



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE NEW AMBASSADOR OF GREECE
TO THE HOLY SEE****

Monday, 2 September 2002

Mr Ambassador,

1. I am pleased to welcome you, Excellency, to the Vatican for the presentation of the Letters accrediting you as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Hellenic Republic to the Holy See.

I thank you very much for conveying to me the courteous message of President Constantinos Stephanopoulos. With delight I recall his visit to me in the Vatican last January and I would be grateful if you would express my cordial best wishes for him, as well as for all of the Greek people.

2. Mr Ambassador, at the beginning of our exchange, I would like to recall the visit to your country that I made last year, during my Jubilee pilgrimage in the steps of St Paul. Grateful to God who granted me the grace to make this much desired journey, I cherish a vivid memory of the warm welcome of the President and the Greek authorities. I warmly recall my meeting with His Beatitude Christodoulos, Archbishop of Athens and of All Greece. On the particularly evocative site of the Areopagus, we assessed the painful memories of the past, but especially, we asserted our common desire to do our best to advance on the path of Christian brotherhood and the recovery of unity. I hope that the meeting of Athens will be an important stage on the long road that lies ahead; the recent visit to Rome of a delegation of the Orthodox Church of Greece confirms me in this hope.

3. Your country is deeply attached to the Christian faith which is one of the constitutive elements of the nation. It knows this religious heritage is living at the heart of Europe, not just as a historical memory which is justifiably an important element of its culture, but also as a source that can bring

dynamism and future prospects to the building of Europe. On various occasions I have expressed my concern in this regard and, especially, my regret at seeing that no explicit mention was made of the communities of religious believers among the partners who are to contribute to the reflection on the "Convention" established at the Laeken Summit with a view to a possible European Constitution. As I recalled to the Diplomatic Corps: "The marginalization of religions, which have contributed and continue to contribute to the culture and humanism of which Europe is legitimately proud, strikes me as both an injustice and an error of perspective. To recognize an indisputable historical fact in no way means to disregard the modern demand for States to have an appropriate non-confessional character, and therefore Europe as well!" (*Address to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See*, 10 January 2002, n. 2; *ORE*, 16 January 2002, p. 3).

I am sure, Mr Ambassador, that your country can play an important role within the institutions of the Community to ensure that they recognize and express in a satisfactory way the religious dimension to which the Holy See and the Hellenic Republic are equally attached.

4. For more than 20 years now Your country has been a member of the European Union that recognizes that Greece has made a special contribution to the continent since the time of the foundation of the first Athenian democracy, especially on the social, cultural and religious levels which are part of its long tradition. I am delighted with the attention that the Greek authorities have paid to the enlargement of Europe, in particular to the Balkan countries. It is obvious that this opening to the other European nations will make it possible to put a permanent end to any risk of confrontation in the region, so that the tragic conflicts which bathed the end of the 20th century in blood will never happen again. The gradual acceptance of all the countries will consolidate with their peoples a culture of peace and solidarity which is one of the strengths of the European project.

The Holy See, as you know, calls forcefully for the establishment of a solid and lasting peace among nations, and supports all that can enable different peoples to meet, to speak to one another and to put into practice common projects for the good of all the inhabitants.

In this perspective, the forthcoming Olympic Games that will be held in Athens in 2004, will be an opportunity for a new experience of brotherhood, to overcome hatred and to bring together persons and peoples. On this occasion, I make a heartfelt appeal for a lasting truce from all violence, so that the peaceful spirit and healthy competition, which the founders of the Olympic Games had in mind, may spread to all areas of society and to all continents. In our troubled and sometimes uncertain world, I hope that this sports event may be a joyful witness to the fact that all belong to the same human, fraternal and supportive community, as recent sporting events have shown.

5. Through you, I would like to greet warmly the Catholic faithful who live in Greece. They are a small minority and often dispersed in small communities. They are still in a difficult position

regarding the recognition of their rights within the nation and at the different levels of society. I therefore take this opportunity once again to draw your Government's attention to the need, through a constructive dialogue between the leaders concerned, to give the Catholic Church legal standing. Indeed, it would be right, as is the case in all the countries of the European Union, to ensure full respect for the effective religious freedom of Catholics, as well as for other believers, giving the dioceses and local communities the means they need for their mission. For their part, Catholics look forward to having a real dialogue with their Orthodox brothers and sisters, and their only concern is to share fully, in their proper capacity, in the economic, political and social life of the country in which they are already deeply involved. I encourage the Catholic community and its Pastors, bishops and priests, the men and women religious who are devoted to its service, and all the faithful who are members to persevere in this regard. May they all be assured of the support and fraternal prayer of the Bishop of Rome, Successor of Peter.

I also cordially greet the pastors and faithful of the Orthodox Church of Greece, expressing to them once again my gratitude for their welcome during my visit, and I once again assure you of the Catholic Church's desire for dialogue, a dialogue which, as I have recently repeated, must take place not only at the level of fraternal charity, but above all in the theological sphere.

6. Mr Ambassador, at the time when you are beginning the noble mission of representing your country at the Holy See, please accept my best wishes for its success, and be sure that you will always find here with my collaborators the necessary understanding and support!

Upon your Excellency, upon your family, upon all those who work with you and upon all your compatriots, I cordially invoke an abundance of divine Blessings.

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