



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS  
POPE JOHN PAUL II  
TO H.E. Mr JÜRGERN OESTERHELT,  
AMBASSADOR OF GERMANY TO THE HOLY SEE\***

*Saturday, 18 October 1997*

*Mr Ambassador,*

1. With special joy I welcome you here today in the Vatican as you begin your task as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Federal Republic of Germany to the Holy See. As I did your esteemed predecessor, I bid you also a cordial welcome and wish you all the best in your new and distinguished service.

2. Your greetings, for which I heartily thank you, were accompanied by the promise to work to maintain and develop the excellent relations between the Holy See and the Federal Republic of Germany. In that connection you recalled the visit which I was able to make to your beloved homeland last year, and you made special mention of how the Federal Chancellor and I walked together through the Brandenburg Gate. As the open gate is a symbol that the forced division into political blocs has been overcome, so too our joint crossing of the threshold which once marked the boundary was an eloquent sign. For the entry through the "gate of unity" indicated the regained freedom, as it clearly indicates, however, that the many problems which today are caused precisely by this freedom can be resolved only in partnership. What holds true for relations between the Holy See and the Federal Republic of Germany is also true of the relationship between Church and State in your country. The two are allied whenever it is a question of giving "soul" to a pluralistic and secularized society. Freedom and unity require each other. Unity without freedom becomes compulsion, but freedom without unity brings chaos. While at the Brandenburg Gate I put the concept of "freedom" at the centre of my thoughts, today I would like to make "unity" the focus of my considerations.

3. When in the autumn of 1989 the wall began to crumble and was ultimately torn down in a non-violent revolution, it was succeeded, one after another, by the steps necessary for leading East and West back again to a common currency, political reunification and economic unity. Although much has been done in these areas, internal unity remains but a dream. There are still differences. It is true that people can travel unimpeded between East and West, but with the fall of the external wall not all the internal walls have been dismantled yet.

As the fathers of your Basic Law sought, a full 50 years ago, to build the new home for the community after the catastrophe of the Second World War, they came to the decision that they would give the German people a Constitution that is "conscious of their responsibility before God and humanity". This passage from the preamble of your Basic Law is still the Magna Charta for those who would instil a soul in German unity. Among the tragedies of this century now drawing to a close we can count the painful discovery that any attack against human beings is an attack against God and conscience. If many of our contemporaries lack the immediacy of this experience, nevertheless it is the lasting legacy of the generation of the many parents and grandparents who, upon the debris of the breakdown, built the social order in which political activity must obviously be predicated on respect for God and man. Hence there developed the still valid basis which marks the relationship of partnership between Church and State deriving from mutual respect for the independence of both partners and their own individual tasks as well as from the consciousness of a common responsibility for society and culture. Recently the basic conditions for future collaboration in some of the new Federal States were also established through agreements reached with the Holy See.

4. With great joy and deep gratitude I would like to emphasize how sensitively and generously this common responsibility for social matters is taken. Wherever crises flare up, eyes are not closed in Germany. Whenever cries for help are heard from far or near, the citizens of your country do not turn a deaf ear. The needs of others open the hearts and hands of your fellow citizens. The discussion of material, financial and moral support is not just idle chatter. The word "help" receives hands and feet from Germany. This society of solidarity binds together not only the old and new Federal States but goes beyond German borders, spreads over the European continent and at the same time embraces the whole globe of the "one world", crossing over all linguistic, religious and national frontiers.

