



The Holy See

MEETING WITH REPRESENTATIVES OF THE ALL-UKRAINIAN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES AND RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER

Sunday 24 June 2001

Kyiv (National Philharmonic)

*Illustrious Representatives of the All-Ukrainian Council
of Churches and Religious Organizations*

1. I am very grateful to those who have made possible today's meeting, which gives me the opportunity in the course of my visit to know more familiarly the representatives of the different Churches and Religious Organizations present in Ukraine. I extend cordial and respectful greetings to all of you. I express my heartfelt appreciation of the Pan-Ukrainian Council's service *to the safeguarding and promotion of spiritual and religious values*, which are indispensable for the building of a genuinely free and democratic society. Your excellent Organization contributes in no small measure to creating the conditions for *an ever greater understanding* between the members of the different Churches and Religious Organizations, in a spirit of mutual respect and in the constant search for a sincere and fruitful dialogue. I must also mention your praiseworthy efforts in favour of peace between individuals and between peoples.

2. Your existence and your daily endeavours testify in a concrete way to the fact that *the religious element is an essential part of the personal identity of everyone*, no matter the race, people or culture to which they belong. Religion, when practised with a humble and sincere heart, makes a specific and irreplaceable contribution to the promotion of a just and fraternal society.

How could a State that wishes to be really democratic fail to have full respect for the religious freedom of its citizens?

There is no true democracy where one of the fundamental freedoms of the person is trampled on. During the long and sorrowful period of dictatorships, Ukraine too experienced the devastating effects of atheistic oppression which represses man and subjects him to a regime of slavery. Now you face the urgent challenge of rebuilding the social and moral fabric of the nation. Through your activities you are called to make an essential contribution to this work of social renewal, by

showing that only in a climate of respect for religious freedom is it possible to build a society which is fully human.

3. In the first place I greet you, dear Brothers united by common faith in Christ who died and rose again. The violent Communist persecution did not succeed in eliminating the yearning for Christ and his Gospel from the spirit of the Ukrainian people, because this faith is part of its history and its very life. In fact, in speaking of religious freedom in this land of yours, our thoughts go back spontaneously to the *glorious beginnings of Christianity*, which for over a thousand years has marked its cultural and social identity. It was with the baptism of Prince Volodymyr and the people of Rus' in the year 988 that the presence of the faith and Christian life began on the banks of the Dnieper. From here the Gospel then reached the different peoples living in the Eastern part of the European continent. I recalled this fact in my Apostolic Letter *Euntes in Mundum*, on the occasion of the Millennium of the Baptism of the Rus' of Kyiv, and I emphasized how this event led to a great missionary expansion: "towards the West as far as the Carpathians, from the southern banks of the Dnieper as far as Novgorod and from the northern banks of the Volga ... as far as the shores of the Pacific Ocean and beyond" (No. 4; cf. also the Message *Magnum Baptismi Donum*, 1).

At a time when there was still full communion between Rome and Constantinople, Saint Volodymyr, preceded by the example of Princess Olga, dedicated himself to safeguarding the spiritual identity of the people, and at the same time to fostering the insertion of Rus' within the totality of the other Churches. The process of inculturation of the faith, which has marked the history of these peoples down to today, was carried out through the untiring work of the missionaries who came from Constantinople.

4. Ukraine, land blessed by God, Christianity is *an inseparable part of your civil, cultural and religious identity!* You have fulfilled and continue to fulfil an important mission within the great family of Slav peoples and in Eastern Europe. Draw from the common Christian roots the living sap which will continue to flow through the branches of your ecclesial communities in the third millennium.

Christians of Ukraine, may God help you to look back together to the noble origins of your nation. May he help you to rediscover together the solid grounds for *a respectful and courageous ecumenical journey*, a journey of coming closer and of mutual understanding, favoured by good will on the part of everyone. May the day of restored communion among all the disciples of Christ come soon, that communion for which the Lord ardently prayed before his return to the Father (cf. *Jn 17:20-21*).

5. I now greet you, the Representatives of the other Religions and Religious Organizations, who work in close cooperation with Christians in Ukraine. This is a typical quality of your land which, on account of its particular position and make-up, *is a natural bridge* not only between East and West, but also between the peoples who have been here together for several centuries. These are people who differ as regards historical origin, cultural tradition and religious belief. I wish to recall the significant presence of the Jews, who form a community which is solidly rooted in Ukrainian society and culture. They too suffered injustices and persecutions for having remained faithful to the religion of their ancestors. Who can ever forget the immense tribute of blood which they paid to the fanaticism of an ideology propounding the superiority of one race over others? Here, in Kyiv, at Babyn Yar, during the Nazi occupation countless people, including over 100,000 Jews, were killed within a few days. This is one of the most atrocious of the many crimes which the history of the last century unhappily has had to record.

May the memory of this episode of murderous frenzy be a *salutary warning to all*. What atrocities is man capable of, when he fools himself into thinking that he can do without God! The desire to set himself up in opposition to God and to combat every form of religion showed itself in an overbearing way also in atheistic and Communist totalitarianism. In this city, this memory lives on in the monuments to the victims of Holodomar, to those killed at Bykivnia, to those who died in the Afghanistan war, to mention but a few. May the memory of such painful experiences help humanity today, especially the younger generation, *to reject every form of violence* and to grow in respect for human dignity, by safeguarding the fundamental rights rooted in it, not least the right to religious freedom.

6. To the memory of the massacre of the Jews, I wish to add that of the crimes committed by the political power against the Muslim community in Ukraine. I am thinking in particular of the Tartars deported from the Crimea to the Asiatic Republics of the Soviet Union, who now wish to return to their land of origin. In this regard, allow me to express the hope that through open, patient and persevering dialogue suitable solutions will be found, always in a climate of sincere tolerance and practical cooperation for the common good.

In this patient work of protecting man and the true good of society, *believers have a particular role to play*. Together they can give clear witness to the priority of the spirit with respect to material things, however necessary. Together they can bear witness that a vision of the world founded on God is the guarantee also of the inalienable value of the human person. If God is removed from the world, nothing truly human remains. By not looking to heaven, the creature loses sight of the goal of his journey on earth. At the root of every authentic humanism there is always the humble and trusting acknowledgement of the primacy of God.

7. Dear Friends! Allow me to greet you in this way at the end of this family gathering. For all of you, for your Churches and Religious Organizations in Ukraine, I express once more my esteem and affection. Your mission at this historic beginning of the millennium is a great one. Continue without ceasing in your common search for an increased sharing of the values of *religion lived in freedom* and of *tolerance lived in justice*. This is the most significant contribution that you can make to the overall progress of Ukrainian society.

The Bishop of Rome, who during these days has become a pilgrim of hope to Kyiv and Lviv, embraces the faithful of every city and village of the beloved Ukrainian land. He assures you and everyone of a remembrance in his prayers, that the Almighty may shower you with his graces. May God, the tender and merciful Father, bless you who are present here, your Churches and Religious Organizations. May he bless and protect the beloved Ukrainian people. Today and for ever!