



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT IN KAZAKHSTAN MEETING WITH REPRESENTATIVES OF THE WORLD OF CULTURE

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II

*Auditorium of the Congress Hall
Astana, 24 September 2001*

*Mr President,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

1. I am very pleased to meet you this evening. I offer you respectful and cordial greetings, and I give heartfelt thanks for the gracious words of welcome spoken in the name of all present. I readily accepted the invitation to spend this time with you in order to demonstrate once more the interest and the confidence with which the Catholic Church and the Pope look to the men and women of culture. I am indeed well aware of the *indispensable contribution* which you can make to the style and the substance of human life through your committed research and your ability to express the true and the good.

Men and women of culture, art and science! Kazakhstan is heir to a history in which complex and often sorrowful events have given rise to diverse traditions, so that today it stands as *a unique example* of a multiethnic, multicultural and multireligious society. Be proud of your Nation and conscious of the great responsibility which is yours in preparing for its future. My thoughts turn especially to the *young people* who rightfully expect from you a testimony of knowledge and wisdom, passed on to them through your teaching and above all by the witness of your life.

2. Kazakhstan is a vast country which down the centuries has given rise to *a vibrant local culture, rich in creative developments*, thanks also to the influence of Russian intellectuals confined here by the totalitarian regime.

How many people have passed through this country! I would like to mention, in particular, the Venetian traveller and merchant Marco Polo, who in medieval times admiringly described the moral qualities and the rich traditions of the men and women of the steppe. The endless stretches of your plains, the sense of human frailty in the face of the untrammelled power of nature, the awareness of the mystery which lies hidden beyond the phenomena of the senses, everything inspires in your people *an openness to fundamental human questions* and the search for answers which are significant for universal culture.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, you are called to acquaint the world with *Kazakhstan's rich cultural tradition*: this is a demanding undertaking, and yet an attractive one, for it commits you to discovering the deepest features of that tradition, in order to combine them in a harmonious synthesis.

One of your country's great thinkers, the teacher Abai Kunanbai, put it this way: "A man cannot be a man unless he perceives the evident and the hidden mysteries of the universe, unless he seeks an explanation for everything. Anyone who fails to do this is no different from the animals. God distinguished man from the animals by giving him a soul... It is absolutely necessary that we constantly extend our interests, increasing the knowledge which nourishes our souls. It is important to realize that the goods of the soul are incomparably superior to the benefits of the body, and that carnal needs should be subordinated to the imperatives of the soul" (*Sayings of Abai*, Chapter 7).

3. How can we not appreciate the profound wisdom of these words, which seem like a commentary on the disturbing question asked by Jesus in the Gospel: "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?" (*Mk* 8:36). The human heart asks questions which will not go away; when these questions are ignored, *man becomes not freer but weaker*, often ending up at the mercy of his own instincts, to say nothing of the aggression of others.

"If the heart no longer aspires to anything", Abai Kunanbai says, "who can unveil its thought? / ... If reason abandons itself to desire, / it loses all its depth. / ... Can a people worthy of this name do without reason?" (*Poems*, 12).

Questions like this *are religious* by their very nature, in the sense that they appeal to those supreme values which have God as their ultimate foundation. Religion, for its part, cannot fail to grapple with these existential questions; otherwise it loses contact with life.

4. Christians know that in Jesus of Nazareth, called the Christ, a complete answer has been given to the questions dwelling deep in the human heart. Jesus' words, his actions and, in the end, his Paschal Mystery, have revealed him to be the Redeemer of man and the Saviour of the world. Of this "good news", which for two thousand years has been on the lips of countless men and women in every part of the earth, *the Pope of Rome comes before you today as a humble and convinced*

witness, in full respect for the search which other people of good will are engaged in along different paths. Whoever has encountered the truth in all the splendour of its beauty must necessarily feel drawn to share it with others. Rather than an obligation based on a law, the believer feels the need to share with others the supreme Value of his own life.

Consequently – even in the context of a soundly secular State, which is obliged in any event to guarantee to each citizen, without distinction of sex, race and nationality, the fundamental right to freedom of conscience – there is a need to acknowledge and defend *the right of believers to bear public witness to their faith*. Authentic religious practice cannot be reduced to the private sphere or narrowly restricted to the edges of society. The beauty of the new houses of worship which are beginning to rise up almost everywhere in the new Kazakhstan is a precious sign of spiritual rebirth and a sign of promise for the future.

5. For their part, *centres of education and culture* can only gain from an openness to greater knowledge of the more vital and significant religious achievements in your nation's history. In my Message for the World Day of Peace on 1 January 2001, I spoke of the danger of a "slavish conformity" to Western culture, observing that "Western cultural models are enticing and alluring because of their remarkable scientific and technical cast, but regrettably there is growing evidence of their deepening human, spiritual and moral impoverishment. The culture which produces such models is marked by the fatal attempt to secure the good of humanity by eliminating God, the Supreme Good" (No. 9).

Again, let us listen to the great teacher Abai Kunanbai: "All people, whatever their religion, attribute to God love and justice. Love and justice are the origin of humanity. Those in whom sentiments of love and justice prevail are the truly wise" (*Sayings of Abai*, Chapter 45).

In this context, and precisely here in this Land of encounter and dialogue, and before this distinguished audience, I wish to reaffirm the Catholic Church's respect for Islam, for authentic Islam: the Islam that prays, that is concerned for those in need. Recalling the errors of the past, including the most recent past, all believers ought to unite their efforts to ensure that God is never made the hostage of human ambitions. Hatred, fanaticism and terrorism profane the name of God and disfigure the true image of man.

6. I am happy to see and to honour in you here present, distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, so many "seekers after truth", committed to handing on to the younger generation of this great country the values on which they can base their personal and social life. Unless it is soundly rooted in these values, life is like a tree with luxuriant branches but which the winds of adversity can easily batter and uproot.

I thank you, Mr President, and I thank you, Ladies and Gentlemen, representatives of the world of culture in Kazakhstan. At the end of this meeting, which in a certain sense concludes my visit to

your beautiful country, I wish to assure you of the real cooperation and the sincere prayers of the Pope and of the whole Catholic Church to the Almighty and Most High God that Kazakhstan, faithful to its native Eurasian vocation, *will continue to be a land of encounter and acceptance*, in which men and women of the two great continents will be able to live long days of prosperity and peace.