



The Holy See

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

MEETING WITH REPRESENTATIVES OF THE WORLD OF
CULTURE, SCIENCE AND ART

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER

Sofia - Palace of Culture
Friday, 24 May 2002

Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. I am pleased to meet you, representatives of the various expressions of culture and art. With your respective specializations, you in some way make present here all the beloved Bulgarian people. I address you with respect and admiration, conscious of *the delicate and important contribution which you make* to the noble enterprise of building a society which encourages "mutual understanding and readiness to cooperate through the generous exchange of cultural and spiritual resources" (*Slavorum Apostoli*, 27).

I am deeply grateful for the noble words of welcome which have expressed the sentiments of those present and of all those who in different ways have made possible my visit to your beautiful country. I warmly greet the promoters of the campaign "Bells for Peace", and I gladly offer this "bell of the Pope", in the hope that its peals will call the children and youth of Bulgaria to the duty and task of building friendship and understanding among the nations of the world.

2. This meeting is taking place *on a particularly significant day*, for Bulgaria today celebrates the feast of the Holy Brothers Cyril and Methodius, intrepid heralds of the Gospel of Christ and founders of the literary language and culture of the Slav peoples. Their liturgical memorial has a particular significance, since it is also the "feast of Bulgarian letters". This is not something which

concerns the Orthodox and Catholic faithful alone, but is an opportunity for all to reflect on the cultural patrimony which originated with the activity of the two Holy Brothers of Thessalonica.

The proto-Bulgar Khan Omurtag wrote on the column preserved at Veliko Trnovo, in the Church of the Forty Holy Martyrs: "Even if a man lives well, he dies and another is born. May those born later, when they see this writing, remember him who composed it". I would like this meeting to serve as a solemn common act of veneration and gratitude towards Saints Cyril and Methodius, whom in 1980 I proclaimed *Patrons of Europe*, together with Saint Benedict of Norcia. Today they still have much to teach all of us, both in the East and in the West.

3. y introducing the Gospel to the culture of the peoples whom they evangelized, the Holy Brothers – with their brilliant creation of a new alphabet – achieved special merit. In order to respond to the needs of their apostolic ministry, they *translated the Sacred Books into the local language* for liturgical and catechetical purposes, and thus laid the foundations of literature in the languages of the Slav peoples. They are therefore rightly considered not only the *Apostles of the Slavs*, but also the *fathers of Slav culture*. Culture is *the expression, incarnate in history, of a people's identity*; it forges the soul of a nation, which identifies itself with specific values, expresses itself in precise symbols, and communicates by its own proper signs.

Through their disciples, the mission of Cyril and Methodius was marvellously consolidated in Bulgaria. Here, thanks to Saint Clement of Ohrid, *dynamic centres of monastic life* were founded, and here the Cyrillic alphabet greatly developed. *From here also Christianity spread to other lands*, until it reached, via nearby Romania, the ancient Kievan Rus', and then spread towards Moscow and other regions eastward.

The work of Cyril and Methodius made *an outstanding contribution to forming the common Christian roots of Europe*, those roots which by their depth and vitality have created a solid cultural reference-point which cannot be ignored in any serious attempt to rebuild in a new and contemporary way the unity of the Continent.

4. The *guiding inspiration* of the massive work carried out by Cyril and Methodius was *the Christian faith*. Culture and faith are not only not incompatible, but are related to each other as the fruit is to the tree. It is an undeniable historic fact that down the centuries the Christian Churches of East and West have promoted and spread among the peoples *a love of their own culture and respect for the cultures of others*. This explains the building of magnificent Churches and places of worship marked by architectural splendour and filled with sacred images, such as the icons, the fruit of prayer and penance, as much as of good taste and refined artistic skill. This is also the reason for the creation of countless documents and writings of a religious and cultural character, which expressed and perfected the genius of peoples growing towards an increasingly mature national identity.

The cultural heritage that the Saints of Thessalonica left to the Slav peoples was the fruit of the tree of their faith, profoundly rooted in their soul. Thereafter new branches grew on that tree and new fruits were produced, for the further enrichment of that remarkable patrimony of thought and art which the world owes to the Slav nations.

5. Historical experience shows that the proclamation of the Christian faith has not *stifled* but rather *integrated and exalted* the authentic human and cultural values proper to the genius of the countries where it has been preached. It has also contributed to their *openness to one another* and helped them to overcome enmities and to create *a common spiritual and cultural heritage*, necessary for stable and constructive relations of peace.

Those committed to working effectively for the building of authentic European unity cannot ignore these historical data, which have an indisputable eloquence all their own. As I have said on another occasion, "the marginalization of religions which have contributed and continue to contribute to the culture and humanism of which Europe is legitimately proud, strikes me as both an injustice and an error of perspective" (*Address to the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See*, 10 January 2002, No. 2). The Gospel does not impoverish or destroy those things which every individual, people or nation acknowledges and expresses as goodness, truth and beauty (cf. *Slavorum Apostoli*, 18).

6. Looking back, we must recognize that, together with a *Europe of culture* marked by its outstanding and distinctive philosophical, artistic and religious movements, together with a *Europe of labour* marked by the technological and communications achievements of the twentieth century, there is unfortunately a *Europe of dictatorships and wars*, a Europe of blood, tears and acts of horrific cruelty. Perhaps it is also because of these bitter experiences of the past that today's Europe seems prone to a growing *temptation to scepticism and indifference* in the face of the gradual erosion of fundamental moral reference-points of personal and social life.

We need to respond. In these troubling times there is an urgent need to affirm that, Europe, if it is to rediscover its own deepest identity, must necessarily return to its Christian roots, and in particular to the work of men like Benedict, Cyril and Methodius, whose witness offers an essential contribution for the spiritual and moral restoration of the Continent.

This then is the message of the Patrons of Europe and of all the Christian Saints and mystics who have borne witness to the Gospel among the peoples of Europe: *the ultimate "why" of human life and history has been given to us in the Word of God*, who took flesh in order to redeem man from the evil of sin and from the abyss of anguish.

7. This being the case, I greet with lively appreciation the project of the Catholic Bishops to translate into Bulgarian the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: the Catechism "aims at presenting an organic synthesis of the essential and fundamental contents of Catholic doctrine, as regards

both faith and morals, in the light of the Second Vatican Council and the whole of the Church's Tradition. Its principal sources are the Sacred Scriptures, the Fathers of the Church, the Liturgy and the Church's Magisterium" (*Prologue*, 11).

I would also like to present symbolically the Catechism to those among you who, although not Catholic, share with us the one Baptism, so that they may know what the Catholic Church believes and preaches.

The monk Paisij, of the Monastery of Chiliandar, rightly observed that a Nation with a glorious past has a right to a splendid future (cf. *Istoriya slavyanobolgarskaya*, 1722-1773).

8. Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, the Pope of Rome looks to you with confidence and repeats before you his conviction concerning the *great task entrusted to the men and women of culture* in preserving and handing on the knowledge and wisdom which have historically inspired the life of their peoples.

I pray that Bulgaria, the beautiful *Land of Roses*, will have a "splendid future", so that, by continuing to be a meeting point between East and West, it can, with the blessing of Almighty God, prosper in liberty, progress and peace!