



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT IN KAZAKHSTAN

ARRIVAL SPEECH OF THE HOLY FATHER

Astana International Airport

Saturday, 22 September 2001

Mr President,

Members of the Diplomatic Corps,

Distinguished Authorities,

Representatives of the Various Religious Faiths,

Beloved Brothers and Sisters!

1. I give thanks to God who has guided my steps to the city of Astana, capital of this noble and vast Country, located in the heart of Eurasia. It is with affection that I kiss this Land, which has given rise to a multi-ethnic state, heir to numerous centuries-old spiritual and cultural traditions, and now on the move to new social and economic objectives. I have long desired this meeting and great is my joy at being able to hold all the citizens of Kazakhstan in an admiring and affectionate embrace.

From the moment I met you in the Vatican, Mr President of the Republic, and you invited me to visit this Land, I began to prepare myself in prayer for today's meeting. I now ask the Lord to make this day blessed for all the beloved peoples of Kazakhstan.

2. Thank you, Mr President, for the invitation made to me at that time, and thank you for your commitment in making the arrangements for this visit, in all its complicated organizational aspects. I thank you also for the kind words of welcome which you addressed to me in the name of the Government and the Kazakh people. I cordially greet the civil and military authorities, as well as the members of the Diplomatic Corps. Through them I send my affectionate regards to the peoples they worthily represent.

I greet the Islamic Leaders and faithful, who boast a long religious tradition in this region. My good wishes go also to all people of good will who are engaged in promoting the moral and spiritual values that are capable of guaranteeing a

future of peace for everyone.

A special greeting goes to the Bishops and the faithful of the Orthodox Church and to the Christians of other Churches and Ecclesial Communities. I am pleased to repeat the invitation that we all work together so that the third millennium will witness the disciples of Christ proclaiming the Gospel — the message of hope for all humanity — with one voice and one heart.

Above all, with fraternal affection I embrace you, dear Bishops, priests, men and women Religious, missionaries, catechists and lay faithful, who make up the Catholic community living in this vast Kazakh land. I am aware of your dedication and enthusiasm; I am aware also of your fidelity to the Apostolic See and I pray that God will sustain you in every good work.

3. This visit of mine is taking place ten years after the proclamation of the independence of Kazakhstan, achieved following a long period of darkness and suffering. The date of 16 December 1991 is indelibly inscribed in the annals of your history. This regained freedom has rekindled in you a surer confidence in the future, and I am convinced that your past experience will provide a wealth of lessons from which to draw in order to move courageously towards new horizons of peace and progress. Kazakhstan wishes to grow in brotherhood, dialogue and understanding; these are the indispensable requisites for building bridges of solidarity and cooperation with other peoples, nations and cultures.

It is in this light that Kazakhstan made the bold move in 1991 to close the nuclear facility of Semipalatinsk, subsequently announcing its unilateral rejection of nuclear arms and its adherence to the Pact totally banning atomic experimentation. This decision is based on the conviction that controversies must be resolved not by recourse to arms but by the peaceful means of negotiation and dialogue. I can only encourage this type of commitment, which well corresponds to the fundamental demands of solidarity and peace to which human beings aspire ever more knowingly.

4. Today in your Country, which is one of the world's largest in area, citizens belonging to over a hundred nationalities and ethnic groups live side by side, each guaranteed the same rights and freedoms by your Constitution. This spirit of openness and cooperation is part of your tradition, for Kazakhstan has always been a land where different traditions and cultures come together and coexist. This has given rise to significant cultural achievements, seen in original artistic styles as well as in a flourishing literary tradition.

I think with admiration of cities such as Balasagun, Merke, Kulan, Taraz, Otrar, Turkestan and others which were once important cultural and trade centers. In these cities have lived distinguished persons of science, art and history, from Abu Nasr al-Farabi, who helped Europe to rediscover Aristotle, to the well-known intellectual and poet Abai Kunanbai. The latter was taught by Orthodox monks, and he also knew the Western world and appreciated its intellectual heritage. He often repeated: "The West has become my East", revealing how contact with other cultural movements had reawakened in him the love for his own culture.

5. Beloved peoples of Kazakhstan! Having learned from the experiences of your ancient and recent past, and especially from the sad events of the twentieth century, you must see to it that your commitment to your country is always based on the safeguarding of freedom, the inalienable right and profound aspiration of every person. In particular, recognize the

right to religious freedom, which enables people to express their most deeply held beliefs. When in a society citizens accept one another in their respective religious beliefs, it is easier to foster among them the effective recognition of other human rights and an understanding of the values on which a peaceful and productive coexistence is based. In fact, they feel a common bond in the awareness that they are brothers and sisters, because they are children of the one God, who created the universe.

I pray that God Almighty will bless and strengthen your steps along this path. May he help you to grow in freedom, unity and peace. These are the conditions necessary for establishing a climate conducive to an integral human development that is attentive to the needs of everyone, especially of the poor and suffering.

6. Dear Kazakh people, a challenging mission awaits you: building a Country under the banner of true progress, in solidarity and peace. Kazakhstan, Land of martyrs and of believers, Land of deportees and of heroes, Land of intellectuals and of artists, do not be afraid! If the scars of the wounds inflicted on your body remain many and deep, if difficulties and obstacles hinder your work of material and spiritual rebuilding, you will find balm and encouragement in the words of the great Abai Kunanbai: "Love and justice are humanity's principles, these are the crowning of the work of the Most High" (*Sayings*, chapter 45).

Love and justice! May the Most High, who guides men's steps, make these stars shine brightly upon your path, vast Land of Kazakhstan!

Such are the sentiments that surge within my heart as I begin my visit to Astana. Looking at the colours of your flag, dear Kazakh people, I ask the Most High to grant you the gifts that they represent: stability and openness, symbolized by the blue; prosperity and peace, symbolized by the gold.

God bless you, Kazakhstan, and all your peoples. May he grant you a future of unity and peace.