



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO TUNISIA

**MEETING WITH REPRESENTANTIVES OF THE WORLD OF CULTURE, POLITICS AND
RELIGION
AT PRESIDENTIAL PALACE OF CARTHAGE**

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

April 14, 1996

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. It gives me great joy to be in Tunisia, this land of hospitality and friendship. I thank you warmly, Mr. President, for your friendly words just now, which bear witness to your country's esteem for the Church. I also thank the dignitaries who have wished to take part in this meeting. Through you, the representatives of the political, cultural and religious worlds, I am pleased to have another opportunity, though brief, to meet the Tunisian people whose courtesy, openness and tolerance do them honour. These qualities of the Tunisian character are certainly due in part to the country's geographical location as well as to its history. Tunisia belongs equally to the Arab world or, more precisely, the Maghreb, and to that of the Mediterranean. Throughout history and with the succession of the brilliant civilizations which met here, a network of relations was created and has left its mark on the country. Today Tunisia, which has been distinguished in recent decades by its achievements in the areas of education and health care, still plays an important role in the co-operation and exchanges developing throughout this region.

2. Indeed, in recent times we have witnessed a great movement to promote understanding and collaboration between the countries bordering the Mediterranean, The Holy See follows these efforts with great interest. Of course, we can only rejoice that investments and technological and cultural exchanges are creating opportunities of greater prosperity for the peoples of the two Mediterranean shores. It is essential that every level of the populations in these countries should

benefit from the advantages of the expected economic growth. Justice and mutual esteem should also ensure that each nation retain its freedom and specific identity in its relations with others. In this context, one cannot fail to encourage all who are courageously working together to build a just and lasting peace in the Middle East Without an equitable solution to the region's problems, who can reasonably speak of development and prosperity.

3. International co-operation must therefore contribute to progress the overall development of man and society, that is, to a development that concerns not only the economic aspect but involves every dimension of human life. By so doing, this co-operation will promote stability and peace. When a people's deepest aspirations are unfulfilled, the consequences can be disastrous. They can lead to simplistic solutions which threaten the freedom of individuals and societies and which some even seek to impose by violence. If, on the contrary, future prospects based on real solidarity among all are open to the citizens, they will be more encouraged to advance on the way of true human progress in justice and harmony

4. It is obvious that it is not the task of religious leaders to find technical solutions to the problems of the modern economy and international co-operation. Nonetheless, they have a great responsibility in social life. They must somehow be society's conscience, recalling the ethical principles to be considered when making concrete choices, by appealing to respect for true human values, such as respect for life, human dignity and honesty. It is also their duty to speak on behalf of those who are the weakest, the most deprived, whose voice cannot be heard.

5. Concern for the most underprivileged is not the responsibility of the public authorities alone; it must be everyone's concern. The Church in Tunisia also hopes, in her own capacity, to contribute to meeting new needs. Her institutions in the area of social assistance, which promote development, education and health care, are intended for all Tunisians. They are places for fruitful co-operation between Muslims and Christians, so that together they may contribute to the common good.

6. I must admit that I am moved by coming to this country which calls to mind the glorious pages of Christianity's history. Who could forget the names of Cyprian, Tertullian, or Augustine? I remembered them this morning as I prayed with the Christian community. But how could we fail to mention with equal admiration the contribution made by Arab civilization and the role of its thinkers, especially in the transmission of knowledge, or again, the writings of the great Tunisian philosopher, Ibn Khaldun, a forerunner in the area of historical and sociological thought?

The works produced by the great minds of this country, Christian and Muslim alike, are a rich heritage that deserves to be better known. I would also like to recall particularly in this context the importance of cultural exchanges between peoples strongly marked both by Christianity and Islam. These exchanges must be fostered and sustained, for as I said last year during my visit to the United Nations Organization, culture 'is a way of giving expression to the transcendent dimension

of human life. The heart of all culture is its approach to the greatest of all mysteries, the mystery of God' (n. 9; L'Osservatore Romano, English edition. 11 October 1995, p 9). But it is also a paradoxical fact of our contemporary world that at a time when communication is becoming easier and faster, our level of mutual knowledge is in danger of remaining superficial.

7. In our time an important development in the Muslim-Christian dialogue has come to light. The Second Vatican Council was a decisive step for Catholics, encouraging them to be open to this dialogue and collaboration with Muslims. In the well-known terms of the Declaration *Nostra aetate*, the Council urges Christians and Muslims 'that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding, for the benefit of all men, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values» (n.3). We must pay tribute to Tunisia for its initiatives in this area, for example the Islamic-Christian talks organized by the Centre for Studies and for Economic and Social Research, the contribution of Tunisian Muslims and of Christians residing in Tunisia, and the various research and study groups whose work is appreciated. And I have learned with pleasure that the development of academic exchanges between the prestigious University of Zaytouna and the pontifical universities in Rome has been requested.

8. May I consider once again with you the conditions necessary if this dialogue is to be fruitful. It is indispensable first of all that it be motivated by a true desire to know the other. It is not a question of mere human curiosity. Openness to others in some way a response to God who allows our differences and who wants us to know one another more deeply. To do this, the discovery of our true place in relation to each other is essential.

The partners in dialogue will be reassured and at ease to the extent that they are firmly rooted in their respective religions. Thus firmly rooted, they will be able to accept their differences and to avoid two contradictory stumbling blocks syncretism and indifferentism. Each will also be enabled to profit from a critical look at the other's manner of formulating and living his faith.

Faith will also be at the basis of this type of dialogue which is collaboration in the service of man and which I have already mentioned, for since we believe in God the Creator, we recognize the dignity of each human person created by him. We have our origins in God and in him our common destiny. Between these two poles we journey through history, where we must walk together in a spirit of mutual aid, in order to reach the transcendent goal God has established for us.

I would like to repeat to you the appeal I made during my visit to Senegal 'Let us together make a sincere effort to come to a deeper mutual understanding. Let our collaboration for mankind, in the name of God, be a blessing and a benefit for all people» (To Muslims leaders of Senegal, Dakar, 22 February 1992, n. 7; L'Osservatore Romano English edition, 4 March 1992, p. 5).

9. These are a few reflections on the occasion of this visit, brief it is true, but very rich in meaning. I will treasure in my heart the memory of the Tunisian people and I assure you of my prayers that

the Almighty and Merciful God will grant his abundant blessings to this country and to all its inhabitants.

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