



The Holy See

WELCOME CERIMONY AT THE PRESIDENTIAL PALACE OF ATHENS

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER*

Friday, 4 May 2001

Mr President,

1. I thank you for your kind words of welcome. I am deeply grateful for this opportunity to greet you, and through you to offer a cordial greeting to the members of the Government and of the Diplomatic Missions. I have happy memories, Mr President, of your visit to the Vatican last January, and I thank you for your invitation to come to Greece. Through you I likewise extend heartfelt greetings to all the people of your country. My wish is in some way to recognize the great debt which we all owe to Greece; in fact no one can be unaware of the enduring influence that her unique history and culture have had on European civilization and indeed on that of the entire world.

Last year, Christians everywhere celebrated the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ. I had a deep desire to mark that event by becoming a pilgrim to some of the places connected with the history of salvation. This desire became a reality in my pilgrimage to Sinai and to the Holy Land. Now it is to Greece that I come as a pilgrim, in the footsteps of Saint Paul, whose mighty figure towers over the two millennia of Christian history and whose memory is etched for ever in the soil of Greece. It was here in Athens that Paul founded one of the first communities of his voyages in the West and of his mission on the European continent. Here he worked tirelessly to make Christ known; here he suffered for the proclamation of the Gospel. And how could we not recall that it was here in the city of Athens that there began the dialogue between the Christian message and Hellenistic culture, a dialogue which would decisively shape European civilization?

2. Long before the Christian era, the influence of Greece was felt far and wide. In Biblical

literature, the later books of the Old Testament, some of which were written in the Greek language, were profoundly marked by Hellenistic culture. The Greek translation of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint, had a great influence in Antiquity. The world that Jesus himself entered and knew was already deeply imbued with Greek culture. The New Testament was written in Greek, with the result that it spread rapidly. But it was much more than a simple matter of language, for the early Christians also drew upon Greek culture in order to transmit the Gospel message.

Certainly the first encounters of Christianity and high Greek culture were difficult. One indication of this is the reception accorded to Paul when he preached at the Areopagus (cf. *Acts* 17:16-34). While corresponding to the profound expectation of the Athenian people in search of the true God, Paul did not find it easy to preach Christ who had died and was risen, and to show that in Christ is to be found the full meaning of life and the goal of all religious experience. It would fall to the first Apologists, like the martyr Saint Justin, to show that a fruitful encounter between reason and faith was possible.

3. Once the initial distrust was overcome, Christian writers began to see in Greek culture an ally rather than an enemy, and there emerged great centres of Christian Hellenism throughout the Mediterranean world.

Reading the learned writings of Augustine of Hippo and Dionysius the Areopagite, we see that Christian theology and mysticism drew elements from the dialogue with Platonic philosophy. Writers like Gregory of Nazianzus, steeped in Greek rhetoric, were able to create a Christian literature worthy of its classical antecedents. Gradually, then, the Hellenistic world became Christian, and Christianity became to a certain extent Greek. Then there came to birth the Byzantine culture of the East and the Medieval culture of the West, both deeply imbued with Christian faith and Greek culture. And how could we not mention the approach of Saint Thomas who, in rereading the works of Aristotle, proposed a masterly theological and philosophical synthesis?

Raphael's painting "The School of Athens" in the Vatican Palace makes clear the contribution of the school of Athens to the art and culture of the Renaissance, a period which led to a great exchange between classical Athens and the culture of Christian Rome.

4. Hellenistic culture is characterized by its attention to the education of the young. Plato insisted on the need to train the mind of the young to seek the good and the honourable, as well as to respect the principles of divine law. How many Greek philosophers and writers, beginning with Socrates, Aeschylus and Sophocles, invited their contemporaries to live "in accordance with the virtues"! Saints Basil and John Chrysostom did not neglect to praise the value of the Greek educational tradition, for its concern to develop the moral sense of young people and to help them to choose freely what is good.

The fundamental elements of this long tradition remain valid for the people, including the young people, of our own time. Among the most sure elements are the moral aspects contained in the Hippocratic Oath, which emphasizes the principle of unconditional respect for human life in the maternal womb.

Greece is also the country in which two great sporting traditions, the Olympic Games and the Marathon, were born. Through these competitions a significant conception of the human person is expressed, in the harmony of the spiritual and bodily dimensions, through disciplined effort, marked by moral and civic values. We can only rejoice that to see that these competitions perdure and continue to create close bonds among the peoples of the world.

5. The inculturation of the Gospel in the Greek world remains an example for all inculturation. In its relations with Greek culture, the proclamation of the Gospel had to make a careful discernment, in order to receive and evaluate all its positive elements, and at the same time to reject aspects which are incompatible with the Christian message. In this we have a permanent challenge for the proclamation of the Gospel, in its encounter with the various cultures and with the process of globalization. All of this calls us to engage in respectful and honest dialogue, and requires a new solidarity which evangelical love is capable of inspiring, bringing to fulfilment the Greek ideal of the *cosmopolis* in a world which is truly united and imbued with justice and fraternity.

We are in a decisive period of European history, and I hope most fervently that the Europe now emerging will rediscover this long tradition of encounter between Greek culture and Christianity in fresh and imaginative ways, not as the vestige of a vanished world but as the true basis for the genuinely human progress that our world seeks.

Carved on the façade of the Temple in Delphi were the words "Know yourself"; I appeal therefore to Europe to know herself ever more deeply. Such self-knowledge will come only in so far as Europe explores afresh the roots of her identity, roots which reach deep into the classical Hellenistic patrimony and into the Christian heritage which brought to birth a humanism based upon the vision of every human person as created in the image and likeness of God.

6. Geography and history have set your country, Mr President, between East and West, and this means that Greece's natural vocation is to build bridges and a culture of dialogue. Today this is essential for Europe's future. Many walls have been broken down in recent times, but others remain. The task of integrating the Eastern and Western parts of Europe remains complex; and there is still much to be done to bring harmony between the Christians of East and West, so that the Church can breathe with both her lungs. All believers should see themselves as having a duty to work for this objective. The Catholic Church in Greece desires to share loyally in this noble cause, which also has positive effects in the social sphere. From this point of view, a significant contribution is made by the schools in which the younger generation is trained. Schools are *par excellence* places where the integration of young people of different backgrounds takes place. The

Catholic Church, in harmony with the other Churches and religious confessions, desires to cooperate with all citizens for the education of the young. She wishes to continue her long educational experience in your country, especially through the activities of the Marist Brothers and the Brothers of the Christian Schools, the Ursuline Sisters and the Sisters of Saint Joseph. These different religious families have shown that, with tact and respect for the cultural traditions of the young people entrusted to them, they are able to educate men and women to be true Greeks among the Greeks.

At the end of our meeting, I once more thank you most warmly, Mr President, for your welcome, and at the same time I express my gratitude to all who have made possible my pilgrimage in the footsteps of Saint Paul. I ask God to bestow upon the people of your country his abundant blessings, so that in the third millennium Greece may continue to offer new and wonderful gifts to the continent of Europe and to the family of nations!

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