



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO H.E. MR AHARON LOPEZ,
AMBASSADOR OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL
TO THE HOLY SEE***

10 April 1997

Mr Ambassador,

I am 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. On this auspicious occasion I express my gratitude for the greetings which you have brought from President Ezer Weizman and which I cordially reciprocate. I ask you to convey my good wishes and assure him of my prayers for your country and for all the peoples of the Holy Land.

The diplomatic relations established in 1994 between the Holy See and the State of Israel represent an important step in the continuing process of normalization which we have undertaken. These diplomatic ties cannot however be considered an end in themselves, for their purpose is to help achieve the even greater goals spelled out in the *Fundamental Agreement* signed at the end of 1993. The spirit of that *Agreement*, the good faith and the commitment expressed therein, must be constantly at the forefront of all our efforts as we continue to travel together the road of mutual understanding, friendship and cooperation.

Much has already been done to implement the different Articles of the *Fundamental Agreement*, and I acknowledge with pleasure Your Excellency's reference to the "Legal Agreement" which will soon be brought before the Israeli Government for approval and implementation. We must be grateful to all those on both sides whose untiring efforts have enabled us to reach this point. It is my hope that the "Legal Agreement" will be signed and ratified as soon as possible, since it represents a most significant juridical instrument for the life of the Catholic Church in Israel and for the Catholic faithful who are Israeli citizens. Moreover, we are speaking here of an important step

in helping all the people of Israel, regardless of religious faith or cultural differences, to work together as equal partners in the building up of Israeli society. This involves nothing less than firmly placing our hope in the Creator and in the ability he has given man to respond to what is asked of him: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic 6:8).

This brings us to what you have rightly identified as one of the challenges - indeed the great challenge - facing the peoples of the Middle East: the quest for peace. As you have pointed out, progress has been made, and the Holy See, ever an active supporter of the peace process, is pleased whenever positive results are forthcoming. However, difficulties and crises are not lacking, which even now threaten to shatter the fragile optimism that has been growing. In this regard, I renew the expression of the grave concern with which the Holy See and the entire international community has noted the recent heightening of tensions in an already delicate and volatile situation. There are serious problems which daily touch upon the physical safety of individuals, both Israelis and Palestinians, and which threaten the possibility of release from the seemingly endless spiral of action, reaction and counter-reaction. This is in fact a vicious circle from which there can be no escape unless all parties act with genuine goodwill and solidarity. As I remarked earlier this year: "All people together, Jews, Christians and Muslims, Israelis and Arabs, believers and non-believers, must create and reinforce peace"; this peace "rests on sincere dialogue between equal partners, with respect for each other's identity and history, . . . on the right of peoples to the free determination of their own destiny, upon their independence and security" (*Address to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See*, 13 January 1997, No. 3).

In this context I cannot fail to mention, if only briefly, the unique character of Jerusalem. The Holy City, the City of Peace, remains part of the common patrimony of the whole of humanity, and must be preserved and safeguarded for all generations. Different peoples identify with the words of the Psalm: "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!" (Psalm 122:6). The Catholic Church will continue to do her part in fostering the vocation and mission which the God of Revelation himself has entrusted to the Holy City in its complex and varied history. And when we think about the peace which God desires, we cannot forget that it involves justice, respect for every person's dignity and a willingness to understand others.

The Holy See and the Catholic Church as a whole are deeply committed to cooperating with the State of Israel "in combatting all forms of anti-Semitism and all kinds of racism and of religious intolerance, and in promoting mutual understanding among nations, tolerance among communities and respect for human life and dignity" (*Fundamental Agreement*, Article 2 SS 1). There can be no question that in these areas more can be done and must be done. It is precisely such renewed efforts that will give to the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 a truly universal significance, not limited to Catholics or Christians but embracing all peoples in every part of the world. I am confident that the Israeli authorities, and their Palestinian counterparts, will do all they can to ensure that those who come to visit the historic and holy places connected with the three great monotheistic faiths

will be welcomed in a spirit of respect and friendship. It is my own fervent hope to be among those making such a pilgrimage, and I am grateful for the kind invitations which I continue to receive.

Mr Ambassador, I wish you success in your mission as your country's Representative to the Holy See, and I assure you of the cooperation of the various offices of the Roman Curia as you discharge your high duties. For you and your country I make my own the prayer of the ancient Biblical author: "The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace!" (Num 6:26).

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