



# The Holy See

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**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Wednesday 12 May 1999*

***Reflection on the visit to Romania***

***Romanians have ancient Christian roots***

1. My thoughts keep returning with deep emotion to the visit God enabled me to make to Romania a few days ago. This was an event of historic importance because it was *my first visit to a country where the majority of Christians are Orthodox*. I thank God who in his Providence determined that this should take place shortly before the Year 2000, offering Catholics and our Orthodox brothers and sisters the opportunity to take a particularly significant step together on the way towards full unity, in fidelity to the spirit of the Great Jubilee which is now at hand.

I would again like to express my gratitude to all who made this apostolic pilgrimage possible. I thank the President of Romania, Mr Emil Constantinescu, whose courtesy I appreciated, for his kind invitation. With a warm sense of brotherhood I thank His Beatitude Teoctist, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, and the Holy Synod: their great cordiality in welcoming me and the sincere affection that was apparent in the words and on the faces of them all have left an indelible mark on my heart. I also thank the Latin and Greek-Catholic Bishops, with whom I was able to strengthen the bonds of deep communion in the love of Christ.

Lastly, I thank the authorities, organizers and all who worked to ensure its success. When we think of what the political situation was until a few years ago, how can we not regard this event as an eloquent sign of God's action in history? To foresee a papal visit at the time would have been totally unthinkable, but the Lord who guides human steps has made possible what seemed humanly unattainable.

2. With this journey I wanted to pay *homage to the Romanian people and to their Christian roots*,

which according to tradition date back to the preaching of the Gospel by the Apostle Andrew, brother of Simon Peter. The people understood this, lining the streets and flocking to the celebrations. Down the centuries the lifeblood of their Christian roots has nurtured a continuous growth of holiness, with many martyrs and confessors of the faith. This spiritual legacy was taken up in our century by a great many Bishops, priests, religious and lay people who witnessed to Christ during the long, harsh communist domination, courageously facing torture, imprisonment and sometimes even death.

How deeply moved I was to stop at the graves of Cardinal Iuliu Hossu and Bishop Vasile Aftenie, victims of the persecution under the dictatorial regime! Honour to you, Church of God in Romania! You suffered greatly for the Truth, and the Truth has set you free.

The experience of martyrdom joined Christians of different denominations in Romania. The Orthodox, Catholic and Protestants gave a united witness to Christ by the sacrifice of their lives. From the heroism of these martyrs springs an encouragement to harmony and reconciliation in order to overcome the divisions which still exist.

3. This journey gave me an opportunity to experience what a blessing it is *for Christians to breathe with the two "lungs"* of the Eastern and the Western tradition. I realized this during the solemn and moving liturgical celebrations, for I had the joy of presiding at the Eucharist in the Greek-Catholic rite; I attended the Divine Liturgy for my Orthodox brethren led by the Patriarch in the Byzantine-Romanian rite and was able to pray with them; and lastly, I celebrated Mass in the Roman rite with the faithful of the Latin Church.

During the first of these moments of solemn and intense prayer, I paid *homage to the Greek-Catholic Church*, sorely tested during the years of persecution, and I recalled that the third centenary of her union with Rome will occur in 2000. The revered Cardinal Alexandru Todea, who was punished by the regime with 16 years of prison and 27 of house arrest, is a symbol of this Church's heroic resistance. Despite his advanced age and ill health, he was able to come to Bucharest: embracing him was one of the greatest joys of this pilgrimage.

4. Particularly desired and important was the *meeting with Patriarch Teoctist and the Holy Synod* of the Romanian Orthodox Church. On Saturday afternoon they welcomed me at the Patriarchate with great cordiality and I found in His Beatitude and in the other members of the Holy Synod fraternal understanding and a sincere desire for full communion according to the Lord's will. On this occasion I wanted to assure the Romanian Orthodox Church, involved in an important work of renewal, of the affection and collaboration of the Catholic Church. Fraternal love is the soul of dialogue and is the path for overcoming the remaining obstacles and difficulties in order to reach full Christian unity. God has already worked marvels on this journey of reconciliation: we must press ahead with confident enthusiasm, because Europe and the world have greater need than ever for the visible witness of the brotherhood of all who believe in Christ.

In this light, I feel the need once again to thank the Romanian Orthodox Church, because her invitation gave me the opportunity to carry out essential aspects of the Petrine ministry in the perspective I indicated in the Encyclical *Ut unum sint*.

5. Ecumenical commitment does not lessen but rather strengthens the task of Peter's Successor as Pastor of the Catholic Church. I carried out my ministry especially by meeting the *Romanian Episcopal Conference*, composed of Bishops of the Latin and Greek-Catholic rites, and whose President is Archbishop Lucian Mureșan of Făgăraș and Alba Iulia. I urged them to proclaim the Gospel without tiring, to be builders of communion, to provide for the formation of their priests and of the many who are called to the consecrated life, as well as the laity. I encouraged them to promote the pastoral care of young people and schoolchildren, and to make every effort to defend the family, to protect life and to serve the poor.

6. The Romanian nation arose with evangelization and in the Gospel it will find the light and strength to fulfil its vocation as a crossroads of peace in the coming millennium.

For this beloved country too, the year 1989 marked a turning-point. With the sudden collapse of the dictatorship, a new springtime of freedom began and the country thus became a worksite of democracy, to be built with patience and honesty. Drawing on its authentic cultural and spiritual sources, Romania inherited the culture and values of both the Latin (as its language attests) and the Byzantine civilizations, with many Slavic elements. Its history and geographical location make it an *integral part of the new Europe*, which is gradually being constructed since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Church intends to serve this process of growth and democratic integration in a spirit of active cooperation.

7. Recalling the widespread popular tradition according to which Romania is known as the "Garden of Mary", I would like to ask the Blessed Virgin, in this month dedicated to her, to rekindle in Christians the desire for full unity, so that they may be a Gospel leaven together. I ask Mary that the Romanian people may grow in the spiritual and moral values which are the foundation of every society worthy of the human person and concerned for the common good. To her, the heavenly Mother of Hope, I above all commend the families and young people, who are the future of the beloved people of Romania.

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*To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:*

I am pleased to greet the English-speaking pilgrims present at this Audience, especially those from England, Finland, Greece, Australia and the United States of America. Upon all of you I invoke the grace and peace of the risen Saviour.

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