



The Holy See

WELCOME CERIMONY IN DAMASCUS

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II

Saturday, 5 May 2001

*Mr President,
Members of the Government,
Brother Patriarchs and Bishops,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,*

1. As I arrive in Damascus, this "pearl of the East", I am deeply aware that I am visiting a very ancient land, which has played a vital role in the history of this part of the world. Syria's literary, artistic and social contribution to the flourishing of culture and civilization is renowned. I am most grateful to you, Mr President, and to the Members of the Government, for making my visit to Syria possible, and I thank you for your kind words of welcome. I greet the civil, political and military Authorities graciously present, as well as the distinguished members of the Diplomatic Corps.

I come as a pilgrim of faith, continuing my Jubilee Pilgrimage to some of the places especially connected with God's self-revelation and his saving actions (cf. *Letter Concerning Pilgrimage to the Places Linked to the History of Salvation*, 1). Today he allows me to continue this pilgrimage here, in Syria, in Damascus, and to greet all of you in friendship and brotherhood. I greet the Patriarchs and Bishops who are here, representing the Syrian Christian community. My heartfelt greeting goes to all the followers of Islam who live in this noble land. Peace be with you all! *As-salámù 'aláikum!*

2. My Jubilee Pilgrimage marking the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ actually began last year, with the commemoration of Abraham, to whom God's call came not far from here in the region of Haran. Later, I was able to travel to Mount Sinai, where the Ten Commandments were given to Moses. And then there was my unforgettable visit to the Holy Land,

where Jesus fulfilled his saving mission and founded his Church. Now my mind and heart turn to the figure of Saul of Tarsus, the great Apostle Paul, whose life was changed for ever on the road to Damascus. My ministry as Bishop of Rome is linked in a special way to the witness of Saint Paul, a witness crowned by his martyrdom in Rome.

3. How can I forget the magnificent contribution of Syria and the surrounding region to the history of Christianity? From the very beginning of Christianity, flourishing communities were to be found here. In the Syrian desert Christian monasticism flourished; and the names of Syrians such as Saint Ephraem and Saint John Damascene are etched for ever in Christian memory. Some of my predecessors were born in this area.

I am thinking too of the great cultural influence of Syrian Islam, which under the Umayyad Caliphs reached the farthest shores of the Mediterranean. Today, in a world that is increasingly complex and interdependent, there is a need for a new spirit of dialogue and cooperation between Christians and Muslims. Together we acknowledge the one indivisible God, the Creator of all that exists. Together we must proclaim to the world that the name of the one God is "a name of peace and a summons to peace" (*Novo millennio ineunte*, 55)!

4. As the word "peace" echoes in our hearts, how can we not think of the tensions and conflicts which have long troubled the region of the Middle East? So often hopes for peace have been raised, only to be dashed by new waves of violence. You, Mr President, have wisely confirmed that a just and global peace is in the best interests of Syria. I am confident that under your guidance Syria will spare no effort to work for greater harmony and cooperation among the peoples of the region, in order to bring lasting benefits not only to your own land, but also to other Arab countries and the whole international community. As I have publicly stated on other occasions, it is time to "return to the principles of international legality: the banning of the acquisition of territory by force, the right of peoples to self-determination, respect for the resolutions of the United Nations Organization and the Geneva conventions, to quote only the most important" (*Speech to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See*, 13 January 2001, No. 3).

We all know that real peace can only be achieved if there is a new attitude of understanding and respect between the peoples of the region, between the followers of the three Abrahamic religions. Step by step, with vision and courage, the political and religious leaders of the region must create the conditions for the development that their peoples have a right to, after so much conflict and suffering. Among these conditions, it is important that there be an evolution in the way the peoples of the region see one another, and that at every level of society the principles of peaceful coexistence be taught and promoted. In this sense, my pilgrimage is also an ardent prayer of hope: hope that among the peoples of the region fear will turn to trust; and contempt to mutual esteem; that force will give way to dialogue; and that a genuine desire to serve the common good will prevail.

5. Mr President, the gracious invitation which you and the Government and people of Syria have extended to me, and the warmth of your welcome here today, are signs of our shared belief that peace and cooperation are indeed our common aspiration. I deeply appreciate your hospitality, so characteristic of this ancient and blessed land. May Almighty God grant you happiness and long life! May he bless Syria with prosperity and peace! *As-salámu 'aláikum!*