



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO CROATIA (OCTOBER 2-4, 1998)
SPEECH TO THE PEOPLE

2 October 1998

1. Dear people of Zagreb and of all Croatia, dear young people and families: peace be with you!

Here, before this majestic Cathedral, a monument of faith and art which preserves the remains of the Servant of God Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac, I greet you in the name of the Risen Christ, the one Saviour of the world, and I embrace you all with great affection!

My thoughts go to all the beloved people of this country, to whose noble traditions of civilization I am pleased to pay homage. In a particular way, I address you Christians, who, according to the words of the Apostle Peter, must be "prepared to make a defence to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you" (1 *Pet* 3:15).

I thank Providence which has guided my steps and brought me back once more to Croatia. The words of one of your poets come spontaneously to my lips: "Here all are brothers to me / I feel really at home . . ." (D. Domjanic, *Kaj*). I would like to be able to greet personally all the people of this land, whatever their social condition: from farmers to manual workers, from housewives to professionals, from sailors and fishermen to office workers and people of culture and science; from the youngest to the elderly and the sick. My good wishes of peace and hope go to everyone!

2. With affection I turn particularly to you young people, who have come out in such great numbers to greet me upon my arrival in your country. I am especially pleased that my pilgrimage is starting off under the sign of young people.

Dear friends, in you I greet the future of this region and of the Church in Croatia. Today Christ is

knocking at the door of your hearts: open the door to welcome him in! He has the complete answers to your expectations. With him, under the loving gaze of the Blessed Virgin Mary, you will be able to build your future creatively.

Draw inspiration from the Gospel! In the light of its teaching you will be able to cultivate a healthy critical spirit in the face of fashionable conformity, and you will succeed in bringing to your world the liberating newness of the Beatitudes. Learn to distinguish between good and evil, without being hasty in judging. This is the wisdom which must be the mark of every mature person.

3. The citizen, particularly the believer, has precise responsibilities with regard to his own homeland. Your country expects from you a significant contribution in the different areas of social, economic, political and cultural life. Its future will be better to the degree that each one of you makes a commitment to self-improvement.

Human life on this earth entails difficulties of various kinds: solutions to these are certainly not to be found by seeking refuge in hedonism, consumerism, drugs or alcohol. I exhort you to face adversities with courage, to look for answers to them in the light of the Gospel. You must rediscover the resources of faith, so that you can draw from them the strength to bear courageous and consistent witness.

The Servant of God Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac, who tomorrow — God willing — I shall raise to the honours of the altar, encouraged the youth of his day: “Pay attention to yourselves and continue to grow up, because without people who are solid and mature from a moral point of view nothing is accomplished. The greatest patriots are not those who shout the loudest, but those who most conscientiously fulfil the law of God” (*Homilies, Speeches, Messages*, Zagreb 1996, p. 97).

May your youthful enthusiasm, nourished by a profound relationship with God, never fade. In this regard, the same Cardinal Stepinac said to his priests: “Put far from our youth all faint-heartedness, as though it were the plague, for it is unworthy of Catholics, who can boast so great a name as is the name of our God” (*Letters from Prison*, Zagreb 1998, p. 310).

4. I have ardently desired to make this second Visit to Croatia in order to continue the pilgrimage of faith, hope and peace begun in September 1994. Now, happily, the war is no more. My hope is that there will never again be war in this noble country. May this land, together with the entire region, become an abode of peace: true and lasting peace, which is always built upon justice, respect for others and the coexistence of different peoples and cultures.

Croatia, an integral part of Europe, has definitively closed a painful chapter of its history, leaving behind the terrible tragedies of the twentieth century in order to look towards the new millennium with a fervent desire for peace, freedom, solidarity and cooperation among peoples. I wish to quote here the words spoken by my Predecessor of venerable memory, Pius XII, on 24 December

1939: “A fundamental basis for a just and honourable peace is the guarantee of the life and independence of all Nations, big and small, strong and weak” (AAS, 32 [1940], p. 10). These words retain all their value also in the prospect of the new millennium which is now at the threshold. But they are also words which call upon every individual Nation to model its own juridical system according to what is demanded of the State ruled by law, thanks to the growing respect for the aspirations rooted in the innate dignity of the citizens who make up the State.

It is my hope that the fundamental rights of the person will be ever better recognized and embraced in this country, beginning with the right to life from its very first moments until its natural end. The degree of a Nation’s civilization is measured by the compassion which it shows its weakest and most needy members, and by its commitment to work for their rehabilitation and their full insertion into the life of society.

5. The Church feels called to be part of this process of human promotion. She knows, however, that her first and primary duty is to make her contribution by proclaiming the Gospel and forming consciences. In fulfilling this task she counts on each one of you, dear faithful people who are listening to me today: she counts on your witness and, before all else, on your prayers. It is by prayer, in fact, that we open ourselves to the constant saving presence of God in the life of every person and every people. Communion with God nourishes courage and hope in our hearts. May each one of you rediscover the immense treasures hidden in personal and community prayer!

With all my heart I hope that the people of Croatia will remain faithful to Christ also in the future. This faithfulness holds the secret of true freedom: it is Christ, in fact, who “for freedom . . . has set us free” (*Gal 5:1*). And this freedom, as one of your poets sings, “is a gift in which God Most High has given us every treasure” (I. Gundulic, *Dubravka*).

6. Goodbye until tomorrow at the Shrine of Marija Bistrica!

I now invoke the blessing of God and the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary upon all of you here present, upon all who have joined us by radio and television, and upon all the people of this country. May the Lord grant you steadfast faith, active harmony and the wisdom to make decisions inspired by the common good.

And may there never disappear from your lips the beautiful greeting which I too now address to you:

Praised by Jesus and Mary!
