



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO H.E. MR. MARTIN STROPNICKÝ
NEW AMBASSADOR OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC
ACCREDITED TO THE HOLY SEE***

Thursday, 28 February 1999

Mr Ambassador,

1. I am pleased to welcome Your Excellency for the presentation of the Letters accrediting you as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Czech Republic to the Holy See.

With courteous attention you have referred to the pastoral mission of Peter's Successor, stressing the value of his Magisterium also for the life of the civil community. In this connection you recalled my visits to your country. Your words have brought back many memories, taking me back to the unforgettable feeling I experienced during those meetings so full of human warmth and Christian faith.

I am grateful to the President of the Czech Republic, Mr Václav Havel, for his cordial greetings which Your Excellency has kindly conveyed to me. Please reciprocate my respectful good wishes for his important mission and for his health, while conveying my sentiments of goodwill to the inhabitants of the Czech nation, which is so dear to me. May the Lord grant everyone prosperity and peace in a context of justice and solidarity in which everyone can find his own legitimate expectations properly fulfilled.

2. Mr Ambassador, you also recalled the changes that took place on the European continent 10 years ago. The collapse of the communist regime brought many hopes, giving peoples new reasons to look to the future with trust.

Because of its location in the heart of the continent, your country has received a particular vocation. As an important factor of unity, it is called to play an active part in building the new Europe.

The millennium of St Adalbert's martyrdom, which I celebrated in Prague and Hradec Králové in 1997, was an important historical moment which prompted us to reflect not only on the Christian roots of the Czech Republic, but also on the heritage it received from that great Bishop and from other Bohemian, Moravian and Silesian saints, in order to establish a united, free Europe that believes in the Gospel. In this light, your country was able to rediscover the meaning of its own role as a bridge between East and West.

In these years European countries are at a political juncture laden with extraordinary opportunities. They can no longer think of their existence as a mere juxtaposition of States or in terms of antagonism, which results in inevitable tensions and conflicts, as confirmed by recent events in the Balkans. Rather it is necessary that in overcoming possible divisions, which unfortunately are likely to occur in a society which is extremely jealous of its own rights and autonomies, they should work on building those structures which can strengthen that Europe of nations, the urgent need for which is being more and more felt. It is up to people of good will to encourage every source of reconciliation and *rapprochement* between individuals and peoples, thereby helping to establish peace for the benefit of present and future generations in both the East and the West. Beyond differences of language and culture, the deep relations historically interwoven between European peoples and the Christian heritage of the majority of their members represent a very sound basis for building understanding and collaboration among the peoples of the continent.

3. Every nation has its own particular features connected with its history, and it is right that it should preserve them in the union being created. It is necessary for every European to be committed to fostering a climate of mutual respect and fraternal solidarity. It is also important that those in charge of public affairs be concerned to base their political, economic and social decisions first and foremost on those moral criteria which belong to the common European memory; in particular, they should take care to focus on the human being, with concern for his integral advancement and respect for his basic freedoms.

In this perspective, effective recognition of religious freedom appears as an indispensable condition for building the new Europe and for harmonious coexistence of the nations comprising it. As you appropriately stressed, throughout history Christianity brought together and united various peoples with one another, helping them to free themselves from the yokes that oppressed them. A serene examination of the past shows that Christian faith is one of the pillars supporting the old continent. The anthropological, moral and spiritual values which are linked to it are a treasure from which to draw in planning for the future. Obviously this does not exclude equal respect for other religious traditions, which must have the right of citizenship. Respect for religious freedom is a guarantee of respect for all the other individual and community freedoms.

4. In the same spirit, relations between Church and State should be clarified and strengthened. In this context, I stress once again, as I did at the beginning of my Pastoral Visit two years ago, that it seems to be of primary importance to set up a joint committee that includes representatives of the Czech Republic and the Holy See, with the task of examining pending issues concerning Church-State relations. In this way it will also be possible to deal effectively with the question of restoring Church property, as well as that of suitable support for ecclesial institutions, in accordance with the rights and requirements of justice and democracy.

The Church, without being directly involved in political life as this is not her mission, nonetheless

wishes to serve people and to help them fulfil their responsibilities for the benefit of others. This will also be the aim of the Special Assembly for Europe of the Synod of Bishops, which will be held in Rome next October. It is the duty of Catholics on the continent to propose a sound vision of civilization and to plan new ways of working together to make it a reality.

5. Mr Ambassador, I know well that Czech Catholics wish to have their own place "to transform reality in order to make it correspond to God's plan" (Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 46); they want to make an active contribution to the good of their country, after the trials they endured during the communist period. They would like to ensure that the rich cultural and spiritual heritage of the Christian tradition is transmitted to the younger generation, so that they can prepare to fulfil the roles to which they will be called. This cannot but help to promote the country's democratic development and to encourage the consolidation of State based on law.

It is in fact essential that those who have or will have responsibility for the *res publica* consider their office as a service to the national community. This task requires that they have a high standard of moral and social values, such as honesty, justice, harmony, impartiality, a sense of lawfulness, so that people will have ever greater trust in their representatives at all levels of society.

6. I therefore hope that the mission to the Holy See which you are beginning today will offer you many occasions to have a close knowledge of the many expressions of the universal Church's life, especially in this period when we are preparing to celebrate the Great Jubilee. In this regard, I am pleased that the Czech Republic feels particularly involved in the celebration of this event: it will be donating the great fir tree that will stand in St Peter's Square during the Christmas season at the beginning of the Holy Year, as a sign of union between the second and the third millennium; and here in Rome it will organize programmes of particular cultural importance during the Jubilee itself.

I hope that this solemn event will be for the faithful and for many other people of good will a time of conversion in which, by humbly recognizing the weaknesses of the past, everyone will turn to the future with a new heart, determined to give the best of himself in fraternal life.

As I offer you my best wishes, I can assure you that those who work with me will always offer you an attentive welcome and cordial understanding in the fulfilment of your office.

I invoke an abundance of divine blessings upon you, your loved ones and the staff of your embassy, as well as upon the President of the Republic, your country's other authorities and all your compatriots.

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