



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC VISIT OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO AZERBAIJAN AND BULGARIA

ARRIVAL CEREMONY

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER

Sophia, St. Alexander Nevski Square
Thursday, 23 May 2002

*Mr President,
Your Holiness,
Esteemed Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Distinguished Authorities,
Representatives of Religious Denominations,
Dear Brothers and Sisters!*

1. It is with emotion and deep joy that I find myself today in Bulgaria, addressing my warm greetings to you. I thank Almighty God for allowing me *to fulfil a desire* that I have long held in my heart.

Every year, on the Feast of Saints Cyril and Methodius, the Apostles to the Slavs, it is customary for me to receive in the Vatican representatives of the Bulgarian Government and Church. In a way therefore today, I am here *to repay those visits* and to meet in their own country the beloved Bulgarian people. At this moment, my thoughts turn to my predecessor Pope Adrian II, who went personally to meet the Holy Brothers of Thessalonica when they came to Rome to bring the relics of Saint Clement, Pope and Martyr (cf. *Life of Constantine*, XVII, 1), and to bear witness to the communion between the Church founded by them and the Church of Rome. Today *it is the Bishop of Rome who comes to you*, prompted by the same sentiments of communion in the love of Christ.

On this occasion, my thoughts turn also to another of my predecessors, Blessed Pope John XXIII, who was Apostolic Delegate in Bulgaria for ten years and remained always *deeply attached to this land and its people*. In memory of him, I greet everyone with affection and I say to all that *I have never ceased to love the Bulgarian people*, lifting them up always in my prayer to the Throne of the Most High: may my presence among you today be a clear sign of my sentiments of esteem and affection for this noble Nation and its children.

2. I cordially greet *the Authorities of the Republic*. I thank them for their invitation to me and for all that has been done to prepare my visit. To you, Mr President, I express heartfelt gratitude for the kind words with which you welcomed me to this historic Square. Through the distinguished Members of the Diplomatic Corps, my thoughts go also to the peoples whom they so worthily represent.

With respect I greet *His Holiness Patriarch Maxim* and the Metropolitans and Bishops of the Holy Synod, together with all the faithful of the Orthodox Church of Bulgaria. I fervently hope that my visit will *serve to increase our knowledge of each other* so that, with God's help and on the day and in the way that pleases him, we shall finally live "united in the same mind and the same judgment" (1 Cor 1:10), mindful of the words of our one Lord: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35).

3. With particular affection I embrace *my Brother Bishops* Christo, Gheorghi, Petko and Metodi, together with all the sons and daughters of the Catholic Church, priests, religious and laity: I come to you with the greeting and good wishes of peace that the Risen Lord offers to his disciples (cf. Jn 20:19), to confirm you in faith and encourage you on the path of Christian living.

I greet the Christians of the *other Ecclesial Communities*, the members of the *Jewish Community* with their President, and *the followers of Islam* led by the Grand Mufti. I reaffirm here, as I did at the meeting in Assisi, my conviction that *every religion is called to promote justice and peace among peoples*, forgiveness, life and love.

4. Bulgaria received the Gospel thanks to the preaching of Saints Cyril and Methodius, and down the centuries that seed planted in fertile soil has produced abundant fruits of Christian witness and holiness. Even during the long cold winter of the totalitarian system, which brought suffering to your country and to many other European nations, fidelity to the Gospel did not disappear, and numberless children of this people *remained heroically faithful to Christ*, in not a few cases to the point of sacrificing their lives.

I wish to honour here those courageous witnesses of faith, members of the various Christian denominations. May their sacrifice not be in vain, and may it serve as an example and make fruitful your ecumenical commitment with a view to the full unity of Christians. May those who work to build a society based on truth, justice and freedom look to them as well!

5. Wounds must be healed, and the future needs to be planned with optimism. This is certainly not an easy road, nor one without obstacles, but *the united efforts of all sectors of the Nation* will make it possible to achieve the desired goals. At the same time, there is a need to move forward with wisdom, in accordance with law and safeguarding democratic institutions, sparing no sacrifice, maintaining and promoting *the values on which the greatness of the Nation is founded*: moral and intellectual honesty, the defence of the family, care of the needy, respect for human life from conception until natural death.

I express my hope that the efforts to achieve social renewal, which Bulgaria is courageously undertaking, will be wisely received and generously supported by the European Union.

6. It was perhaps on this very spot, near the tombs of the martyrs, that the Bishops of East and West gathered in 342 or 343 for the *important Council of Serdica*, where the future of European Christianity was discussed. In the centuries following, there rose here the Basilica of *Sophia*, Divine Wisdom, which according to Christian thought indicates the foundations on which the city of man is to be built. The path to a people's authentic progress cannot only be political and economic; it must also necessarily be open to the spiritual and moral dimension. *Christianity is part of the roots of this country's history and culture*: therefore it cannot be ignored in any serious process of growth that looks towards the future.

The Catholic Church, with the daily commitment of her children and the ready availability of her structures, intends to contribute to *maintaining and developing the heritage of spiritual and cultural values* of which the country is so proud. She wishes to join her efforts with those of other Christians, to place at the service of all people those forces of civilization that the Gospel can offer also to the generations of the new millennium.

7. By reason of its geographical location, Bulgaria *serves as a bridge between Western Europe and Southern Europe*, like a kind of spiritual crossroads, a land of contacts and mutual understanding. Here the human and cultural wealth of the different regions of the Continent have come together: they have been welcomed and respected. I wish to pay a public tribute to the traditional hospitality of the Bulgarian people, remembering especially the noble efforts made to save thousands of Jews during the Second World War.

May the Mother of God, who is particularly loved and venerated here, keep Bulgaria under her mantle and intercede for her people, that they may grow in brotherhood and harmony! May Almighty God fill your noble country with his blessings, assuring it a future of prosperity and peace!
