



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO H. E. MR BERNARD ANTON BANDARA GOONETILLEKE
NEW AMBASSADOR OF THE DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST
REPUBLIC OF SRI LANKA TO THE HOLY SEE***

Thursday, 13 January 1994

Mr. Ambassador,

It gives me great pleasure to accept the Letters of Credence appointing you Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka to the Holy See. I am grateful for the cordial greetings which you have conveyed from His Excellency President D. B. Wijetunge and the people of Sri Lanka, and I gladly reciprocate with good wishes and the assurance of my prayers for the peace and well-being of the entire nation.

Among the greatest challenges of this last decade of the twentieth century is that of finding a way to promote the growth—and sometimes even the survival—of multi-religious and multicultural societies in various parts of the world. As events in our own day so tragically demonstrate, wherever intolerance and ethnic strife creep into a nation's social or political life peace is endangered and undermined. On the contrary, the religious, cultural and ethnic differences within a country should be treasured as gifts which help citizens to appreciate the oneness of the human family in the natural and legitimate diversity of its members. Sri Lanka is facing a major challenge in this regard.

Your Excellency has referred to the long tradition of freedom of religion in your country. Indeed, Sri Lanka as a nation is founded on the principles of equal human rights for all and respect for religious liberty. With citizens who profess Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam, Sri Lanka has vigorously sought to provide an example of religious harmony and cooperation, which in turn are essential factors of social and civic peace and solidarity.

In this International Year of the Family it will be helpful to consider the role of that vital unit of

society in supporting and guaranteeing respect for cultural and ethnic diversity. As the fundamental community responsible for educating the younger generation, the family plays an indispensable part in fostering reciprocal solidarity, without bias or prejudice. Built on the enduring foundation of marriage, this intimate communion of persons makes an essential contribution to nurturing a national life based on shared moral values, communal solidarity and respect for the rights and duties of each citizen. The family in Sri Lanka, as in every country, has the task of "humanizing" the social order.

I am heartened to know that your nation is working to foster peace by alleviating the devastating effects of poverty. When families are unable to provide for their primary needs in a way befitting their human dignity, social instability follows. Both within countries and among them, the ever widening social and economic abyss separating rich from poor is a cause for grave concern. Nations can attain authentic progress only if their leaders and people take bold measures to guarantee a fair distribution of wealth and resources, and if material development is placed in a wider context of an overall human and social progress (Cf. John Paul II, *World Day of Peace 1993*, 5). A solely pragmatic approach to growth is insufficient. The promotion of progress raises ethical questions which must be addressed. In fact, the main obstacles to a nation's integral development can be overcome only by means of decisions in conformity with the moral order taken by those entrusted with responsibility for the common good (Cf. John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 35).

In fulfilling their task, leaders have to make special efforts to create and encourage conditions which strengthen family life and ensure the active contribution of family members to the wider community. If a society is to resolve economic, cultural and social problems, ethical and religious values must shape its mentality, behaviour and structures. Without an "ultimate truth to guide and direct political activity . . . freedom loses its foundation and people are exposed to the violence of passion and manipulation, both open and hidden" (John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 46). Respect for the universal and unchanging norms of the moral order is the path which leads to national and international peace and prosperity.

On various occasions in recent years I have expressed concern regarding the internal conflict in your country, a conflict which has caused thousands of victims, inflicted immense suffering and had a devastating effect on family and community life. Your Excellency has mentioned that the Government of Sri Lanka is taking positive steps to restore peace. I can assure you that the Holy See supports every honest effort to bring an end to bloodshed, and is anxious that innocent civilians, especially women and children, should be protected from all forms of violence. Men and women of good will must spare no effort to overcome a culture of violence which trivializes the sacredness of human life.

Lasting peace can be established only if mutual trust is nurtured between conflicting factions. Full respect for the rule of law and constitutional order, the guarantee of security and of the God-given rights of all persons, and mutual confidence between those of different races and traditions are

principles cherished by the vast majority of Sri Lankans. These principles provide the cornerstone for a culture of dialogue which would express your people's deep yearning for peace and justice. "The willingness of parties involved to meet and talk to one another is the indispensable condition for reaching an equitable solution to the complex problems that can seriously obstruct peace" (John Paul II, *Message for the World Day of Peace 1989*, 10). Nothing should be allowed to thwart the earnest discussion and negotiation which are the obligatory path to peace.

As Your Excellency has kindly noted, the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka has a long and venerable tradition of service to the nation. While the Church carefully maintains her independence from the State and her autonomy in her own sphere of activity, her members actively pursue the common good in a spirit of harmony and cooperation with all their fellow-citizens. Both communities, civil and religious, serve "the personal and social vocation of the same individuals" (Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 76). Fulfilling the mission entrusted to her by God, the Church proclaims the truth about man-his transcendence and his central place within society. She contributes to national life "by forming the consciences of her members in openness towards others and respect for them, in that tolerance which accompanies the search for truth, and in a spirit of solidarity" (John Paul II, *Message for the World Day of Peace 1991*, VII). Catholic citizens in your land have been active in defending freedom and promoting health care and education. At this moment in the life of their country, Catholic Sri Lankans are among those who are devoting themselves to works of justice and reconciliation. As followers of the "Prince of Peace" (Is. 9:6), they are struggling to foster within families and communities a climate of harmony that will lead to the cessation of hostilities and attacks on human life.

Mr. Ambassador, as you undertake your responsibilities, it is my hope that the bonds of understanding and friendship between the Holy See and your country will be increasingly strengthened. You will find that the various offices of the Roman Curia are always ready to assist you in fulfilling your mission. Upon yourself and all the beloved people of Sri Lanka I cordially invoke the abundant blessings of Almighty God.

**Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, vol. XVII, 1 pp.87-90.

L'Attività della Santa Sede 1994 pp. 32-34.

L'Osservatore Romano 14.1.1994 pp.6,10.

L'Osservatore Romano. Weekly edition in English n.4 p.7.

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana