



# The Holy See

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JOHN PAUL II

## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Wednesday 16 May 2001*

1. A week ago I concluded my pilgrimage in the *footsteps of St Paul*, which led me to Greece, Syria and Malta. I am pleased today to reflect with you on the event, the final segment of my Jubilee itinerary which took me to the principal places of salvation history. I am grateful to all those who have followed me with their prayer in the unforgettable "return to the sources", from which we draw the freshness of the original Christian experience.

I renew my sentiments of cordial gratitude to the President of the Greek Republic, Mr Kostas Stephanopoulos, for having invited me to visit Greece. I thank the President of the Arab Republic of Syria, Mr Bashàr Al-Assad, and the President of the Republic of Malta, Mr Guido De Marco, who received me so graciously in Damascus and in Valletta.

Everywhere I wished to express to the *Orthodox Churches* the affection and esteem of the Catholic Church, with the desire that the memory of past sins against ecclesial communion may be fully purified and make way for reconciliation and fraternity. Also, I had the opportunity to reaffirm the sincere and open way in which the Church turns to the believers of Islam, to whom we are united by the adoration of the one God.

I consider it a particular grace to have been able to meet, above all in the places where they exercise their pastoral activity, *the Catholic Bishops* of Greece, Syria and Malta, and their priests, men and women religious, and many of the faithful. In the footsteps of St Paul, the successor of St Peter was able to strengthen and encourage those Churches, exhorting them to fidelity as well as to openness and fraternal charity.

2. At the *Areopagus of Athens*, I heard resounding the words of the famous discourse of Paul as

reported in the Acts of the Apostles. The passage was read in *Greek* and in *English*, and I was moved by the reading of St Paul in the very place where it was first spoken. In fact the Greek language was the common language of the Mediterranean basin at the beginning of the first millennium, much as English is today a global language. The "Good News" of Christ, the revealer of God and the Saviour of the world, yesterday, today and forever, is destined for all the men and women of the earth in accord with his explicit mandate.

At the beginning of the third millennium, the Areopagus of Athens has become in a certain way the "*areopagus of the world*", from which the Christian message of salvation is presented afresh to all who seek God and are "God-fearing" in accepting the inexhaustible mystery of truth and love.

Particularly, by means of the reading of the "*Common Declaration*" which, at the end of our fraternal meeting, I signed together with His Beatitude Christódoulos, Archbishop of Athens and of all Greece, an appeal that was made to the nations of the *European continent* as an appeal not to forget their Christian roots.

Paul's discourse at the Areopagus remains a model for inculturation and as such retains its relevance for our task today. Accordingly, in the *Eucharistic celebration with the Catholic community in Greece*, I reviewed it recalling the marvelous example of the holy brothers, Cyril and Methodius, natives of Thessalonica. They were inspired by the fidelity and creativity of St Paul's method in their way of preaching the Gospel among the Slavic peoples.

3. After Greece, I went on to *Syria*, where on the *road to Damascus*, the Risen Christ appeared to Saul of Tarsus transforming him from persecutor into untiring Apostle of the Gospel. It was a way of going to the beginning, as it was with Abraham, a return to the call, to the *vocation*. This is what I was thinking about when I visited the *Memorial of St Paul*. The history of God with men always begins with the call of God, who invites a person to leave himself and his own security to move forward towards a new land, trusting in him who calls. It was true for *Abraham, Moses, Mary, Peter* and all the other *Apostles*. It was also true for *Paul*.

Syria is a country which is prevalently inhabited by Muslims, who believe in the one God and wish to submit to Him, after the example of Abraham to whom they constantly refer (cf. *Nostra aetate*, n. 3). The *interreligious dialogue with Islam* becomes ever more important and necessary at the beginning of the third millennium. As a result I found very encouraging the warm reception I received from the civil authorities and the Grand Mufti, who even accompanied me on the *historic visit* to the *Great Umayyad Mosque* where one finds the *Memorial of St John the Baptist* who is highly venerated by the Muslims.

At Damascus my pilgrimage took on a strongly *ecumenical* character, thanks to the visit I had the joy of realizing in the two Orthodox Cathedrals, to His Beatitude, Ignace IV, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch, and to His Holiness, Mor Ignatius Zakka I, the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch. In the historic

Greek Orthodox Cathedral of the Dormition of Our Lady, we then celebrated a solemn *prayer service*. With interior gratitude, I saw realized one of the principal goals of our Jubilee pilgrimage, that of "gathering in the places of our common origin to bear witness to Christ our unity" (cf. *Ut unum sint*, n. 23) and to confirm our mutual commitment to restoration of full communion" (*Letter concerning the pilgrimage to the places linked to the history of salvation*, n. 11).

Prayer for peace in the Middle East

4. In Syria I could not resist directing to God a special *prayer for peace* in the Middle East, compelled by the unfortunate situation which becomes ever more worrisome. I traveled to the *Golan Heights* to the *Church of Kuneitra*, partially ruined by the war, and there I made my petition. In a certain sense, I have remained there in spirit continuing my prayer and I will not cease to pray until revenge will give way to reconciliation and the recognition of mutual rights.

Such hope is founded on faith. It is the hope that I entrusted to the *young people of Syria*, whom I had the joy of meeting the evening before I left Damascus. In my heart I still carry the fervour of their greeting and I pray to the God of peace so that Christian, Muslim and Jewish young people can grow up together as sons and daughters of the one God.

5. The final place on my pilgrimage in the footsteps of St Paul was the *Island of Malta*. Here the Apostle spent three months, after the shipwreck of the ship which was taking him as a prisoner to Rome (cf. Acts 27: 39-28, 10). For the second time I have experienced the enthusiastic welcome of the Maltese, and I had the joy of proclaiming as *Blessed* two sons of the Maltese people, Fr George Preca, Founder of the Society of Christian Doctrine, and Ignatius Falzon, lay catechist, together with the Benedictine nun, Sr Maria Adeodata Pisani.

Once again I wished to indicate the *way of holiness* as the path to be followed by the faithful of the third millennium. On the vast ocean of history, the Church need not fear the challenges and the threats which she meets in the course of her voyage through time if she keeps steering a steady course in the royal channel of holiness, towards which the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 directed us (cf. *Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 30).

May it be a reality for all, thanks to the intercession of the Virgin Mary, to whom we turn constantly during the month of May which is consecrated to her. May the Virgin Mary assist every believer, family and community to continue with unhesitating enthusiasm on the path of daily fidelity to the Gospel.

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I extend a special greeting to the White Fathers present. I welcome the members of the *NATO Defense College*; I encourage you always to see your work as a service to peace and the common good. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from England, Sweden,

Nigeria, Canada and the United States, I invoke the joy and peace of the Risen Saviour.

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