



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO H.E. Mr SINTHU SORASONGKRAM,
NEW AMBASSADOR OF THAILAND TO THE HOLY SEE***

Tuesday, 19 November 1991

Mr Ambassador,

I am pleased to accept the Letters of Credence by which you are appointed Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Kingdom of Thailand. Your presence here today offers me the happy occasion to underline and reaffirm the ties of friendship and goodwill which mark relations between your country and the Holy See. I thank you for the greetings you have expressed on behalf of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, and I gladly reciprocate with my warmest good wishes for the health and happiness of Their Majesties and of the Royal Family, and with my prayers for the well-being of all your fellow citizens.

The Thai people are proud of their long tradition of religious freedom, of which the Monarchs themselves are the guarantors. Although the Catholic community in Thailand is small in relation to the followers of other religious traditions, it enjoys religious freedom, not only to fulfil the duties of their Christian faith but also to share wholeheartedly in the life and concerns of the nation. Catholics have the progress and development of Thai society very much at heart.

Your Excellency has referred to the widespread activity of the Church in the fields of education, health-care and service to those in need. In May of this year I had the joy of meeting the Catholic Bishops of Thailand here in the Vatican on the occasion of their quinquennial *ad Limina* visits. They were pleased to report on their communities' efforts to defend and strengthen family life, to be of assistance to the poor and the sick, in particular the handicapped and those suffering from Hansen's Disease or AIDS, to educate the young as responsible members of society. The Catholic view is that parents are the primary and principal educators of their children and that other bodies, including religious and civil institutions, have the responsibility of assisting them in carrying out this duty and of ensuring the free exercise of their fundamental rights in this area (cf. *Gravissimum*

Educationis, 3). An increasingly effective coordination of these responsibilities, the importance of which has been clearly emphasized in various international Declarations, can come from continued dialogue and cooperation between all involved (cf. John Paul II, *Address to the Bishops of Thailand on their ad Limina visit*, 6 [24 May 1991]). The well-being of a nation greatly depends on the integral education of its citizens, which includes education in ethical and moral values, as well as in respect for human dignity and human rights.

In building up a just and developed society, Thai Catholics seek increasing dialogue and cooperation with the followers of other religions, in order to avoid misunderstandings and above all to identify areas of common commitment. Religious belief is a powerful force for good in the life of individual believers as well as in society as a whole. It is my earnest hope that harmony will continue to characterize relations between all believers in Thailand, so that the common good will be most effectively served.

As a neighbour of Cambodia and the host country of large numbers of refugees from that country, Thailand has been an active partner in the negotiations which have led to the Paris Peace Accords of last month. These provide a basis for the advent of peace in that hardpressed nation. A transitional period has just begun, in which the representatives of the various groups within the country are committed to working through political means, in conjunction with the United Nations, to set up a reconciliation body responsive to the Cambodian people's longdelayed aspirations to independence, peace and development. During this period Cambodia will need political and economic support from the international community, and not least from the ASEAN countries which have been directly involved in the peace process, in order that the terrible heritage of years of suffering and violence may be overcome, and a new culture of freedom and cooperation be established.

Among the principal beneficiaries of peace we must count the hundreds of thousands of refugees now gathered in your country. They have lost not only their homes and possessions but also their loved ones and, as is so often the case, their very dignity. I recall my visit to Phanat Nikhom in May 1984. There I found thousands of men, women and children, completely destitute and in a state of total dependence on others for food, clothing and shelter, and unable to make any decision about their own future. As I said during my stay in your country: "History will record the sense of hospitality, the respect for life and the deeply rooted generosity shown by the people of Thailand" (cf. John Paul II, *Address to the members of the Government of Thailand and to the Diplomatic Corps of Bangkok*, 4 [11 May 1984]). Their Majesties and the Government of Thailand, together with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and numerous governmental and non-governmental organizations, including the COERR (Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees), as well as many individual volunteers, deserve praise and gratitude for their untiring efforts. Now, new resources and an even greater commitment are needed in order to ensure that the tragedy of the refugees comes to an end with their safe and voluntary return home and an opportunity to begin their lives again in conditions of stability and freedom.

The new situation in Cambodia and the reduction of some tensions in the world as a result of recent transformations suggest that regional peace and stability in Southeast Asia is now a more realistic prospect. Not all problems have been solved, but in the new circumstances ASEAN's long-standing objective of creating a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality has become less remote. The Holy See is happy to see such an initiative prosper. Development in fact demands increased understanding and goodwill between countries, and presupposes greater cultural, social, educational and scientific exchanges. All of this is impossible in the presence of conflict and rivalry. Development, by freeing human beings from the negative effects of degrading poverty and lack of education, is an essential factor in promoting a more just society, open to the spiritual and transcendent nature of human life.

As you begin your mission I wish to offer you, Mr Ambassador, my prayerful best wishes for the success of your work and efforts. I am confident that your endeavours will lead to a further strengthening of the good relations already existing between Thailand and the Holy See. Upon Their Majesties the King and Queen, upon the Royal Family and the beloved Thai people I invoke abundant divine gifts.

*AAS 84 (1992), p. 1073-1075.

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