



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II TO THE NEW AMBASSADOR OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL TO THE HOLY SEE*

Monday, 18 September 2000

Mr Ambassador, I am very pleased to welcome you to the Vatican and to accept the Letters accrediting you as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the State of Israel to the Holy See. My thoughts at this moment are of a deep and abiding gratitude: gratitude to God who in this year of the Great Jubilee led my pilgrim steps to the Holy Land and its peoples; gratitude to the civil and religious authorities for the welcome and attention they gave me during the intense days of my visit in March. The Holy Land will always occupy a central place in the minds and hearts of Jews, Christians and Muslims. The Year 2000, with its commemoration of the birth of Jesus, could not but draw the loving attention of millions of Christian people in every corner of the earth to the places where Jesus lived, died and rose again. The vivid experience of my pilgrimage to the Holy Places lives on in my spirit as an extraordinary grace of God and a kind of testimony that I would like to leave, especially to the younger generation, as an invitation to build a new era of relations between Christians and Jews. I hope above all that the religious nature of that visit will not be forgotten. My overriding purpose was to go from one Holy Place to another in a spirit of prayer, knowing that this "helps us not only to live our life as a journey, but also gives us a vivid sense of a God who has gone before us and leads us on, who himself set out on man's path, a God who does not look down on us from on high, but who became our travelling companion" (*Letter concerning Pilgrimage to the Places linked to the History of Salvation*, 29 June 1999, No. 10). The Church is fully aware that "she draws sustenance from the root of that good olive tree on to which have been grafted the wild olive branches of the Gentiles" (*Nostra Aetate*, 4). The spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is so great and so vital to the religious and moral health of the human family that every effort must be made to advance and expand our dialogue, especially on biblical, theological and ethical matters. And a fresh mutual and sincere attempt must be made at every level to help Christians and Jews to know, respect and esteem more fully each other's beliefs and traditions. This is the surest way to overcome the prejudices of the past and to raise a barrier against the forms of anti-Semitism, racism and xenophobia which are re-appearing in some places today. Today as always, it is not genuine religious faith and practice which give rise to the tragedy of discrimination and persecution, but loss of faith and the rise of a selfish and materialistic outlook bereft of true values, a culture of emptiness. Therefore your words, Mr Ambassador, about the need for moral leadership in responding to some of the more daunting challenges facing mankind in the new millennium find a ready echo in the convictions of the Holy See. A continuing source of sadness is the elusive character of a definitive peace in

the Middle East. We all rejoice every time a step forward is announced in the complex negotiations which have become an essential feature of relations between Israel and its neighbours, especially the Palestinian Authority. The continuation of dialogue and negotiation is itself a significant development. And it is important to acknowledge just how substantial is the progress made so far, lest those involved be discouraged at the size of the task still ahead. Sometimes the obstacles to peace appear so great and so many that to face them seems humanly impossible. But what seemed unthinkable even a few short years ago is now a reality or at least a matter of open discussion, and this must convince all concerned that a solution is possible. It must encourage everyone to press forward with hope and perseverance. Concerning the delicate question of Jerusalem, what is important is that the way forward be the path of dialogue and agreement, not force and imposition. And what is of special concern to the Holy See is that the unique religious character of the Holy City be preserved by a special, internationally guaranteed statute. The history and present reality of interreligious relations in the Holy Land is such that no just and lasting peace is foreseeable without some form of support from the international community. The purpose of this international support would be the conservation of the cultural and religious patrimony of the Holy City, a patrimony which belongs to Jews, Christians and Muslims all over the world and to the entire international community. In fact, the Holy Places are not mere memorials of the past, but are and must continue to be the nerve-centre of vibrant, living and developing communities of believers, free in the exercise of their rights and duties, and living in harmony with one another. What is at stake is not just the preservation of and free access to the holy places of the three religions, but also the free exercise of the religious and civil rights pertaining to the members, places and activities of the various communities. The end result must be – as I said during my visit – a Jerusalem and a Holy Land in which the various religious communities succeed in living and working together in friendship and harmony, a Jerusalem that will truly be a City of Peace for all peoples. Then we shall all repeat the words of the Prophet: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, . . . that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths" (*Is* 2:3). Mr Ambassador, my prayers are with you as you begin your mission as Israel's diplomatic representative to the Holy See, and I am certain that you will do everything in your power to increase understanding and friendship between us, in the spirit of the Fundamental Agreement and the other documents which are intended to guarantee its application. Likewise, the various offices of the Roman Curia will willingly cooperate with you as you discharge your high duties. May goodness and kindness follow you all the days of your life (cf. *Ps*

22:6).

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