



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
TO THE NEW AMBASSADOR
OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN
TO THE HOLY SEE***

Monday, 22 January 2001

Your Excellency,

I am very pleased to welcome you to the Vatican and to accept the Letters of Credence by which you are appointed Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the Holy See. The kind greetings which you bring from His Excellency President Seyed Mohammad Khatami evoke the memory of our cordial meeting within these very walls just three years ago: in the spirit of the friendship and respect which marked the President's visit to the Vatican I ask you to convey to him my own good wishes and assure him of my prayers both for his person and for the nation.

Your Excellency has remarked upon the importance of a true dialogue between cultures if the efforts of men and women of good will throughout the world are to succeed in bringing about a lasting era of peace and fraternity for all peoples and nations. In fact, it was at the suggestion of President Khatami that the General Assembly of the United Nations declared this year of 2001 as the "International Year of Dialogue among Civilizations". Thus, this eminent international body representing the family of nations has called attention to the urgent need for people to acknowledge that dialogue is the necessary path to reconciliation, harmony and cooperation between different cultures and religious traditions. This is the approach that will ensure that all can look to the future with serenity and hope.

Our world is made up of an amazing complexity and diversity of human cultures. Each of these cultures is distinct by virtue of its particular historical development and the resulting characteristics which make it an original and organic whole. Culture, in fact, is a form of man's self-expression as he travels through history; it is, in synthesis, "the cultivation of natural goods and values" (Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 53). It is largely through culture that people acquire a sense of national identity and develop a love of their country: these are values to be fostered, not with narrow-mindedness, but with respect and compassion for

the whole human family. As I had occasion to remark in my Message for the 2001 World Day of Peace, efforts must be made "to avoid those pathological manifestations which occur when the sense of belonging turns into self-exaltation, the rejection of diversity, and forms of nationalism, racism and xenophobia" (No. 6).

Hence, appreciation for the values present in one's own culture must properly be accompanied by the recognition that every culture, as a typically human and historically conditioned reality, necessarily has limitations. Such an understanding helps to prevent pride in one's own culture from becoming isolation or from turning into prejudice and persecution against other cultures. The attentive study of other cultures will reveal that beneath seemingly divergent traits there are significant internal elements held in common. Cultural diversity can then be understood within the broader context of the unity of the entire human race. Thus, it becomes less likely for cultural differences to be a source of misunderstanding between peoples and the cause of conflicts and wars; it becomes easier to attenuate the sometimes exaggerated claims of one culture against another. In the dialogue of cultures, people of good will come to see that there are values which are common to all cultures because they are rooted in the very nature of the human person. These are values which express humanity's most authentic and distinctive features: the value of solidarity and peace; the value of education; the value of forgiveness and reconciliation; the value of life itself.

I am pleased to note that the Holy See and Iranian authorities have worked together to provide opportunities for such dialogue, not only as promoters of various meetings but also as active participants in them. I am thinking in particular of the Colloquium sponsored jointly by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Secretariat for Interreligious Dialogue of the Organization for Islamic Culture and Communication, which took place in Rome last year on the theme of religious pluralism in Christianity and Islam. A further Colloquium, once again jointly sponsored by the Organization of Islamic Culture and Communication and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, is scheduled to take place in Tehran later this year on the theme of the religious identity and education of young people.

Moreover, I wish to express appreciation for the regular bilateral Conferences which the Iranian authorities sponsor with other Christian Churches and Communities, the most recent one being held last year in Tehran on the theme "Islam and Orthodox Christianity". Such dialogue will surely help Governments and legislators in safeguarding the civil and social rights of individuals and peoples, especially the fundamental right to religious freedom. It is this right which is a point of reference of all other rights and in some way becomes a measure of them, because it involves the most intimate realm of our personal identity and dignity as human beings. Accordingly, even in cases where the State grants a special juridical position to a particular religion, there is a duty to ensure that the right to freedom of conscience is legally recognized and effectively respected for all citizens and for foreigners residing in the country (cf. *Message for the 1998 World Day of Peace*, 1). Should problems arise, the effective way of preserving harmony is through dialogue. The leaders of nations have a special duty to be clear-sighted, honest and courageous in recognizing that all people have the same God-given rights and inalienable dignity, and in working with dedication for the common good of all.

In this regard, the Holy See counts on the support of the Iranian authorities in ensuring that the Catholic faithful of Iran — present in that region of the world since the first centuries of Christianity — will enjoy the freedom to profess their faith and to continue to be a part of the rich cultural life of the nation. Although the Christian community is but a tiny minority in the overall population, it sees itself as truly Iranian; and after centuries of living alongside its Muslim brothers and sisters it is in a unique position to contribute to ever greater mutual understanding and respect between Christian believers and

the followers of Islam everywhere.

Mr Ambassador, I have touched here upon some of the common ideals and aspirations which are the basis of the growing relationship of respect and cooperation between the Holy See and the Islamic Republic of Iran. I am confident that your tenure as your Government's representative will serve to strengthen the bonds which already unite us. Assuring you of every help and assistance as you seek to fulfill your lofty responsibilities, I pray that Your Excellency, and the Iranian Government and People whom you represent, will enjoy the abundant blessings of Almighty God.

**Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II, vol. XXIV, 1 p.209-212.*

L'Osservatore Romano 22-23.1. 2001 p.5.

L'Osservatore Romano. Weekly edition in English n. 5 p.4.

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