



# The Holy See

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## APOSTOLIC PILGRIMAGE TO INDIA

### **ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE REPRESENTATIVES OF OTHER RELIGIONS IN THE COLLEGE OF SAINT FRANCIS XAVIER**

*Calcutta (India)*

*Monday, 3 February 1986*

*Dear Friends,*

It gives me particular pleasure to have this opportunity of meeting you, the distinguished representatives of the religious, cultural and social life of this city of Calcutta, of Bengal and of India.

1. In you I greet the spiritual vitality of Bengala and of the whole of India.

In you I salute the venerable culture of this land. You are the heirs of more than three thousand years of intense artistic cultural and religious life in this region. Here the human spirit has been nobly served by a host of men and women rightly esteemed for their learning and wisdom, for their sensitivity to the deepest, aspirations of the human heart, for their precious artistic achievements.

In you I acknowledge with admiration not only the achievements of the past, but also those of modern Bengal and modern India.

I have looked forward to this meeting in a spirit of fraternal dialogue, with sentiments of solidarity with you who are engaged in many different forms of service to your fellow citizens.

I wish to say to you what the Second Vatican Council declared to the men and women of thought and science: "Happy are those who, while possessing the truth, search more earnestly for it in order to renew it, deepen it and transmit it to others. Happy also are those who, not having found it are working towards it with a sincere heart. May they seek the light of tomorrow with the light of today until they reach the fulness of light" .

May this be our common hope and prayer!

2. This afternoon I visited the Nirmal Hriday, the "Home of the Dying" at Kalighat.

In every country of the world, in every city, town and village, in every family, indeed in every human life, we come face to face with the ever-present reality of human suffering. "The 'unwritten book' of the history of humanity speaks constantly of the theme of suffering" .

Individuals and groups and whole populations suffer when they see something good in which they "ought" to share, but which escapes them. At times this suffering becomes especially intense. In certain historical situations the burden of pain borne by the human family seems to grove beyond all possibility of relief.

Elsewhere I have spoken concerning our contemporary world which "as never before has been transformed by progress through man's work and, at the same time, is as never before in danger because of man's mistakes and offences" .

Suffering, with its accompanying fear and frustration, becomes especially dramatic and acute when the question is asked: Why? and no adequate response is forthcoming.

I strongly believe that just as all human beings are joined in the experience of pain and suffering, so too all men and women of good will who are the leaders in the field of intellectual and artistic endeavour must join together in a new solidarity in order to respond to the fundamental challenges of our times. In this sense you are invested with an altogether special responsibility for the well-being of your motherland.

The new situation into which the advances of knowledge and technology have thrust the human family requires vision and wisdom equal to the best that humanity has produced under the guidance of its saints and sages. A new civilisation is struggling to be born: a civilisation of understanding and respect for the inalienable dignity of every human person created in the image of God; a civilisation of justice and peace in which there will be ample room for legitimate differences, and in which disputes will be settled through enlightened dialogue, not through confrontation.

3. Religious leaders, by a special title must be sensitive to the sufferings and needs of humanity. " Men look to the various religions for answers to those profound mysteries of the human condition which, today even as in olden times deeply stir the human heart: What is man? What is the meaning and the purpose of our life? What is goodness and what is sin? What gives rise to our sorrows and to what intent? Where lies the path to true happiness?..." .

There opens up an immense field of dialogue between the various philosophies and religious

traditions in answer to these questions, and of mutual collaboration in seeking to respond concretely to the challenges of development and assistance, especially to the poorest.

The saints and true men and women of religion have always been moved by a powerful and active compassion for the poor and the suffering. In our day, as well as seeking to relieve the distress of individuals and groups, our religious and social conscience is challenged by the questions inevitably raised by the growing inequality between developed areas and those which are increasingly dependent, and by the injustice of much needed resources being channelled into the production of terrifying weapons of death and destruction.

Our religious beliefs, which teach us the value and dignity of all life, urge us to commit our energies to the endeavour of men and women of good will, in the first place the poor themselves, to help change those attitudes and structures which are responsible for man-made poverty and oppressive suffering. This requires a mighty investment of intellectual energy and imagination. Herein your contribution in the cause of truth is paramount. As intellectuals, thinkers, writers, scientists artists, you must always be intent on unleashing in the world the power of truth for the service of humanity.

And I am sure that you share a conviction once expressed by Paul of Tarsus: "We cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth" . This in fact is an echo of what is stated in the ancient Upanishads and upheld as the very motto of your revered nation: "Truth alone triumphs – Satyam èva jayatè" .

