



The Holy See

***SPEECH OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II
IN REPLY TO THE NEW YEAR GREETINGS
OF THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS
ACCREDITED TO THE HOLY SEE****

11 January 1999

*Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

1. I am deeply grateful for the good wishes offered to me on your behalf by your Dean, the Ambassador of the Republic of San Marino, Signor Giovanni Galassi, at the beginning of this final year before the year 2000. They join the many expressions of affection which were sent to me by the Authorities of your countries and by your fellow citizens on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of my Pontificate and for the New Year. To all, I wish to express once again my profound gratitude.

This yearly ceremony is like a family gathering and for this reason it is particularly dear to me. First, because through you almost all the nations of the world are made present here with their achievements and their hopes, but also with their difficulties. Secondly, because such a meeting affords me the pleasant opportunity to express my fervent and prayerful good wishes for you, your families and your fellow citizens. I ask God to grant each one health, prosperity and peace. You know that you can count on me and my collaborators whenever it is a matter of supporting what each country, with its best efforts, undertakes for the spiritual, moral and cultural uplifting of its citizens and for the advancement of all that contributes to good relations between peoples in justice and peace.

2. The family of nations, which has recently taken part in the joy of Christmas and with one accord has welcomed the New Year, has without doubt some grounds for rejoicing.

In Europe, I think especially of Ireland, where the agreement signed on Good Friday last has established the basis for a much awaited peace, which must be founded on a stable social life, on mutual trust and the principle of equality before the law for all.

Another reason for satisfaction for all of us is the peace process in Spain which for the first time is enabling the peoples of the Basque territories to see the spectre of blind violence retreat and to think seriously of a process of normalization.

The transition to one currency and the enlargement towards the East will no doubt give Europe the possibility to become more and more a community with a common destiny, a true "European community" – this is in any case our dearest wish. This obviously presupposes that the member countries are able to reconcile their history with the same common project, so that they may all see themselves as equal partners, concerned only for the common good. The spiritual families which have made such a great contribution to the civilization of this continent – I am thinking especially of Christianity – have a role which seems to me to be more and more decisive. In the face of social problems which keep significant sectors of the population in poverty, and of social inequalities which give rise to chronic instability, and before the younger generations seeking points of reference in an often chaotic world, it is important that the Churches should be able to proclaim the tenderness of God and the call to fraternity which the recent feast of Christmas has caused to shine out once again for all humanity.

I would like to draw to your attention, ladies and gentlemen, further grounds for satisfaction in relation to the American Continent. I am referring to the agreement reached in Brasilia on 26 October last between Ecuador and Peru. Thanks to the persevering efforts of the international community – especially on the part of the guarantor countries – two sister nations had the courage to renounce violence, to accept a compromise and to resolve their differences in a peaceful way. This is an example for so many other nations still bogged down in divisions and disagreements. I am firmly convinced that these two nations, thanks particularly to the Christian faith which unites them, will be able to meet the great challenge of fraternity and peace, and thus turn a painful page of their history, which in fact dates from the very beginning of their existence as independent states. I address an urgent and paternal call to the Catholics of Ecuador and Peru to work with conviction for reconciliation through prayer and action, and thus to contribute to ensuring that the peace brought by the treaties enters everyone's heart.

We should also rejoice at the efforts of the great people of China, in a dialogue undertaken with determination and involving the peoples on both sides of the Strait. The international community – and the Holy See in particular – follows this felicitous development with great interest, in the hope of significant progress which, without any doubt, would be beneficial to the whole world.

3. However, the culture of peace is far from being universal, as the centres of persistent dissension testify.

Not far from us, the Balkan region continues to experience a time of great instability. We cannot yet speak of normalization in Bosnia-Herzegovina where the effects of the war are still being felt in inter-ethnic relations, where half the population remains displaced and where social tensions dangerously persist. Again recently, Kosovo has been the scene of deadly confrontations for both ethnic and political reasons which have prevented a peaceful dialogue between the parties and hindered any economic development. Everything must be done to help the people of Kosovo and the Serbs to meet around a table in order to defuse without delay the armed suspicion which paralyses and kills. Albania and Macedonia would be the first to benefit, since in the Balkans all things are closely related. Many other countries, large and small, in Central and Eastern Europe are also at the mercy of political and social instability; they are struggling along the road to democracy and have not yet succeeded in living in a market economy capable of giving everyone a legitimate share of well-being and growth.

The peace process undertaken in the Middle East continues to make uneven progress and has not yet brought the local peoples the hope and well-being which they have the right to enjoy. It is not possible to keep people indefinitely between war and peace, without the risk of dangerously increasing tensions and violence. It is not reasonable to put off until later the question of the status of the Holy City of Jerusalem, to which the followers of the three monotheist religions turn their gaze. The parties concerned should face these problems with a keen sense of their responsibilities. The recent crisis in Iraq has shown once more that war does not solve problems. It complicates them, and leaves the civilian population to bear the tragic consequences. Only honest dialogue, a real concern for the good of people and respect for the international order can lead to solutions befitting a region where our religious traditions are rooted. If violence is often contagious, peace can be so too, and I am sure that a stable Middle East would contribute effectively to restoring hope to many peoples. I am thinking for example of the suffering peoples of Algeria and of the island of Cyprus, where the situation is still in deadlock.

Some months ago Sri Lanka celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of independence, but unfortunately it is still today divided by ethnic struggles which have delayed the opening of serious negotiations, which alone are the only way to peace.

