



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO H.E. Mr Goytom Welde-Mariam,
AMBASSADOR OF ERITREA TO THE HOLY SEE***

Saturday, 11 January 1997

Mr Ambassador,

I am pleased to welcome you to the Vatican as you begin your mission as the first Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the State of Eritrea to the Holy See, and I gladly accept the Letters of Credence by which you are so appointed. The establishment of diplomatic relations between us and the exchange of representatives is the latest development in the continuing relationship between the people of Eritrea and the Catholic Church; I am confident that this new level of contact will lead to ever greater understanding, esteem and co-operation. I appreciate the good wishes which you have conveyed from President Isaias Afwerki, and I would ask you in turn to convey my own greetings and the assurance of my prayers for the peace and well-being of your country and its people.

Recent political and social changes in the world give evidence of an ever growing conviction that certain ideals should shape human relations at every level. Among these are the desire for true peace, the determination to work for freedom and justice, and the commitment to stand in solidarity with the poor. Peoples and nations hope to see hostility and conflict replaced by dialogue and co-operation. There is general acceptance, at least on the level of principle, of the need for the more affluent and developed regions of the world to help peoples striving for a more just share of the world's resources, and to encourage them in their efforts to foster their own integral development.

At the same time, however, these positive developments are threatened by new and tragic confrontations which are appearing in different areas, and by the persistence of intolerance based on racial, ethnic or religious prejudice. It is precisely in the light of such distressing situations that all people of goodwill, and the leaders of nations in particular, must renew their efforts to bring about the peaceful resolution of such tensions. This involves, above all else, an ever stronger commitment to defend the inalienable dignity and protect the basic human rights of every individual.

Chief among these rights, and one which the contemporary world must strive to guarantee, is freedom of conscience. As I had occasion to note in my *Message for the 1991 World Day of Peace*, conscience bears witness to “the transcendence of the person, also in regard to society at large, and as such is inviolable.... To deny an individual complete freedom of conscience — and in particular the freedom to seek the truth — or to attempt to impose a particular way of seeing the truth, constitutes a violation of that individual’s most personal rights. This also aggravates animosities and tensions, which can easily lead to strained and hostile relations within society or even to open conflict. In the end, it is on the level of conscience that the difficult task of ensuring a firm and lasting peace is most effectively confronted” (*loc. cit.*, n. 1).

It is precisely in this regard that the Church insists on the right of individuals and organized religious communities to profess and practise their faith freely. Respect for religious freedom serves as an indication and a guarantee of authentic social progress. It is my hope therefore that freedom of religion, as a necessary expression of freedom of conscience, will enjoy constitutional protection and be enshrined in the democratic institutions which Eritrea is building for itself as it begins this new era in its history.

I appreciate your recognition of the contribution made by the Catholic Church, both in the practical aid given to your people as they suffered the devastations of famine and war, and in moral support of your nation as it faces the task of reconstruction. Eritrean Catholics are committed to working hand in hand with their fellow citizens as active participants in the political, social and cultural advancement of their country in its new-found independence. To this end, many missionaries, members of religious communities as well as lay men and women, have come to your land offering their services in the fields of education and health care. The work which they do is not for the benefit of Catholics alone but for the good of all the people. It is my hope that the Government of Eritrea and the public authorities will welcome this service on the part of the Church and will assist the missionaries and others as they seek to continue these efforts aimed at the building up of Eritrean society.

Mr Ambassador, as you begin your diplomatic mission to the Holy See, please know of the readiness of the various offices and agencies of the Roman Curia to assist you in the fulfilment of your responsibilities. Assuring you of my good wishes for the success of your work, I cordially invoke upon you and upon the leaders and people of the State of Eritrea the abundant blessings of almighty God.

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