It is a deep religious intuition that the "service of men is service of God" – as expressed by Swami Vivekananda, one of the renowned figures connected with this city – and That when we go out to our brothers and sisters in fraternal love we receive from them more than we give them. This is an intuition which is also deeply Indian, as witnessed by your holy books and by the testimony of so many religious men and women.

I wish to reaffirm the Catholic Church's commitment to the processes of development which lead to greater justice for all. I invite the Catholic community of Bengal and all India to work wholeheartedly for this goal, and I express the hope that followers of all religious persuasions will in the construction of a new civilisation of peace and love.

4. In speaking to you, men and women of the academic world, representatives of the world of art and the sciences, religious leaders I cannot but underline the Catholic Church's esteem for the manifold cultural life which you represent. The Church rejoices at the creative richness which has characterised the culture of India during its history of thousands of years. During this time it has preserved a marvellous continuity and a subtle unity in the midst of a wide variety of manifestations.

Its vitality and relevance are borne out by the fact that it has moulded many sages and saintly mystics, poets and artists, philosophers and statesmen of great excellence. Yes, the Church looks in admiration upon your contribution to humanity and feels so close to you in so many expressions of your ethics and your asceticism. She attests to her profound respect for the spiritual vision of man that is expressed century after century through your culture and in the education that transmits it. And she is pleased that, from the beginning, Christianity has become incarnate on Indian soil and in Indian hearts.

Yes, culture is the embodiment of the spiritual experiences and desires of a people. It refines and unfolds the spiritual and native qualities of each human group. It creates the customs and institutions which seek to render social life more human and more conducive to the common good. It gives concrete expression to truth, goodness and beauty in a multitude of artistic forms .

Here it is fitting to make reference in particular to the rich cultural heritage of Bengal and of the city of Calcutta, graced with a great variety of ethnic communities, each making its specific contribution to the general culture.

In spite of a succession of traumatic experiences consequent upon natural disasters and political events, Bengal has been renowned for the vitality of its cultural and artistic life. In song, poetry, drama, dance and the graphic arts this culture gives expression to the original values present in the life of the people. It is a culture deeply rooted in the soil of this region. One notes warm hospitality, openness to others, and the strength of family life.

Against the background of great suffering and social problems all of this helps us to believe in the forces of hope and in the triumph, under God, of the human spirit.

5. In preparing for this visit I have learned that Bengal was pioneer in introducing modern education on a large scale. This is not to say that you do not have to contend today with serious problems in the field of education and culture. It is facing these problems with courage and resourcefulness that you show the integrity of your spiritual and intellectual leadership.

I am pleased to know that the Christian Churches have contributed to the cultural development of Bengal through their educational institutions. I wish to encourage the Catholic educators of all India to make their schools and centres of higher education ever better instruments at the service of justice development and harmony in social life, inspiring an ever-increasing awareness of the vocation to serve the integral well-being of people, especially the young and the poor.

In order to fulfil this task with completeness these institutions are called to a twofold fidelity. Fidelity, in the first place, to the Gospel message of universal brotherhood and solidarity under the loving providence of our heavenly Father, and fidelity to what is best and most valuable in Indian culture.

Christians in India know that their vocation is not only to give, but also to receive. Theirs is a pilgrimage to the depths of the human spirit, a pilgrimage which enriches their vision and insight into religious truth and into the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

My dear friends: in the Catholic Church you will find a willing partner in the dialogue of truth and in the service of man; you will find a persevering ally to encourage you in making your irreplaceable contribution to humanity. Catholics in every part of the world are exhorted by the Second Vatican Council " that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, they acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these people, as well as in their social and cultural values" .

The Catholic Church in turn looks to you, men and women of the world of culture, to defend and promote the spiritual and moral well-being of your people, in the common cause of safeguarding and fostering human dignity, social justice, peace and freedom in the world.

To conclude, I would like to raise to God this significant prayer uttered by one of the great sons of this very region, Rabindranath Tagore: "Give us strength to love, to love fully, our life in its joys and sorrows, in its gains and losses, in its rise and fall. Let us have strength enough fully to see and hear Thy universe and to work with full vigour therein. Let us fully live the life Thou hast given us, let us bravely take and bravely give. This is our prayer to Thee" .

And may Almighty God help us to build together a civilisation of harmony and love for every human being!

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