



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
TO THE NEW AMBASSADOR
OF BULGARIA TO THE HOLY SEE***

Friday, 21 December 2001

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 Republic of Bulgaria to the Holy See. I thank you for your courteous words and would be grateful if you would kindly thank the President for his goodwishes and assure him in return of my best wishes for him and for the Bulgarian people.

2. As you have said, although diplomatic relations between Bulgaria and the Holy See have only recently been re-established, the ties between the Catholic Church and the Bulgarian people go back to the first millennium of our era, the age of the conversion of Eastern Europe to the Christian faith under the decisive impact of the two brothers, Cyril and Methodius. By translating the Bible into the local language, by adapting the Byzantine liturgy and law, they truly sowed the Good News in the land of the Slavs and brought into being an original culture nourished by the Christian tradition which is recognized by all Slav peoples as having shaped their identity. In an age when Europe was suffering from deep divisions on account of the political rivalry between the Byzantine and Carolingian Empires and when the Church herself was experiencing division, they worked as ardent servants of the unity of the Church and also of Europe, whose heavenly patrons, with St Benedict, they have become.

3. Their example shows us the path we should today, that of a dialogue between cultures and peoples that upholds and respects the identity and riches of each one, and is open to the knowledge and recognition of the other over and above any narrow nationalism. This is an exemplary path of peace that makes it essential to give up the use of force and the desire to dominate, to work together for the common good. It is also a path of truth that often requires the

recognition of the wrongs committed in the past against one another. It is a path of justice that requires us to make amends for the wrongs and harm done to others and to respect each one's rights and duties.

Today's world, once again tempted by conflicts and the blind violence of terrorism, needs to hear the voice of men of dialogue and of peacemakers, which I fervently hope will take place on 24 January, when the religious leaders of the world will meet in Assisi for a day of prayer for peace. I am delighted to know that your country, whose natural location as a bridge between Eastern and Southern Europe prepares it to be a land of meetings and tolerance, has taken in hand its obligation to work for peace and cooperation among peoples in the concert of nations and particularly on the European continent.

4. You have wished, Mr Ambassador, to pay homage to the apostolic work of two apostles of the last century: Bishop Angelo Roncalli, who was Apostolic Visitor then Apostolic Delegate in Sofia for many years, before becoming my Venerable Predecessor Bl. Pope John XXIII, and Bishop Eugene Bossilkov, a martyr for the faith, also a Blessed. Thank you very much. In them your nation acknowledges true servants of the Gospel for the Bulgarian people, and honours the Church's action in two essential features of her mission: the exercise of charity and the defence of religious freedom. May I assure you of the Catholic Church's firm and constant determination, after the example of these two witnesses, to work for the good of peoples always, passing on to them her one treasure, the Word of God, in order to nourish cultures and make them fruitful. I hope that the new law on religious freedom will permit the Catholic Church, as well as the other recognized religions, to exercise her mission in your country freely and without restrictions, in accord with the rights and duties guaranteed by law. In this spirit, I hope that the administrative services will continue to encourage the process that will enable the faithful to benefit from the necessary conditions to exercise freedom of worship.

5. On this occasion and through your good offices, I am glad to be able to greet the Catholic community of different rites living in Bulgaria. It is of course small, in a country with an Orthodox majority, but it is active and desires to maintain good relations with all the religious traditions that exist in the country. I cordially greet the bishops and priests, as well as the religious and lay faithful, as I give thanks for their fidelity to Christ and to the Catholic Church. I know that they participate actively part in the building of the nation, taking their place in society and working for the development of the country. The Successor of Peter wants to encourage them in their desire to serve and witness to their faith. I also greet with respect, esteem and fraternal affection our brothers and sisters of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and hope that on many occasions we will be able to show each other and the world our spiritual brotherhood in Christ.

Each year in May a Delegation from your country pays a visit to the Bishop of Rome on the occasion of the feast of Sts Cyril and Methodius, thus expressing attachment to these great spiritual persons, with the desire, after their example, to develop the bonds of brotherhood and

peace. I sincerely hope that I will be able to visit the beloved people of Bulgaria, and soon come to your country to meet the civil authorities, to speak with the religious leaders, especially of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, and to let the Catholic faithful know of my pastoral concern. After my pilgrimage to the sources of faith, I will continue my pilgrimage to the origins of the Christian communities to foster peace and dialogue among all.

6. Mr Ambassador, at the time when you are officially beginning your mission to the Holy See, I offer you my best wishes for your success. You may be sure that you will always receive an attentive welcome and cordial understanding from those who work with me.

I cordially invoke an abundance of divine Blessings upon you, Your Excellency, upon your family, upon your staff at the Embassy and upon the Bulgarian people.

* *L'Osservatore Romano. Weekly edition in English* 2002 n.2 p.5.

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