



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE FOURTH INTERNATIONAL
CONGRESS ON THE PASTORAL CARE OF GYPSIES***

7 June 1995

Faith of Gypsy People must be strengthened

1. Welcome, representatives of the Gypsy people and pastoral workers who generously devote yourselves to serving them! The Pope is pleased to greet you on the occasion of your Fourth International Meeting, appropriately organized by the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People on the theme: "Gypsies Today: From Their History to New Pastoral Demands".

You have come from Eastern and Western Europe and from other parts of the world to reinvigorate your Christian commitment through prayer, reflection on the challenges to the faith today, the exchange of experiences and the search for increased solidarity and openness to your brothers and sisters. At this historical moment you are seeking new forms of participation in social life for the Gypsy people and new expressions of their religious sense.

You have not come empty-handed! On behalf of the Gypsy people you renew your readiness to make a specific contribution to coexistence and the building of a more just and harmonious society, stressing those values which distinguish this people's culture, such as respect for the elderly and for the family, love of freedom, a just pride in their own traditions and generous support of peace.

Likewise, you are giving a new expression to the Gypsy people's willingness to co-operate actively in the solution of the complex problems that still affect their life in various parts of the world: discrimination and racism, the lack of housing and properly equipped caravan sites, non-acceptance, inadequate education and marginalization. At the same time, you recognize that

Gypsies, whether they lead a settled or a nomadic life, cannot but feel committed to co-operation with the peoples among whom they find themselves, appreciating their qualities, accepting their laws and making their own contribution to the necessary mutual awareness and the common quest for fruitful co-existence.

2. In the Church, the People of God on their way to the Father, as the Second Vatican Council recalls (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 9), no ethnic or linguistic group must feel a stranger: all must be accepted and fully appreciated by her. When my venerable predecessor, Paul VI, met the first Gypsy pilgrimage 30 years ago, he had this to say: "You are in the heart of the Church" (*Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, III, [1965], p. 492).

Today I would like to make those words my own, hoping that the Church, whose activity is also being re-organized in Eastern Europe, may continue to be actively involved with the Gypsies through generous pastoral workers and projects that witness in daily life to the love of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, for the lowly and the weak.

3. The evangelization of the Gypsy people must not overlook their history, often marked by tragic suffering and serious hostility. In my recent *Message on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the End of the Second World War in Europe* I asked that the memory of what happened during those terrible years be kept alive: "The memories of the War must not grow dim; rather, they ought to become a stern lesson for our generation and for generations yet to come" (John Paul II, *Message on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the End of the Second World War in Europe*, 2 [8 May 1995]). In the Nazi extermination camps as I recalled, "millions of Jews and hundreds of thousands of Gypsies and other human beings met their death in atrocious conditions; their only fault was that they belonged to another people" (*ibid.*). To forget what happened in the past can open the way to new forms of rejection and aggression.

Indifference could lead to killing today too. In this context, then, how can we fail to condemn the recent acts of violence of which Gypsies and especially the defenceless, such as children, were the object? Episodes of the kind cannot pass unnoticed.

Public administrators, ecclesial communities, volunteer workers, those who work in the media, must unanimously commit themselves to preventing these shameful episodes and to strengthening a social climate of tolerance and true solidarity .

4. Sensitive and attentive to the Gypsy world, the Church recalls that the vocation to holiness is universal. The witness of Ceferino Jimenez Malla, a Gypsy and a Christian, who was heroic to the point of giving his life, is a shining example. In our time, the Gypsy people are going through a period of radical readaptation of their traditions and thus find themselves face to face with the danger of the disintegration of their community's very life. It is important that the Christian faith be firmly and vigorously represented. A new evangelization is necessary, addressed to each member

as well as to a beloved portion of the pilgrim People of God, to help them overcome the double temptation of withdrawing into themselves, seeking a way out with the sects, or losing their own religious heritage in a materialism that stifles every appeal to the divine.

The many forms of pastoral activity carried out by groups of Gypsies who have an apostolic commitment by the Schools of Faith and the Schools of the Word, by the national and diocesan .services, by the chaplaincies for Gypsies and finally, by the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, shows how deeply the Church loves the Gypsy people. I would like to express to them all my sincere gratitude for this indispensable mission, encouraging each one to continue on this path with ever greater enthusiasm.

Dear Gypsies and pastoral workers, always keep your gaze fixed on Jesus the Redeemer, and Mary, his and our Mother! Even the Lord in his earthly life was obliged to move from one place to another. May he, who said of himself that he had nowhere to lay his head (cf. Lk 9:58), guide you and bring to fulfillment every apostolic task.

May Mary, invoked by you as «AMARI DEVELESKERIDAJ» - «Our Mother of God» - always be the Star on your way. May my Blessing, which I affectionately impart to all of you present here, to your nomadic communities and to all the members of your peoples, go with you.

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