



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II TO THE NEW AMBASSADOR OF PORTUGAL TO THE HOLY SEE*

Monday, 13 November 2000

Mr Ambassador,

Welcome to the Vatican for this presentation of the Letters of Credence appointing you Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Portugal to the Holy See. The sentiments and intentions that you have just expressed are a sign of the seriousness with which you regard and accept this new diplomatic post; here you will find - I can assure you - the necessary support for successfully accomplishing the lofty mission for which you have been accredited, as did your predecessors. In you I see the noble Portuguese nation, limited today to its narrow European dimensions, but great in its universalist soul, which, under the shadow of the glorious Cross, revealed the brotherhood of individuals and peoples, which it has heralded and fostered. The Holy See is pleased with this and congratulates you.

Your Excellency has been sent by the Head of State, who entrusted you with the kind expression of his compliments and best wishes for my person, for which I am very appreciative and grateful. With the assurance of my prayers for the prosperity of his country, I ask you to convey my cordial greetings to the President of the Republic, to the Government and to the Portuguese people. The last image I have of them is of the countless multitude of pilgrims at the Shrine of Fátima, where their devout and happy eyes were reflected in the gracious figures of their compatriots, Francisco and Jacinta Marto, raised to the honours of the altar. I thought to myself: this is Portugal!

On that occasion, as I visited your country for the third time, I was able to see again how the Christian religion moulds Portugal's soul and marks its life particularly through the influence of worthy and prestigious social and cultural institutions, visible signs of the "Catholic Church's incalculable role in the course of the country's collective life". Your words, Mr Ambassador, express the sentiment of the Portuguese Government, which wants to achieve a better "adjustment to contemporary reality" of Portugal's relations with the Holy See. You can communicate to your Government the latter's willingness, since it is sensitive to the signs of the times and quite happy to pursue our respectful relations governed by a shared concern to work together for the advancement of the human person.

The specific mission of the Church, and naturally of the Holy See which is her centre, is spiritual in nature, since the formation of consciences is one of her fundamental concerns. In their respective field in each country, the local Churches work to this end in communion with the Successor of Peter; they would fail in their duty, if they did not try to clarify consciences, to point out the evils that threaten both Christian life and the integrity of the person, and to encourage what is in keeping with truth and human welfare. It is true that the Church has no direct power over the laws and institutions of the State democratically chosen by the citizens in complete freedom; but she does claim, in fulfilling the mission received from her divine Founder, the right to make statements about these laws and institutions and to distinguish between what is permitted by the civil law and what is moral, in conformity with a well-formed conscience. And the Portuguese Church has never tired of doing so in the most diverse cases, such as the unjust law on abortion and the granting of the same legal status as the family based on marriage to emerging models of cohabitation that are radically different and irreducible to it.

In addition, there are other complex moral problems. It is easy to see the deep disorientation of many young people, who frequently seek escape in drugs or in degrading behaviour. Knowing that the future is born today - as Your Excellency recalled - and at the sight of these scourges which debilitate many gullible and frail victims, it is right to ask the various areas where the men and women of the future are formed to assume their responsibility. It is necessary to denounce, for violating the original plan received, all who fail to teach authentic freedom, the quest for truth, respect for love and family values. For her part, the Church wishes to work for this cause with all her forces, within the realm of her own competence and with respect for the freedom of consciences; she has no doubt that in this area she will encounter the assent of political leaders for the common good. It is they who are in the best position to see that there is a challenge to be considered with regard to the country's future and its true human and spiritual progress, in conformity with the Christian heritage which marks it so strongly and continues to be a source of life for those who accept it.

I would like to mention one point that honours your country: the great sensitivity of your people and your Government to those who are suffering, which in a certain way is in the Portuguese blood.

From time immemorial your homeland has been the *finis terrae* and last haven for the strongest of the fugitives from the consecutive Indo-European invasions: harassed by the new lords of the battlefield, they ended up there, driven to the ocean, until the day when it relented, giving them access to new worlds and new peoples. This long and almost forced coexistence of various peoples forged the great, I would almost say universal, soul of Portugal, which is capable of a special and fruitful synergy with peoples and races from the different parts of the earth and takes the form of a large family.

A concrete result of this is the community of Portuguese-speaking countries, not only with its sociopolitical, cultural and economic aspects but also with its ecclesial expression, which consists of mutual help and the fraternal sharing of resources. There was a great wave of solidarity throughout Portugal with the bloody tragedy that struck East Timor when the people chose their future. At the time when Macau was returned to China, its farewell was lived under the banner of the consolidation of the moorings with which Portugal knew how to make it fast to the pier of the great Chinese family. Your nation is living through the tragedy of Angola with the same sentiments: since the appeals for peace went unheard, they were directed to God in a permanent back-up of prayer that heaven would raise up those new hearts which the prophecies (cf. *Ez* 36: 26-28; *Jer* 31: 31-33) proclaim for the new times.

Your Excellency well knows the interest that the Holy See pays to all these efforts, which can make the human community more fraternal and supportive, thanks to the preparation and application of adequate political, juridical and economic means. A deeper knowledge of the unity of the entire human family and of the radical interdependence of all peoples should gradually foster a greater conviction that it is only true solidarity, understood as a moral quality that determines human relations, which can effectively safeguard the dignity and rights of individuals and, consequently, build peace within societies and among nations.

These are the sentiments that motivate me as I welcome you, Mr Ambassador, at the beginning of your diplomatic mission to the Holy See. I express before God my best wishes for you and your family, for the Portuguese people and for its leaders, as I invoke upon everyone, through the intercession of your heavenly Patroness and Queen, the blessings of the Most High who gives happiness, strength and light to people of good will.

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