



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER TO THE PILGRIMS FROM THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Saturday 18 December 1999

*Mr President,
Your Eminence,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,
Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Czech Republic,*

1. With great joy I greet all of you who have come to present the fir tree which has arrived from the beloved Czech nation. This Christmas gift testifies to the sense of respect and esteem that the beloved Czech people has for the Holy See, and at the same time, it is a symbol of warm participation in the joy of the Christmas festivities being celebrated here in the Vatican, in keeping with the particular solemnity that the beginning of the Great Jubilee requires.

Yesterday I was able to meet numerous representatives of the Czech Republic at the audience for those taking part in the International Convention on Jan Hus, an important moment of reflection on a sorrowful page in the religious and civil history of the nation. And now I have the joy of extending my cordial welcome to President Václav Havel of the Czech Republic and to his distinguished wife.

Thank you, Mr President, for your noble words in which you drew attention to the Government's initiative in giving the Pope the beautiful Christmas tree, which rises majestically next to the crèche in St Peter's Square. I also greet Cardinal Miloslav Vlk and thank him for his expressions of fraternal affection. Lastly, I extend my cordial greeting to Bishop Frantisek Lobkowitz, to the Prelates of the entire Czech Episcopal Conference, to the faithful of the Diocese of Ostrava-Opava, the main organizers of this project, and to the faithful of Rome's Czech community.

I express my sincerest thanks to all of you, to your co-workers who stayed at home, to the sponsors and to everyone involved in transporting the tree. A special greeting to the "Valasský-vojvoda" band which has accompanied the joyful meeting for lighting the tree. Thanks to you the feast of the Lord's Birth, here in St Peter's Square, will certainly be more solemn.

2. This fir tree, which for several days now has stood pointing to heaven decorated with evocative lights, comes from Mount Beskydy in the region of Ostrava and Opava near Morávka. Along with this tree, you have been pleased to offer other small fir trees that will be put in various places in the Apostolic Palace and in the Curia, all decorated with handmade ornaments from that same region. In addition, you have also presented three figures, dressed in the traditional costumes of Valassko, which have been put beside those traditionally used in the crèche in St Peter's Square.

The Christmas tree, with the crib, creates a typical Christmas atmosphere and can help us understand better the message of salvation that Christ came to bring us through his Incarnation.

From the stable of Bethlehem to the Cross on Golgotha, with his whole life he bore witness to God's love for mankind. He is, according to the Evangelist John, "the true light that enlightens every man" (1: 9).

The lights sparkling on the Christmas tree symbolize this Light, to strengthen our knowledge of the great mystery: in Christ is the light that can change the human heart.

3. Dear brothers and sisters, as I wholeheartedly thank you for this visit, I express to you all and to your loved ones my best wishes for a Happy Christmas and a Joyful New Year in the warmth of your families.

May the imminent Christmas festivities awaken and strengthen in everyone faith in the presence and love of God.

With these sentiments, I willingly impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you, to your families and to your entire nation.