5. Whatever applies to responsibility in great matters should also be seen in small ones. Whoever speaks about the "globalization" of the earth must not remain silent about the dignity of the individual. It is not only the earth which is a unity, but so is the human person in every phase of his life. It is precisely in this area that special attention is asked of political leaders and the Church alike in order not to succumb to the allures of a falsely understood humanitarianism or to allow new assaults on human dignity, which reveal the consolidation of a cultural situation that lends a hitherto unknown aspect to attacks on life: broad sections of public opinion approve of many forms of crime against life in the name of the right to individual freedom, and on this pretext they claim

not only impunity for crimes of this type but also State approval and the right to carry them out in total freedom, with government health-care services providing them free of charge. An example of this far-reaching change in the way of looking at life in the Federal Republic of Germany can also be seen in the present practice of legalized abortion as well as in the looming discussion about humane death. The end result of this is tragic: "not only is the fact of the destruction of so many human lives still to be born or in their final stage extremely grave and disturbing, but no less grave and disturbing is the fact that conscience itself ... is finding it increasingly difficult to distinguish between good and evil in what concerns the basic value of human life" (Encyclical *Evangelium vitae*, n. 4). God, conscience and human freedom cannot be divided. In this area Church and State are allies in giving Germany's internal unity a firm foundation. Whoever attacks the human person attacks God. What a horrible, bloody wall must still be torn down in your own house so that the weakest ones, the unborn children, can also have their right to life recognized!

6. Religious instruction also serves as a unifying, foundational support for society. Although the State does not legislate values, it is not value-free. At the birth of the Federal Republic of Germany an option was made for the Christian God. Reunification is no cause for dividing this basic decision into two. Therefore the guarantee of denominational religious instruction in the schools is a duty of State-sponsored education. It is an expression of positive religious freedom in a democratic State. At the same time it also shows that the Churches are imparting something of their message to society and do not want to retreat into a private religious-ecclesiastical world. "The freedom to believe" and "the right to know" are therefore the mottos with which the German Bishops' Conference promotes religious instruction in the schools throughout the Federal Republic and thus seeks to put their request at the centre of public attention, so that the possible introduction of a compulsory non-ecclesiastical religion and ethics course will be debated at both the political and juridical levels. In this context I want to restate the pressing wish that, in accord with the clear right of the human person and of the family, it will be possible for all Catholic students to be given in school "a spiritual formation with the aid of a religious instruction dependent on the Church" (Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi tradendae*, n. 69).

7. To my joy I have learned that not only with regard to religious instruction, but also concerning other burning issues the Christian confessions in Germany have made joint statements, which are now and then followed by concrete actions. Along with the jointly planned and already repeated "Week for Life", whose goal is to make consciences more aware of the "culture of life", they have spoken together particularly on the economic and social situation in Germany, and have made statements on ethics in the media and on compliance with and acceptance of policies regarding migration and foreigners. These initiatives show clearly that ecumenism is not dead, but is alive wherever Christians of different Churches are conscious of their common mission of contributing to the fundamental unity of society.

8. This mission of Christians becomes even more important as the unity of Europe draws nearer. The problems of German unity are new, although the answers to the questions about European

unity are still being sought. The Holy See imposes Christian truth on no individual, State or European people. However, it will continue to point out that no material or economic progress — regardless of how desirable it is — should be allowed to take the place of God. With this truth nothing exclusively Christian is at stake; it is rather a question of what is specifically human. It involves the *humanum*, the humanity of the person. Therefore it concerns everyone, regardless of the religious group to which he or she belongs, and it is valid for all peoples. Thus the Church has an even more important duty of introducing this truth into the house being planned for Europe. Otherwise it will be built on sand. To this end every political power will find a loyal, trustworthy partner in the Church, if only it is prepared to build Europe on stable rock, so that in the house, which the European family of nations must build, we and the following generations can feel safe and secure, free from all fear of being buried again under its rubble.

9. Mr Ambassador, in our common responsibility for the service of unity, which since the restoration of freedom is the duty of Church and State, I want to express to you my conviction that the friendly relations between the Federal Republic of Germany and the Holy See will become more and more harmonious. As I ask you to return the greetings which you conveyed to me from the Federal President and the Government, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you, Mr Ambassador, to your distinguished family and to your esteemed colleagues at the embassy.

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\**L'Osservatore Romano. Weekly edition in English* n.46 p.6.

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