



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC VISIT OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO AZERBAIJAN AND BULGARIA

MEETING WITH RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND POLITICAL,
CULTURAL AND ARTS REPRESENTATIVES

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER

Baku, Presidential Palace
Wednesday, 22 May 2002

*Mr President of the Republic,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,*

1. I am very pleased to be with you today. I greet each one of you, with special thanks to the President of the Republic who, in your name, has given me such a warm welcome.

One of your great poets wrote: "The word, new and at the same time old . . . The word, which is like the spirit, is the treasurer of the riches of the invisible realm: it knows stories never heard, it reads books never written" (Nizami, *The Seven Effigies*). This image alludes to *something that is dear to the three great religions* present in this country: Jewish, Christian and Muslim. According to the teachings of each of them, the One God, shrouded in unapproachable mystery, has chosen to speak to man, inviting him to submit to his will.

2. Despite the differences between us, together we feel called to *foster ties of mutual esteem and benevolence*. I am aware of all that is being done by religious leaders in Azerbaijan to favour tolerance and mutual understanding. I am looking forward to the meeting tomorrow with the representatives of the three monotheistic religions, so that together we can affirm our conviction that religion must not serve to increase rivalry and hatred, but to promote love and peace.

From this country, which has held and still holds tolerance as a primary value of all wholesome life in society, we wish to proclaim to the world: *enough of wars in the name of God!* No more profanation of his holy name! I have come to Azerbaijan as an *ambassador of peace*. As long as I have breath within me I shall cry out: "Peace, in the name of God!" And when word joins word, a chorus is born, a symphony, which will spread to every soul, quench hatred, disarm hearts.

3. Praise to you, *followers of Islam* in Azerbaijan, for being open to hospitality, a cherished value of your religion and your people, and for having accepted the believers of other religions as brothers and sisters.

Praise to you, *Jewish people*, who, with courage and constancy, have kept your ancient traditions of good neighbourliness, enriching this land with a contribution of great value and depth.

Praise to you, *Christians*, who have given so much, especially through the ancient Church of the Albans, in shaping the identity of this land. Praise especially to you, *Orthodox Church*, witness to God's friendship with man and a hymn extolling his beauty. When the fury of atheism was unleashed in this region, you welcomed the children of the Catholic Church who had lost their places of worship and their pastors, and put them into contact with Christ through the grace of the holy Sacraments.

Praised be God for this testimony of love, borne by the three great religions! May it grow and become ever stronger, extinguishing with the dew of affection and friendship any remaining source of contrast!

4. Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, in addition to the world of religion, you represent the world of *culture, art and politics*. What an extraordinary vocation you have received and what high responsibilities you bear! So many people today feel lost and are seeking an identity.

To you, *representatives of culture and art*, I say: *beauty*, as you know, *is the light of the spirit*. The soul, when it is calm and reconciled, when it lives in harmony with God and the universe, emits a light that is already a kind of beauty. Holiness is nothing other than fullness of beauty, as it reflects, according to its ability, the consummate beauty of the Creator. It is your poet Nizami once more who writes: "The intelligent people are those angels who have human names. Intelligence is something marvellous" (*The Seven Effigies*).

Dear friends, men and women of the world of culture and art, *transmit a taste for beauty to all those you meet!* As the ancients teach us, beauty, truth and goodness are united by an indissoluble bond.

5. In this land, none of those who have devoted themselves to culture and art can feel useless or unrecognized. *This contribution is essential for the future of the Azerbaijani people*. If culture is

cast aside, if art is neglected and despised, the very survival of a civilization is imperiled, for that would hinder the handing on of the values that constitute the deepest identity of a people.

In the recent past, a materialistic and neo-pagan vision has often characterized the study of national cultures. Yours is the task, distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, of *rediscovering the entire heritage of your civilization* as the source of ever relevant values. In this way you will be able to prepare suitable study-materials for young people wishing to know the genuine wealth of history of their country, in order to build their lives as citizens on a solid foundation.

6. I turn to you, *the men and women of politics!* Your specific activity is the service of the common good, the promotion of legality and justice, the guarantee of freedom and prosperity for all. But politics is also *an area fraught with dangers*. The selfish seeking of personal advantage can easily take over, to the detriment of faithful dedication to the common good. The great Nizami warns: "Do not eat in the presence of those who are starving, or, if you do, invite everyone to table" (*The Seven Effigies*).

Politics requires honesty and accountability. The people should be able to feel understood and protected. They should be able to see that their leaders are working to build a better future for them. Let it not happen that when people are faced with situations of increasing social inequality, they begin to feel dangerous nostalgia for the past.

Those who accept responsibility for administering public affairs cannot deceive themselves: *people do not forget!* Just as they remember with gratitude those who have laboured honestly in the service of the common good, so they pass on to their children and grandchildren bitter criticism of those who abused power to enrich themselves.

7. There is one thing in particular that I would like to say to you, men and women of the world of religion, culture, art and politics: *look to your young people and spare no effort on their behalf!* They are tomorrow's potential. They must be assured the chance to study and work, according to their aptitudes and capacity. Above all, care must be taken to *educate them in the important values* which last and give meaning to life and its pursuits.

In this task, you especially who belong to the world of culture, art and politics *should see religion as your ally*. It stands with you to offer young people serious reasons for applying themselves. What ideal in fact is better able to motivate the quest for truth, beauty and goodness than belief in God, who reveals to the mind the limitless expanse of his supreme perfection?

And you, the men and women of religion, you should become ever more involved in proclaiming with sincerity and frankness the values in which you believe, without recourse to dishonest means that impoverish and betray the ideals you affirm. Take a hard look at the substance of these ideals, and avoid methods of persuasion that do not respect the dignity and freedom of the human

person.

8. In one of his prayers to God, Nizami wrote: "If your servant . . . has shown boldness in the formulation of his prayer, his water still belongs for ever to your sea . . . If he spoke a hundred languages, in each tongue he would praise you; if he falls silent like those forsaken, you comprehend the language of him who has no words" (*Leila and Majnun*).

From this cosmopolitan land, may a hundred different languages raise their prayer to the living God, who listens above all to those who are poor and forgotten.

Upon all of you present here, upon your people, upon your future, may the blessings of Almighty God descend, bringing prosperity and peace to all!

The beauty of the hymn "Ave Maria" invites all of us to a better life and work. Again many thanks to all present here.