



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO H.E. Mr ALFONS M. KLOSS
NEW AMBASSADOR OF AUSTRIA TO THE HOLY SEE
Thursday, 3 February 2011**

Mr Ambassador,

I accept with pleasure the Letters with which the President of the Republic of Austria has accredited you as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the Holy See. At the same time I thank you for the cordial words with which you expressed the closeness to the Successor of Peter of the President and of the Government. For my part, I extend my affectionate greetings to the President, to the Chancellor and to the members of the Government, as well as to all the citizens of Austria. I also willingly express the hope that relations between the Holy See and Austria may continue to bear fruit in the future.

The culture, the history and daily life of Austria, “land of cathedrals” (from the *National Anthem*) have been profoundly formed by the Catholic faith. I had the opportunity to notice this too during [my Pastoral Visit to your country](#) and during the pilgrimage I made to Mariazell four years ago. The faithful I was able to meet represent the thousands of men and women throughout the country who, in living their faith in daily life and making themselves available to others, show the noblest human features and spread Christ’s love.

At the same time Austria is also a country in which the peaceful coexistence of various religions and cultures has a long tradition. The old popular anthem of the time of the monarchy said “In harmony lies strength”. This is particularly true for the religious dimension which is rooted in the depths of the human conscience and is therefore part of each individual’s life and of the coexistence of the community.

The spiritual homeland, for which many people in an ever more mobile employment situation and constant change, feel a personal need, must be able to exist publicly and in an atmosphere of

peaceful coexistence with other confessions of faith.

In many European countries the relationship between State and religion is facing a particular tension. On the one hand, the political authorities are taking great care not to grant any public space to religions understood as merely the individual ideas of faith of citizens. On the other hand, an effort is being made to apply to the religious communities the criteria of an age-old public opinion.

It seems that there is a desire to adapt the Gospel to culture and yet, almost embarrassingly, there is an attempt to prevent culture from being shaped by the religious dimension.

Instead, emphasis should be given to the view of some States, in particular of Central and Eastern Europe, that room should be made for the fundamental human aspirations, for human faith in God and for faith in salvation through God.

The Holy See has noted with pleasure some actions of the Austrian Government in this regard, not the least of which is the position it has taken to the so-called "crucifix ruling" of the European Court of Human Rights and the proposal of the Minister for Foreign Affairs "that the new European service for external action too should note the situation of religious freedom in the world, draft regular reports and present them to the Foreign Ministers of the European Union" (*Austria Presse Agentur*, 10 December 2010).

Recognition of religious freedom permits the ecclesial community to carry out its multiple activities from which the whole of society benefits. A reference is made here to the various institutes for education and charitable services managed by the Church, which you mentioned, Mr Ambassador.

The Church's commitment to those in need clearly shows the way in which the Church, in a certain sense, considers herself the spokesperson of the underprivileged. This ecclesial commitment which is widely recognized in society cannot be reduced to charity alone.

Its deepest roots are in God, in God who is love. Thus it is necessary fully to respect the Church's action and not to make her one of the many dispensers of social assistance. Rather, she must be seen in the totality of her religious dimension. It is therefore always necessary to counter the tendency to egoistic isolation. It is the urgent and constant duty of all the members of society to guarantee the moral dimension of culture, the dimension of a culture that is worthy of the human being and of human life in a community. For this reason the Catholic Church does her utmost for the good of society.

A further important requirement of the Holy See is for a balanced family policy. The family occupies a place in society that concerns the foundations of human life. The social order finds

essential support in the spousal union of a man and a woman which is also oriented to procreation. For this reason marriage and the family also require the special protection of the State. For all their members they are a school of humanity with positive effects for individuals as well as for society.

Indeed, families are called to live and safeguard reciprocal love and truth, respect and justice, faithfulness and collaboration, service and willingness to help others, especially the weakest. Yet families with many children are often at a disadvantage. The problems in these families, such as, for example, a high potential for conflictuality, low standard of living, difficult access to education, indebtedness and an increase in divorce, give rise to the thought of their deeper causes which must be uprooted from society. Furthermore, it is regrettable that the life of unborn children does not receive adequate protection and that, on the contrary, recognition of their right to life is only secondary to the parents' right to decide on it freely.

The building of Europe as a common home can only be successful if this continent is aware of its Christian roots and if the Gospel values, as well as the Christian image of the human being, are the leaven of European civilization also in the future. Faith lived in Christ and active love for one's neighbour, marked by Christ's word and life and by the Saints' example, carry more weight than Western Christian culture.

Your recently canonized compatriots, such as Franz Jägerstätter, Sr Restituta Kafka, Ladislaus Batthyány-Strattman and Charles of Austria, can open wider horizons to us. These Saints, on their different paths through life, placed themselves with the same dedication at the service of God and of his message of love for neighbour. Thus they remain for us guiding examples of faith and witnesses of understanding among peoples.

Lastly, Mr Ambassador, I would like to assure you that in carrying out the lofty mission that has been entrusted to you, you may count on my support and that of my co-workers. I willingly entrust you, your family and all the members of the Austrian Embassy to the Holy See to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the *Magna Mater Austriae*, and I cordially impart the Apostolic Blessing to you and to the entire beloved people of Austria.