



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC PILGRIMAGE TO INDIA

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II ON THE OCCASION OF THE MEETING WITH THE EXPONENTS OF NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS

Madras, (India)

Wednesday, 5 February 1986

Distinguished Friends,

1. I have been longing to visit India, the land of many religions and of a rich cultural heritage, and I have looked forward to this meeting. I am very happy to have this occasion of spiritual fellowship with you.

India is indeed the cradle of ancient religious traditions. The belief in a reality within man which is beyond the material and biological, the belief in the Supreme Being which explains, justifies, and makes possible man's rising above all aspects of his material self – these beliefs are deeply experienced in India. Your meditations on things unseen and spiritual have made a deep impression on the world. Your overwhelming sense of the primacy of religion and of the greatness of the Supreme Being has been a powerful witness against a materialistic and atheistic view of life.

The Indian rightly thinks that religion has a profound meaning for him. His very being experiences impulses, instincts, questions, longings and aspirations which testify to the greatest of all human quests: the quest for the Absolute, the quest for God. In my first Encyclical after being elected Pope, I made reference to the fact that the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on non-Christian Religions "is filled with deep esteem for the great spiritual values, indeed for the primacy of the spiritual, which in the life of mankind finds expression in religion and then in morality, with direct effects on the whole of culture" .

2. The Catholic Church recognises the truths that are contained in the religious traditions of India. This recognition makes true dialogue possible. Here today the Church wishes to voice again her true appreciation of the great heritage of the religious spirit that is manifested in your cultural

tradition. The Church's approach to other religions is one of genuine respect; with them she seeks mutual collaboration. This respect is twofold: respect for man in his quest for answers to the deepest questions of his life, and respect for the action of the Spirit in man.

As an inner attitude of the mind and heart, spirituality involves an emphasis on the inner man and it produces an inward transformation of the self. The emphasis on the spiritual nature of man is an emphasis on the sublime dignity of every human person. Spirituality teaches that at the core of all outward appearances there is that inner self which in so many ways is related to the Infinite. This spirituality of inwardness which is so predominant in the Indian religious tradition achieves its complement and fulfilment in the external life of man. Gandhi's spirituality is an eloquent illustration of this. He says: "Let me explain what I mean by religion... that which changes one's very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and which ever purifies. It is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself, known its Maker and appreciated the true correspondence between the Maker and itself " .

3. In a world filled with poverty, disease, ignorance and suffering, genuine spirituality can not only change the mind of man but also change the whole world for the better. Genuine spirituality is seriously concerned with bringing relief to all those who are suffering or in want. In the Christian Scriptures there is a particular passage which, I believe, the followers of all religious traditions will agree with: "He who says he is in the light and hates his brother is in the darkness still. He who loves his brother abides in the light, and in it there is no cause for stumbling" .

The abolition of inhuman living conditions is an authentic spiritual victory, because it brings man freedom, dignity, and the possibility of spiritual life. It enables him to rise above the material. Every man, no matter how poor or unfortunate, is worthy of respect and freedom by reason of his spiritual nature. Because we believe in man, in his value and in his innate excellence, we love him and serve him and seek to relieve his sufferings. As a sage of Tamilnadu, Pattinattar, puts it:

"Believe the One above. Believe that God is.
 Know that all other wealth is naught. Feed the hungry.
 Know that righteousness and good company are beneficial;
 Be content that God's will be done.
 A sermon this is unto thee, O Heart!" .

The Catholic Church has time and again expressed the conviction that all people, both believers and non-believers, must unite and collaborate in the task of bettering this world where all live together. "This certainly cannot be done without a dialogue that is sincere and prudent" . Dialogue which proceeds from the "internal drive of charity" is a powerful means of collaboration between people in eradicating evil from human life and from the life of the community, in establishing right order in human society and thus contributing to the common good of all men in every walk of life.

4. Dialogue between members of different religions increases and deepens mutual respect and paves the way for relationships that are crucial in solving the problems of human suffering. Dialogue that is respectful and open to the opinions of others can promote union and a commitment to this noble cause. Besides, the experience of dialogue gives a sense of solidarity and courage for overcoming barriers and difficulties in the task of nation-building. For without dialogue the barriers of prejudice, suspicion and misunderstanding cannot be effectively removed. With dialogue, each partner makes an honest attempt to deal with the common problems of life and receives courage to accept the challenge of pursuing truth and achieving good. The experience of suffering, disappointment, disillusionment and conflict are changed from signs of failure and doom to occasions for progress in friendship and trust.

Again, dialogue is a means of seeking after truth and of sharing it with others. For truth is light, newness and strength. The Catholic Church holds that "the search for truth, however, must be carried out in a manner that is appropriate to the dignity of the human person and his social nature, namely by free enquiry with the help of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue. It is by these means that men share with each other the truth they have discovered, or are convinced they have discovered, in such a way that they help one another in the search for truth" . Modern man seeks dialogue as an apt means of establishing and developing mutual understanding, esteem and love, whether between individuals or groups. In this spirit of understanding, the Second Vatican Council urges Christians to acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral values found among non-Christians, as well as their social and cultural values .

The fruit of dialogue is union between people and union of people with God, who is the source and revealer of all truth and whose Spirit guides men in freedom only when they meet one another in all honesty and love. By dialogue we let God be present in our midst; for as we open ourselves in dialogue to one another, we also open ourselves to God. We should use the legitimate means of human friendliness, mutual understanding and interior persuasion. We should respect the personal and civic rights of the individual. As followers of different religions we should join together in promoting and defending common ideals in the spheres of religious liberty, human brotherhood, education, culture, social welfare and civic order. Dialogue and collaboration are possible in all these great projects.

5. In the context of religious pluralism, the spirit of tolerance, which has always been part of the Indian heritage, is not only desirable but imperative and must be implemented in a framework of practical means of support. It is the teaching of the Church that the human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or social groups or any human power, so that no one is forced to act against his convictions or is prevented from acting in accordance with his convictions in religious matters, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits . The world notes with great satisfaction that in the Preamble to her Constitution India has assured to all

her citizens liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship. It therefore becomes a duty incumbent on all citizens, especially on leaders in religious life, to support and guard this precious principle which specifically includes the right "to profess, practise and propagate religion". The way to do so is to show its effectiveness in the reality of public life. Everyone is called upon to uphold this religious liberty and to work for peace and harmony among people of different religious traditions, among societies, and among nations.

6. It is my humble prayer that the remarkable sense of "the sacred" which characterises your culture may penetrate the minds and hearts of all men and women everywhere. In this way God will be honoured and the human family will experience ever more fully its oneness and its common destiny. Peoples will feel the urgency of a global solidarity in the face of the enormous challenges facing mankind. The wisdom and strength which comes from religious commitment will further humanise man's path through history.

May the Most High God, the Creator and Father of all that exists, man's highest good, bless us in our task and guide our steps to peace!

With sincere gratitude for the generous hospitality with which you have received me, I wish you the fullness of peace in joy and in love!

© Copyright 1986 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana