



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO H.E. Mrs. PEROLS ULLA BIRGITTA GUDMUNDSON
NEW AMBASSADOR OF THE KINGDOM OF SWEDEN
TO THE HOLY SEE***

*Clementine Hall
Thursday, 18 December 2008*

Your Excellency,

I am pleased to welcome you to the Vatican and to accept the Letters accrediting you as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Kingdom of Sweden to the Holy See. I would like to express my gratitude for the good wishes that you bring from King Carl XVI Gustaf. Please convey to His Majesty my cordial greetings and assure him of my continued prayers for all the people of your nation.

The Holy See values its diplomatic links with Sweden, now more than a quarter of a century old. Since the recent relocation to Stockholm of the residence of the Apostolic Nuncio to the Nordic countries, relations between Sweden and the Holy See have been taken a stage further. Moreover, your country's Catholic population has grown considerably in the last few years, not least because of the large numbers of refugees from all over the world who have been so generously welcomed. It is particularly appreciated that thousands of Christian refugees from Iraq have been admitted to Sweden. As you know, the plight of Christians in the Middle East is of great concern to me, and while I pray daily for an improvement in conditions in their homelands that would allow them to remain, at the same time I acknowledge with gratitude the welcome given to those who have been forced to flee. The opportunity to worship in accordance with their own traditions has been an important element in enabling them to feel at home, and your Government has shown wisdom in recognizing the key role played in this regard by the various Churches to which they belong.

Openness to immigration inevitably brings with it the challenge of maintaining harmonious relations between diverse elements in the population. Your Government has made prudent efforts to promote integration, and the Catholic community is keen to offer its own contribution by building up social cohesion and providing an education in the virtues. In the area of commitment to the dignity of the human person and the defence of human rights and individual freedoms, there is much common ground between the Church and the Swedish authorities, as Your Excellency has observed. It will be important to build further on this in the years ahead.

Maintaining a balance between competing freedoms represents one of the most delicate moral challenges faced by the modern State. Some of the dilemmas that arise are of particular concern to the Holy See. For example, every liberal society has to assess carefully to what extent freedom of speech and expression can be allowed to ignore religious sensibilities. The question is of particular importance when the harmonious integration of different religious groups is a priority. Furthermore, the right to be defended against discrimination is sometimes invoked in circumstances that place in question the right of religious groups to state and put into practice their strongly held convictions, for example, concerning the fundamental importance for society of the institution of marriage, understood as a lifelong union between a man and a woman, open to the transmission of life. And even the right to life itself, in the case of the unborn, is often denied the unconditional legal protection that it deserves. This year's sixtieth anniversary of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* urges us to consider to what extent our society guarantees the legitimate rights of all its members, especially the weakest and most vulnerable. The Holy See is eager to engage with all interested parties in the continuing debate that surrounds these questions in today's world.

On an international level, Sweden makes many important contributions to the maintenance of peace and the fight against poverty. Always eager to encourage humanitarian and peace-keeping initiatives in troubled parts of the world, the Holy See welcomes the contributions made by your country to help resolve conflicts, for example in Africa, the Balkans, the Middle East and Afghanistan. It is opportune to pay tribute to the work of many of your countrymen and women, like Count Folke Bernadotte, Dag Hammarskjöld and countless others, who have dedicated their lives to peace missions around the world. Among the more affluent countries, Sweden stands out for its assistance to development projects for the benefit of poorer nations. Sweden's active role in promoting the good of humanity is eloquently expressed in the prestigious awards that she grants to men and women of outstanding achievement in the arts, the sciences and in peace-making. In acknowledging all these worthy activities, I would like to put on record the Holy See's appreciation for the action of the Swedish Government in conferring the *Per Anger* Prize on Archbishop Gennaro Verolino in 2004, in recognition of his work for human rights during the years when he was stationed at the Nunciature in Budapest during the Second World War.

Your Excellency, in offering my best wishes for the success of your mission, I would like to assure you that the various departments of the Roman Curia are ready to provide help and support in the

fulfilment of your duties. Upon Your Excellency, your family and all the people of the Kingdom of Sweden, I cordially invoke God's abundant blessings.

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