



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO H.E. MR ROBERT GEORGE HALVERSON,
AMBASSADOR OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA***

Thursday, 20 May 1999

Mr Ambassador,

It is with pleasure that I welcome you at the beginning of your mission as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Commonwealth of Australia to the Holy See. In accepting your Letters of Credence, I thank you for the greetings which you bring from the Governor-General, Sir William Deane, and the Prime Minister, the Honourable John Howard. I would ask you to convey to them and to the Australian people my own good wishes and the assurance of my prayers for the peace and prosperity of the nation.

In its diplomatic relations, the Holy See seeks to offer to all peoples a quite distinctive service, in support of a fully human life in peace and harmony, with an eye to the common good and the integral development of individuals and nations. I am pleased to note, Mr Ambassador, that you have spoken of "the quest to attain fundamental human dignity for all", since this is at the heart of the diplomatic activity of the Holy See. In so far as Australia and the Holy See undertake this quest together, we may speak, as you have, of "shared values and a common approach to protecting the lives of citizens and their rights".

In this light, the Holy See follows with interest the preparations in Australia for the celebration of the centenary of Federation. The centenary provides Australia with an opportunity to focus upon the question of national identity, which inevitably entails the question of fundamental values. The coming of the new millennium poses this crucial question to all in some way; but it seems especially pertinent at this time in Australian history.

At the core of the question of fundamental values there lies the still deeper question of the vision

of the human being upon which Australian society is grounded and which is expressed in a document like the Constitution. Is it a vision which in the end denies human dignity and therefore subverts the common good? Or is it a vision which nourishes the sense of the dignity of the person and therefore works in favour of the common good?

Such questions are more than theoretical when we consider an issue as concrete as the reconciliation of the Aboriginal people of your land with those who have settled there in more recent times. Who can forget the painful history of the first inhabitants of Australia and the need now for reconciliation and healing? Yet, even among people of good will, there is disagreement as to how this might be achieved. In the midst of such complexity, however, one thing is clear: the issue will not be resolved except on the basis of an unambiguous vision of the dignity of every human being (cf. *Address to Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders*, Alice Springs, 1986, No. 11) and a firm sense of human rights which no individual, group or government can claim either to concede or deny, since these are transcendent rights innate to every man and woman.

The question of human dignity and human rights is focused no less clearly by issues associated with the beginning and end of human life. The Holy See has made it plain that it views with concern the trend in legislation to sanction the killing of those who are unborn and those whose life is approaching its end. This is because the Holy See considers abortion and euthanasia as offensive to human dignity and subversive of the common good. It is one of the great paradoxes of today that the rhetoric of human rights is at times accompanied by the denial of the most basic right of all, the right to life itself. This century has shown that once the right to life of some category of people is denied, then all human rights are in jeopardy. Australia enjoys a hard-won freedom, but freedom is always a fragile good and it can never be taken for granted. Respect for the right to life is decisive because it amounts in the end to respect for freedom.

A sound and integral vision of the human being will also provide the best basis for Australia's exercise of its regional responsibilities. It is no small thing that Australia has attained such stability and prosperity in a relatively short time and in the face of many difficulties. But this stability and prosperity also confer special obligations in a region which knows both poverty and political uncertainty. From a pragmatic viewpoint, it is in Australia's interests to have stable and prosperous neighbours; yet pragmatism alone cannot decide the full scope of Australia's response to the challenges facing the entire region. It is true that every nation must defend and promote its own interests, yet self-interest alone cannot determine Australia's role in the region. Beyond pragmatism and self-interest, those afflicted by instability and poverty have a right to be helped by those who are not so afflicted; and this right to be helped implies a duty to help.

Every society will be judged ultimately upon how it treats the weak, which is why the questions of Aboriginal reconciliation, of the beginning and end of life, and of regional responsibility are important now as Australia considers its identity and sets its course for the future. The Catholic Church in Australia, in fulfilling its religious, social and cultural mission, seeks to ensure that the

new century and the new millennium will see the still greater growth of a nation where the weak are cherished because the inalienable dignity of every human being is the criterion of all personal, social and political life.

Mr Ambassador, as you enter the community of diplomats accredited to the Holy See, I assure you of the ready collaboration of the various offices of the Roman Curia. May your mission serve to strengthen the bond of friendship between your Government and the Holy See, and may that bond contribute richly to the well-being of your country. Upon you, your family and your fellow Australians, I invoke the abundant blessings of Almighty God.

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