



# The Holy See

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JOHN PAUL II

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Wednesday 29 May 2002*

***Spread beautiful fragrance of Christ's holiness***

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

1. I am pleased to reflect with you today on the apostolic journey I made to *Azerbaijan and Bulgaria*. It is still very much alive in my heart. I give thanks first of all to the Lord who granted me the grace to undertake it. My cordial gratitude then goes to all those who made it possible: the Heads of the two States and their respective governments, the civil and military authorities and all who collaborated in its organization and realization. I especially thank the Pastors of the Catholic Church in the two countries, and I cordially extend my thanks to the bishops of the Orthodox Churches and the leaders of the Muslim and Jewish communities.

The great religious traditions are part of the rich historical and cultural heritage of the Azeri people; for that reason it was important to meet in the country's capital, Baku, the *representatives of politics, culture, art and the religions*. Besides, the Catholic community of *Azerbaijan* is one of the smallest I have ever visited. That "little flock" is heir to a very ancient spiritual tradition, peacefully shared with its Orthodox brethren in the midst of a predominantly Muslim population.

2. For this reason, spiritually summoning the Assisi meeting, from that land, a real gateway between East and West, I renewed my *appeal for peace*, insisting that *the religions actively oppose every form of violence*.

Above all, *during the Mass in Baku*, I could clearly perceive that even in Azerbaijan, the heart of the one, holy catholic and apostolic Church is beating.

3. My visit to Sofia coincided with the *Feast of Sts Cyril and Methodius*, the evangelizers of the Slavs, *Slavorum Apostoli*. From the beginning of its evangelization, a solid bridge has united the See of Peter with the Bulgar people. In the last century this bond was reinforced by the valuable service of the *Apostolic Delegate at the time, Angelo Roncalli, Bl. John XXIII*.

*My visit, the first of a Bishop of Rome, was intended to strengthen the bonds of communion with the Orthodox Church of Bulgaria, led by Patriarch Maxim, whom I had the joy of meeting after my visit to the Patriarchal Cathedral.*

4. In Sofia, I also met the *representatives of culture, science and art*, to commemorate the work of Sts Cyril and Methodius, who knew how to bring together in a wonderful way *faith and culture* and made a crucial contribution to the spiritual foundations of Europe.

A striking example of this synthesis of spirituality, art and history is the *Monastery of St John of Rila*, the heart of the Bulgarian nation and pearl of the world's cultural heritage. In going on pilgrimage to that holy place, I wanted to pay a formal *tribute to Eastern monasticism* that enlightens the whole Church with its age-old witness.

5. The high point of my brief but intense visit in Bulgaria was the *Eucharistic celebration* in the central square of Plovdiv, at which I declared "*Blessed*" *Kamen Vitchev, Pavel Djidjov and Josaphat Chichkov*, Augustinian priests of the Assumption, shot in the prison of Sodia in 1952 by a firing squad, along with Bishop Eugene Bossilkov, beatified four years ago.

These courageous witnesses to the faith, together with the other martyrs of the last century, prepare a new springtime for the Church in Bulgaria. In line with this act, one must place my last meeting, a session with *the young people*; I presented to them Christ's pressing message: "*You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world*" (Mt 5, 13-14). Christ calls everyone to the heroism of holiness. I concluded this apostolic pilgrimage under the banner of holiness.

Through the constant intercession of Mary, Queen of Saints and Martyrs, may the Church in Azerbaijan and in Bulgaria, as well as in Europe and throughout the world, spread the beautiful fragrance of Christ's holiness in the variety of her traditions and in the unity of one faith and one love.

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

To the English-speaking pilgrims present at this Audience, especially those from England and the United States of America, I offer special greetings. Upon all of you I cordially invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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