Africa remains a continent at risk. Of its fifty-three States, seventeen are experiencing military conflicts, either internally or with other States. I am thinking in particular of Sudan where, in addition a cruel war, a terrible human tragedy is unfolding; Eritrea and Ethiopia which are once again in dispute; and Sierra Leone, where the people are still the victims of merciless struggles. On this great continent there are up to eight million refugees and displaced persons practically abandoned to their fate. The countries of the Great Lakes region still bear open wounds resulting from the excesses of ethnocentrism, and they are struggling amid poverty and insecurity; this is also the case in Rwanda and Burundi, where an embargo is further aggravating the situation. The Democratic Republic of Congo still has far to go in working out its transition and experiencing the stability to which its people legitimately aspire, as the massacres which recently occurred at the

very beginning of the year near the town of Uvira testify. Angola remains in search of a peace which cannot be found and in these days is experiencing a development which causes great concern and which has not spared the Catholic Church. The reports regularly coming to me from these tormented regions confirm my conviction that war is always destructive of our humanity, and that peace is undoubtedly the pre-condition for human rights. To all these peoples, who often send me pleas for help, I wish to give the assurance that I am close to them. May they know also that the Holy See is sparing no effort to bring about an end to their sufferings and to find equitable solutions to the existing serious problems, on both the political and humanitarian levels.

The culture of peace is still being thwarted by the legitimation and use of armed force for political purposes. The nuclear tests recently carried out in Asia and the efforts of other countries quietly working on establishing their nuclear power could very well lead to a gradual spread of nuclear arms and consequently to a massive re-armament which would greatly hinder the praiseworthy efforts being made on behalf of peace. This would frustrate all policies aimed at preventing conflicts.

There is also the production of less costly weaponry, like anti-personnel mines, happily outlawed by the Ottawa Convention of December 1997 (which the Holy See hastened to ratify last year), and small-calibre arms, to which, I believe, political leaders should pay greater attention in order to control their deadly effects. Regional conflicts, in which children are frequently recruited for combat, indoctrinated and incited to kill, call for a serious examination of conscience and a concerted response.

Finally, the risks to peace arising from social inequalities and artificial economic growth cannot be underestimated. The financial crisis which has shaken Asia has shown the extent to which economic security is comparable to political and military security, inasmuch as it calls for openness, concerted action and respect for specific ethical principles.

4. In the face of these problems which are familiar to you, Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish to share with you a conviction which I firmly hold: during this final year before the year 2000 an awakening of consciences is essential.

Never before have the members of the international community had at their disposal a body of such precise and complete norms and conventions. What is lacking is the will to respect and apply them. I pointed this out in my Message of 1 January, in speaking of human rights: "When the violation of any fundamental human right is accepted without reaction, all other rights are placed at risk" (No. 12). It seems to me that this truth needs to be seen in relation to all juridic norms. International law cannot be the law of the stronger, nor that of a simple majority of States, nor even that of an international organization. It must be the law which is in conformity with the principles of the natural law and of the moral law, which are always binding upon parties in conflict and in the various questions in dispute.

The Catholic Church, as also communities of believers in general, will always be on the side of those who strive to make the supreme good of law prevail over all other considerations. It is likewise necessary for believers to be able to make themselves heard and to take part in public dialogue in the societies of which they are full members. This leads me to share with you, as the official representatives of your States, my painful concern about the all too numerous violations of religious freedom in today's world.

Just recently, for example, in Asia, episodes of violence have caused tragic suffering to the Catholic community: churches have been destroyed, religious personnel have been mistreated and even murdered. Other regrettable events could be mentioned in several African countries. In other regions, where Islam is the majority religion, one still has to deplore the grave forms of discrimination of which the followers of other religions are victims. There is even one country where Christian worship is totally forbidden and where possession of a Bible is a crime punishable by law. This is all the more distressing because, in many cases, Christians have made a great contribution to the development of these countries, especially in the area of education and health care. In certain countries in Western Europe, one notes an equally disturbing development which, under the influence of a false idea of the principle of separation between the State and the Churches or as a result of a deep-seated agnosticism, tends to confine the Churches within the religious sphere alone and finds it difficult to accept public statements from them. Finally, some countries of Central and Eastern Europe have great difficulty in acknowledging the religious pluralism proper to democratic societies and attempt to limit, by means of a restrictive and petty bureaucratic practice, the freedom of conscience and of religion which their Constitutions solemnly proclaim.

As I recall religious persecutions either long past or more recent, I believe that the time has come, at the end of this century, to ensure that everywhere in the world the right conditions for effective freedom of religion are guaranteed. This requires, on the one hand, that each believer should recognize in others something of the universal love which God has for his creatures. It requires, on the other hand, that the public authorities also - called by vocation to think in universal terms - should come to accept the religious dimension of their fellow citizens along with its necessary community expression. In order to bring this about, we have before us not only the lessons of history, but also certain valuable juridical instruments which only need to be applied. In a certain sense, the future of societies depends on the inescapable relationship between God and the Earthly City, for, as I stated during my visit to the seat of the European Parliament on 11 October 1988: "Wherever man no longer relies on the great reality that transcends him, he risks handing himself over to the uncontrollable power of the arbitrary and to pseudo-absolutes that destroy him" (No. 10).

5. These are some of the thoughts which have come to my mind and heart as I look at the world of this century which is coming to a close. If God in sending his Son among us took such interest in mankind, let us act in such a way as to correspond to such great love! He, the Father of all, has

made with each of us a covenant which nothing can break. By telling us and by showing us that he loves us, he also gives us the hope that we can live in peace; and it is true that only the person who knows love can love in return. It is good that all people should discover this Love which precedes them and awaits them. Such is my dearest wish, for each of you and for all the peoples of the earth!

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