



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER TO THE NEW AMBASSADOR OF DENMARK TO THE HOLY SEE*

Thursday 16 December 1999

Mr Ambassador,

I am pleased to welcome you today and to accept the Letters of Credence appointing you Ambassador of Denmark to the Holy See. I thank you for your gracious words and for the greetings which you bring from Her Majesty Queen Margrethe II, and I ask you to convey to Her Majesty, to the Government and to the people of Denmark my good wishes and the assurance of my prayers for the peace and well-being of the nation. Though now ten years ago, my visit to your land remains vivid in my memory. I was privileged then to see for myself the richness of Danish culture, the strength of Danish liberties and the generosity of Danish hearts. These are among the reasons why your country, though comparatively small in area and population, has played such a substantial role in the forging of European civilization. Denmark is a bridge between mainland Europe and the lands of the north: this has not always been an easy role for the Danish people to play, but it has been vital. And today, Denmark can play a no less significant role in this delicate time of increasing political and social union through which Europe is passing.

There is much that is positive in the pursuit of the "common European household", but events such as the appalling outbreaks of war in very recent times remind us that what has been achieved with such dedicated work on the part of so many is still exposed to serious threats of all kinds. In Europe today, the nature of conflict has changed, with wars no longer being waged between sovereign states. But conflict itself has by no means disappeared, with wars now occurring within states rather than between them. The question therefore imposes itself: what is required for there to be a genuinely stable security in Europe? There is no quick and simple answer to this complex question, but one thing is becoming increasingly clear: it is impossible to build stable security without a strong moral foundation. Three elements of such a foundation deserve careful thought on the part of all those responsible for public policy in Europe.

A first element is the recognition of a natural law, by which is meant a set of moral principles and values governing all human behaviour and relationships, anterior to any positive law which a particular state might pass. Beyond the distinctiveness of time, place, culture, personality and situation, there is a universal moral law engraved in the human

heart and accessible to human reason, directing us to do good and to avoid evil. For if there is no ultimate truth to guide personal decision, then the individual is adrift in a subjective and relativist world; and if there is no ultimate truth to guide political action, then ideas are too easily manipulated to serve the ends of the powerful. A democracy without transcendent values easily slides into some form of totalitarianism, as our own century shows so grimly. As the embodiment of these values, the natural law is a "grammar" common to all who bear responsibility for the destiny of nations.

A second element of this strong foundation is the recognition of the inalienable rights of individuals and peoples. It is the quintessence of totalitarianism to claim for government the right to concede or deny these rights. Yet in fact they have their source not in any political power but in the mystery of the human person created in the image of God. Within this perspective, it is the task of government to do what is required to protect the rights of individuals and groups and to ensure the conditions for their exercise. On a broader scale, it is the task of international organizations and agencies to safeguard the rights of the world's peoples, and it is the weakest nations who have first claim on this protection, especially at a time when the gap between rich and poor countries is increasing. Clearly, any attempt to build security in Europe without a concerted attention to human rights throughout the continent would be doomed to failure, and we must rejoice that there is an ever more clear awareness of this fact throughout public opinion.

A third element is respect for minorities, whether they be minorities deriving from different ethnic identities or different religious beliefs. In the face of the repeated and continuing attempts to suppress minorities in Europe through this century, it must be stated unequivocally that such groups have a right to maintain and develop their own culture, and that Europe will only be strong and secure to the extent that this is so.

A new phenomenon in Europe is the influx of immigrants from less developed and less prosperous lands who come to Europe in search of a better life, with Denmark one of the prime destinations. Large numbers of these immigrants can present particular challenges to a society such as yours, but people must have a right to immigrate legally in search of freedom, safety or a better life, as so many Europeans have done in the past. Nor can immigrant groups be denied the right to maintain and develop their own culture in their new land, even though they will also have to adapt to the new culture which has welcomed them. In this context, it remains pertinent in Europe to reaffirm the principle of religious freedom, a freedom which must be a fixed point of European civilization, since the whole edifice of human rights is shaken if the right to religious freedom is denied.

Mr Ambassador, Denmark is rightly proud of the level of freedom it now enjoys, a freedom which can never be taken for granted, for it is always more fragile than it seems. Danish freedom is in large part the flower of the Christian roots of Danish culture; and that is why it is right that the Dannebrog, marked with the sign of Christ's Cross, still flies indomitably as the emblem of your land and your people. It is an emblem which evokes the great Christian past of Denmark, in which luminous figures such as Saint Ansgar and the martyred King Canute stand as beacons for all time. Christianity brought to birth a free and humane society, and it must also play its part in protecting that heritage now by ensuring that freedom is tied inseparably to truth, since freedom sundered from truth quickly gives rise to new forms of slavery.

Relations between Denmark and the Holy See have at times been close, at times more distant under the pressure of religious controversy. It is my hope that in their different ways our diplomatic relations and the recent Agreement between

Catholics and Lutherans may help to consolidate a new season of cooperation between us for the good of Europe and of the entire human family.

Mr Ambassador, as you enter the community of diplomats accredited to the Holy See, I assure you of the ready collaboration of the various offices of the Roman Curia. May your mission serve to strengthen the bond of friendship between us. Upon you and your family and the people of Denmark I invoke the abundant blessings of Almighty God.

**Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II, vol. XXII, 2 p.1181-1184. L'Osservatore Romano 17.12.1999 p.5, 8. L'Osservatore Romano. Weekly edition in English n.51 p. 5, 9. © Copyright 1999 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana*

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