



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO H.E. Dr Gustav Ortner,
AMBASSADOR OF AUSTRIA TO THE HOLY SEE***

Thursday, 9 January 1997

Mr Ambassador,

1. With particular joy I greet you today in the Vatican as you begin your office as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Austria to the Holy See. As I did for your illustrious predecessors, I bid you a cordial welcome and wish you much happiness in your new and noble task.
2. In your address, for which I thank you sincerely, you mentioned that for over 1,000 years the history of Austria and the Catholic Church has been linked in a close relationship. A thousand years ago we find the first documentary evidence of the name “Ostar-rîchi” — Austria. But 300 years before that, in 696 to be precise, the name of Rupert of Worms appears as the saintly founder of Salzburg, St Peter’s Archabbey and the Diocese itself. If the document of Otto III (983-1002), dated 1 November 996 and mentioning a place in western Lower Austria as “located in Ostarrîchi”, is an occasion for celebrating a millennium, then one should certainly not look only to the past, but also see it as a guide to finding a meaningful path in the future. As Austria gratefully recalls its more than 1,000 years of history, together with the Church it looks to the second millennium of the Christian era. Thus the parchment written 1,000 years ago is neither a certificate of Baptism nor a birth certificate for Austria; it is rather a gift of its rich past and, at the same time, a responsibility to prepare the future.

In my Encyclical *Redemptoris missio* I spoke of the “*modern Areopaguses*” (cf. n. 37). After Paul had preached in countless places he arrived in Athens and went to the Areopagus, the cultural centre of the metropolis. There in a speech that was adapted to this environment and

comprehensible to it he proclaimed the Gospel (cf. Acts 17:22-31). A thousand years ago Salzburg was such an Areopagus with a vast outreach: a great part of the German language area was evangelized by missionaries from Salzburg. Precisely on the threshold of the third millennium Austria is once again in a special way an Areopagus: several years ago the dividing line between two worlds was still the Danube which, at least geographically, demarcates the West and East. Today Austria is a country in the middle of Europe, a bridge and the forge of many ideas, an Areopagus of the “European home”. It is imperative that the Gospel be heard in this Areopagus, as it was in Athens thanks to St Paul and later in Salzburg through St Rupert.

3. You yourself, Mr Ambassador, have mentioned some of the Areopaguses where the Gospel must be proclaimed and which Austria and the Holy See will do together. Here I am thinking of international peace-keeping measures and our common struggle for justice and social equity among peoples. I recall the efforts of Austria, as a member of the European Union, to have a freedom of religion clause inserted into the treaty of union in order constitutionally to guarantee the place of the religious communities in the member States.

Two Areopaguses are especially dear to my heart: the first is the *Areopagus of Europe*. In this Areopagus it is not only a matter of raising one’s voice for economic and financial concerns. The history of Europe, with its Christian roots, always places greater emphasis on “being more” rather than “having more”. It is not material goods alone that count, but spiritual values that give meaning. Anyone who wants to build the “European house” on solid ground must therefore not only lay the material infrastructure, but must also take care of the spiritual and religious infrastructure: “Our times are both momentous and fascinating. While on the one hand people seem to be pursuing material prosperity and to be sinking ever deeper into consumerism and materialism, on the other hand we are witnessing a desperate search for meaning ... the so-called ‘religious revival’” (*Redemptoris missio*, n. 38). The meaning of life is not meant to be withheld from people. Although Church and State are two different dimensions, today they often find themselves aboard the same boat, because “people sense that they are as it were traveling together across life’s sea, and that they are called to ever greater unity and solidarity. Solutions to pressing problems must be studied, discussed and worked out with the involvement of all” (*ibid.*, n. 37).

Another Areopagus of our day is the *world of communications* and its responsibility. The disappearance of the Iron Curtain placed the power and influence of the media drastically before our eyes. During those exciting hours signals went out from the media, awakening hope. This growing power of the means of communication, which will create an ever stronger and more rapid relationship in the new Europe, requires of everyone a great sense of responsibility for its sound use as a tool for forming opinion. The Christians’ “Good News” now has the possibility of new pulpits. Great opportunities are opening up for the Church: I would like to emphasize the fundamental meaning of the family and the protection of human life from beginning to end. I would like to mention the moral responsibility of overhasty research. All of this is in close relationship with

a Christian view of the world and the person, which was once so decisively a basis for Europe's spiritual unity and Austria's foundation and which today too must be widened by modern means. What the Apostle Paul once wrote to a community in Asia Minor can give the people of our day something to think about as well: "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap" Gal 6:7). Is it not true that in the terrible years of the two World Wars and their aftermath, as well as in the prisons and concentration camps of National Socialism and communism, we reaped what our ancestors had sown from the 18th to the 20th century, in a spirit that was often no longer Christian humanism; and here I am thinking of rationalism, Marxism and extreme nationalism. It was a "civitas terrena" that they set as their goal, so as to modify and dismantle the "civitas christiana".

4. You are taking office, Mr Ambassador, at a moment that marks the beginning of the road leading to the third millennium. As you mentioned, as a young diplomat here in Rome you had a close experience of the Second Vatican Council. I myself took part in it as a Bishop. Each of us in our own way was a witness to a Council that "focused on the mystery of Christ and his Church and at the same time [was] open to the world" (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 18). The leitmotif of the Council's message presents God "in his absolute lordship over all things, but also as the One who ensures the authentic autonomy of earthly realities" (*ibid.*, n. 20). From this derive consequences for the dialogue which has been begun in many areas and which should be continued truthfully and honestly in the future. This dialogue concerns social questions as well as ecumenical efforts; it applies to matters that are internal to the Church as well as to interreligious dialogue: the basis of a successful dialogue is not to be confused with a wrongly understood tolerance which has absolutely no interest in the truth, but basically considers everything as equally valid. In this regard I would like to recall the Council's golden rule: "Truth can impose itself on the mind of man only in virtue of its own truth, which wins over the mind with both gentleness and power" (*Dignitatis humanae*, n. 1). Whoever ascends the modern Areopagus today must and should deal with the demands of truth and bear witness to it in truth. That is what makes for credibility.

5. The modern Areopaguses await us. They are waiting for a clear message. Mindful of the proud Christian heritage upon which Austria can build, the Church offers her collaboration, which in your country is harmoniously and effectively regulated on the basis of the Concordat. In the heart of Europe, Austria in a special way has the task of giving Europe a soul. It is the human person whose well-being must be a concern to both Church and State, by fostering together the noble values and high ideals to which they know they are committed in a particular way. The human person is not only the Church's way; it is also Austria's way in a united Europe.

With a special word of thanks I return the good wishes which you, Mr Ambassador, conveyed to me from your Federal President. I also cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you, to your distinguished family and to all your co-workers in the embassy.

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