



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

Meeting with representatives of other Religions and other Christian Confessions

Sunday, 7 November 1999

New Delhi — Vigyan Bawan

Distinguished Religious Leaders,

Dear Friends,

1. It is a great joy for me to visit once again the beloved land of India and to have this opportunity in particular to greet you, the representatives of different religious traditions, which embody not only great achievements of the past but also the hope of a better future for the human family. I thank the Government and the people of India for the welcome I have received. I come among you as a pilgrim of peace and as a fellow-traveller on the road that leads to the complete fulfilment of the deepest human longings. On the occasion of Diwali, the festival of lights, which symbolizes the victory of life over death, good over evil, I express the hope that this meeting will speak to the world of the things which unite us all: our common human origin and destiny, our shared responsibility for people's well-being and progress, our need of the light and strength that we seek in our religious convictions. Down the ages and in so many ways, India has taught that truth which the great Christian teachers also propose, that men and women "by inward instinct" are deeply oriented towards God and seek him from the depths of their being (cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 60, art. 5, 3). On this basis, I am convinced that together we can successfully take the path of understanding and dialogue.

2. My presence here among you is meant as a further sign that the Catholic Church wants to enter ever more deeply into dialogue with the religions of the world. She sees this dialogue as an act of love which has its roots in God himself. "God is love", proclaims the New Testament, "and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him. . . Let us love, then, because he has loved us first. . . no-one who fails to love the brother whom he sees can love God whom he has not seen" (1 Jn 4:16, 19-20).

It is a sign of hope that the religions of the world are becoming more aware of their shared responsibility for the well-being of the human family. This is a crucial part of the globalization of solidarity which must come if the future of the world is to be secure. This sense of shared responsibility increases as we discover more of what we have in common as religious men and women.

Which of us does not grapple with the mystery of suffering and death? Which of us does not hold life, truth, peace, freedom and justice to be supremely important values? Which of us is not convinced that moral goodness is soundly rooted in the individual's and society's openness to the transcendent world of the Divinity? Which of us does not believe that the way to God requires prayer, silence, asceticism, sacrifice and humility? Which of us is not concerned that scientific and technical progress should be accompanied by spiritual and moral awareness? And which of us does not believe that the challenges now facing society can only be met by building a civilization of love founded on the universal values of peace, solidarity, justice and liberty? And how can we do this, except through encounter, mutual understanding and cooperation?

3. The path before us is demanding, and there is always the temptation to choose instead the path of isolation and division, which leads to conflict. This in turn unleashes the forces which make religion an excuse for violence, as we see too often around the world. Recently I was happy to welcome to the Vatican representatives of the world religions who had gathered to build upon the achievements of the Assisi Meeting in 1986. I repeat here what I said to that distinguished Assembly: "Religion is not, and must not become a pretext for conflict, particularly when religious, cultural and ethnic identity coincide. Religion and peace go together: to wage war in the name of religion is a blatant contradiction". Religious leaders in particular have the duty to do everything possible to ensure that religion is what God intends it to be – a source of goodness, respect, harmony and peace! This is the only way to honour God in truth and justice!

Our encounter requires that we strive to discern and welcome whatever is good and holy in one another, so that together we can acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral truths which alone guarantee the world's future (cf. *Nostra Aetate*, 2). In this sense dialogue is never an attempt to impose our own views upon others, since such dialogue would become a form of spiritual and cultural domination. This does not mean that we abandon our own convictions. What it means is that, holding firmly to what we believe, we listen respectfully to others, seeking to discern all that is good and holy, all that favours peace and cooperation.

4. It is vital to recognize that there is a close and unbreakable bond between peace and freedom. Freedom is the most noble prerogative of the human person, and one of the principal demands of freedom is the free exercise of religion in society (cf. *Dignitatis Humanae*, 3). No State, no group has the right to control either directly or indirectly a person's religious convictions, nor can it justifiably claim the right to impose or impede the public profession and practice of religion, or the respectful appeal of a particular religion to people's free conscience. Recalling this year the fiftieth

anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, I wrote that “religious freedom constitutes the very heart of human rights. Its inviolability is such that individuals must be recognized as having the right even to change their religion, if their conscience so demands. People are obliged to follow their conscience in all circumstances and cannot be forced to act against it (cf. Article 18)” (Message for the 1999 World Day of Peace, 5).

5. In India the way of dialogue and tolerance was the path followed by the great Emperors Ashoka, Akbar and Chatrapati Shivaji; by wise men like Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda; and by luminous figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, Gurudeva Tagore and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, who understood profoundly that to serve peace and harmony is a holy task. These are people who, in India and beyond, have made a significant contribution to the increased awareness of our universal brotherhood, and they point us to a future where our deep longing to pass through the door of freedom will find its fulfilment because we will pass through that door together. To choose tolerance, dialogue and cooperation as the path into the future is to preserve what is most precious in the great religious heritage of mankind. It is also to ensure that in the centuries to come the world will not be without that hope which is the life-blood of the human heart. May the Lord of heaven and earth grant this now and for ever.