



# The Holy See

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## **ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE MEMBERS OF THE SECRETARIAT FOR NON-CHRISTIANS**

*Friday, 27 April 1979* Dearly beloved in Christ, IT GIVES ME great pleasure to meet you, the Cardinals and Bishops from various countries who are Members of the Secretariat for Non-Christians, and the Consultors who are experts in the major world religions, as you gather here in Rome for your first Plenary Assembly. I know that you planned to hold this meeting last autumn, but that you were prevented by the dramatic events of those months. The late Paul VI, who founded this Secretariat, and so much of whose love, interest and inspiration was lavished on non-Christians, is no longer visibly among us, and I am that some of you wondered whether the new Pope would devote similar care and attention to the world of the non-Christian religions. In my Encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* I endeavoured to answer any such question. In it I made reference to Paul VI's first Encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, and to the Second Vatican Council, and then I wrote: "The Ecumenical Council gave a fundamental impulse to forming the Church's self-awareness by so adequately and competently presenting to us a view of the terrestrial globe as a map of various religions... The Council document on non-Christian religions, in particular, is filled with deep esteem for the great spiritual values, indeed for the primacy of the spiritual, which in the life of mankind finds expression in religion and then in morality, with direct effects on the whole of culture"<sup>[1]</sup>. The non-Christian world is indeed constantly before the eyes of the Church and of the Pope. We are truly committed to serve it generously. It is also good to recall that it will shortly be the fifteenth anniversary of Paul VI's solemn announcement in Saint Peter's Basilica on Pentecost Sunday 1964 of the setting up of this Secretariat. With God's blessing, the seed sown on that day has now grown to be a clear, definite sign which, through a network of local organizations, is operative practically throughout the world, wherever the Church is. The Secretariat is the symbol and expression of the Church's will to enter into communication with every person, and in particular with the multitudes of those who seek in the non-Christian religious traditions meaning and guidance for their lives. A Christian finds it of the highest interest to observe truly religious people, to read and listen to the testimonies of their wisdom, and to have direct proof of their faith to the point of recalling at times the words of Jesus: "Not even in Israel have I found such faith"<sup>[2]</sup>. At the same time the Christian has the tremendous responsibility and the immense joy of speaking to these people with simplicity and openness (the *parrhesia* of the Apostles!) of "the mighty works of God"<sup>[3]</sup>, of what God himself has done for the happiness and salvation of all at a particular time and in a particular man, whom he raised up to be our brother and Lord, Jesus Christ, "descended from David according to the flesh... Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness"<sup>[4]</sup>. I am happy to see that the Secretariat has adopted as its own this will to enter into communication, which is characteristic of the Church as a whole, and that it has put this communication into practice through what Paul VI called "the dialogue of salvation". At the same time, the Secretariat has sought out methods and forms of this dialogue that are

suitable for the particular "circle" of people for which it is intended. It is right that I should make mention at this point of the wise work of Cardinal Paolo Marella as President of the Secretariat for its first nine years, guiding its earliest steps, as the Pope called him to do, in nomine Domini. I am likewise happy to render a public expression of gratitude to Cardinal Sergio Pignedoli, who, together with Monsignor Rossano and the rest of his devoted staff, gives witness through sustained work and cordial and respectful contacts to the Church's deep interest in our non-Christian brethren. Nearly fifteen years of experience has taught many things, and with clear vision your Plenary Assembly is able to describe the present state of dialogue with non-Christians in the various cultural areas, identifying the difficulties, problems and result attained in each area, and deciding short-term and long-term programmes for the coming years. It is my hope and my desire that commitment to the dialogue of salvation should be strengthened throughout the Church, including the countries where there is a Christian majority. Education for dialogue with followers of other creeds should form part of the training of Christians, especially young Christians. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Paul VI wrote that the encounter with the non-Christian religions "certainly raises complex and delicate questions that must be studied in the light of Christian tradition and the Church's magisterium, in order to offer to the missionaries of today and of tomorrow" – and I would like to add: and to all Christians – "new horizons in their contacts with non-Christian religions"[5]. You are aware that your work is a delicate one. It must be pursued with generosity and joy, and without fear, but also with the luminous conviction that dialogue is, in the words of Paul VI, "a method of accomplishing the apostolic mission; it is an example of the art of spiritual communication"[6]. Respect and esteem "for the other" and for what he has in the depths of his heart is essential to dialogue. To this must be added discernment and a knowledge that is sincere and profound. This last cannot be gained from books alone. It calls for fellow-feeling and identification. Long before these conditions for dialogue were given modern philosophical formulation, Saint Paul wrote of his readiness to become all things to all men "for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings"[7]. In dialogue, as Saint Paul again shows us, speech does not become constructive and fruitful without love. Speech and love are the true vehicle of communication. The only truly perfect speech is that spoken in love. And precisely because speech must be joined to love in order to be effective, it is necessary and urgent, as I wrote in my Encyclical, that mission and dialogue with regard to non-Christians should be carried out by Christians in communion and collaboration with each other[8]. I am therefore happy to see present at this Plenary Assembly of the Secretariat qualified representatives of the Greek Orthodox Church and of the World Council of Churches. You are indeed welcome, and may God bless this collaboration. To all of you, my dear Brothers in the Episcopate and the priesthood, and to all the experts and collaborators of the Secretariat for Non-Christians, I extend my prayerful good wishes, invoking on you the blessing of Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, "the Redeemer of man... the centre of the universe and of history".

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[1] Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Redemptor Hominis*, 11. [2] *Matth.* 8, 10. [3] *Act.* 2, 11. [4] *Rom.* 1, 4. [5] Pauli VI *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 53. [6] Eiusdem *Ecclesiam Suam*: AAS 56 (1964) 644. [7] *1 Cor.* 9, 23. [8] Cfr. Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Redemptor Hominis*, 6, 11. © Copyright 1979 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana