



# The Holy See

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**JOHN PAUL II**

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Wednesday 19 May 1999*

## ***Dialogue with the great world religions***

1. The Acts of the Apostles relate St Paul's discourse to the Athenians, which seems very timely for the areopagus of religious pluralism in our times. To present the God of Jesus Christ, Paul starts with the religious practices of his audience, expressing his appreciation: "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god'. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:22-23).

On my spiritual and pastoral pilgrimage around today's world, I have repeatedly expressed the Church's esteem for "whatever is true and holy" in the religions of the various peoples. I have added, following the Council, that Christian truth serves to "encourage the spiritual and moral good found among them, as well as their social and cultural values" (*Nostra aetate*, n. 2). The universal fatherhood of God, revealed in Jesus Christ, spurs us also to dialogue with religions outside Abraham's stock. This dialogue offers a wealth of themes and challenges, when we think, for example, of Asian cultures deeply imbued with the religious spirit, or of African traditional religions, which are a source of wisdom and life for so many peoples.

2. At the root of the Church's encounter with world religions there is a discernment of their specific features, that is, of the way they approach the mystery of God the Saviour, the ultimate Reality of human life. Every religion, in fact, presents itself as a search for salvation and offers ways to attain it (cf. CCC, n. 843). Dialogue presupposes the certitude that man, created in God's image, is also the privileged 'place' of his saving presence.

Prayer, as an adoring recognition of God, as gratitude for his gifts, as an invocation of his help, is a special form of encounter, especially with those religions which, although not having discovered the mystery of God's fatherhood, nevertheless "have, as it were, their arms stretched out towards heaven" (Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 53). However, dialogue is more difficult with certain contemporary forms of religious belief in which prayer often ends up as an enhancement of one's vital potential in exchange for salvation.

3. Christianity's dialogue with other religions takes various forms and operates at different levels, beginning with the *dialogue of life*, in which "people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations" (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, *Instruction Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations*, 19 May 1991, n. 42).

The *dialogue of action* has particular importance. Among these works we should mention education in peace and respect for the environment, solidarity with the world of suffering, the promotion of social justice and the integral development of peoples. Christian charity, which knows no borders, gladly joins forces with the shared witness given by the members of other religions, rejoicing over the good they accomplish.

Then there is the *theological dialogue*, in which experts try to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages and to appreciate their spiritual values. Meetings between the specialists of different religions, however, cannot be limited to the search for a least common denominator. Their purpose is to lend courageous service to the truth by highlighting areas of convergence as well as fundamental differences, in a sincere effort to overcome prejudice and misunderstanding.

4. The *dialogue of religious experience* is also becoming more and more important. The practice of contemplation answers the great thirst for inner life of those who are spiritually searching, and helps all believers to enter more deeply into the mystery of God. Some practices derived from the great Eastern religions hold a certain attraction for people today. Christians must exercise spiritual discernment in their regard so as not to lose sight of the conception of prayer as it has been explained by the Bible throughout salvation history (cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter Orationis formas, on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation*, 15 October 1989: AAS 82 [1990], II, pp. 362-379).

This necessary discernment does not hinder interreligious dialogue. In fact, for many years meetings with the various monastic communities of other religions, marked by cordial friendship, are opening ways for the mutual sharing of other spiritual riches "with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute" (*Dialogue and Proclamation*, n. 42). Mysticism, however, can never be invoked to support religious relativism in the name of an experience that would lessen the value of God's revelation in history. As disciples of Christ, we

feel the urgent need and the joy of witnessing to the fact that God manifested himself precisely in him, as John's Gospel tells us: "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known" (Jn 1:18).

This witness must be given without any reservation, but also in the awareness that the action of Christ and his Spirit is already mysteriously present in all who live sincerely according to their religious convictions. And with all genuinely religious people the Church continues her pilgrimage through history towards the eternal contemplation of God in the splendour of his glory.

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*To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:*

I am always pleased to greet the *NATO Defense College*, recognizing your Organization's role in the service of peace. Today, unfortunately, the Balkans are without peace, and we are daily witnesses of the great suffering of so many of our brothers and sisters. I urge you to keep clearly before your eyes the need for everyone to work to ensure that dialogue and negotiation will succeed in bringing an end to violence in the area. I extend a special greeting to *Up With People*, and to the members of the Dominican Festival Choir. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from England, Scotland, Denmark, Hong Kong, Japan and the United States of America, I invoke the abundant blessings of Almighty God.

*The Holy Father greeted the many Polish pilgrims in attendance and recalled the battle of Monte Cassino (18 May 1944), in which many Poles lost their lives. Here is a translation of his remarks, which were made in Polish.*

I would cordially like to greet my compatriots attending today's audience who have come to Rome from Poland or from abroad to celebrate the 55th anniversary of the memorable battle of Monte Cassino.

I joyfully welcome the soldiers who took part in that battle, as well as the representatives of the Veterans' Associations. I welcome the Cardinal Primate, the Cardinal Metropolitan of Wrocław, Archbishop Szczepan - Pastor of Poles abroad, Bishops Fraszewski and Głódź, the representatives of the supreme authorities and the Polish Government, with the President of the Senate, the representatives of the Polish Army and the Ambassador of the Polish Republic to the Apostolic See. Most of all, I would like to mention two persons here: President Kaczorowski and Mrs Anders, whose presence is particularly significant today.

The battle of Monte Cassino is inscribed forever in the history of Poland and Europe. It showed what great value there is in love for one's homeland and in the desire to regain lost independence. "At Monte Cassino", as I once said, "the Polish soldier fought, here he fell, here he shed his blood, thinking of his country, of that country which is for us a beloved Mother precisely because love for her demands sacrifice and hardship.... [The Polish soldier was] guided by the

consciousness of a just cause, since a just cause was and shall never cease to be the right of a nation to existence, to independent existence, to social life in the spirit of its own national convictions and religious traditions, and to the sovereignty of its own territory" (Homily, 18 May 1979; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 28 May 1979, pp. 6-7).

Through the sacrifice of their lives and the tribute of blood paid there, our compatriots laid the foundations of a new Europe faithful to its Christian tradition, conscious of its spiritual roots and more united. They also laid the foundations of a new Poland. May this battle always be remembered by today's generation and those to come. It is a great challenge for us on the way to creating a new social life in new circumstances - a life based on the teaching of the Gospel and the 1,000-year-old spiritual heritage of our nation.

In our prayer today let us include the soldiers who fought at Monte Cassino, their families and all the concerns of our homeland.