



# The Holy See

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***ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II  
ON THE OCCASION OF THE COMMEMORATION  
OF THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY  
OF THE EUROPEAN CONVENTION ON HUMAN RIGHTS\****

Friday, 3 November 2000

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

1. I am pleased to welcome you today on the occasion of the Ministerial Conference being held under the Presidency of Italy to commemorate the Fiftieth Anniversary of the signing in Rome on 4 November 1950 of the *European Convention on Human Rights*. I greet the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Mr Walter Schwimmer, the President of the Parliamentary Assembly, Lord Johnston, and its Secretary General, Mr Bruno Haller.

2. After the Second World War, the Council of Europe adopted a new political vision and embodied a new juridical order, enshrining the principle that respect for human rights transcends national sovereignty and cannot be subordinated to political aims or compromised by national interests. In doing so, the Council helped to lay the foundation for the moral recovery needed after the ravages of the War, and the *European Convention on Human Rights* proved a vital element of that process.

The Convention was a truly historic document, and it remains a unique legal instrument, seeking to proclaim and safeguard the fundamental rights of every citizen of the signatory States. It was a concrete and creative response to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* which in 1948 had emerged from the tragic experience of the War and was deeply rooted in the twofold conviction of the centrality of the human person and the unity of the human family. As such, the Convention represented an important moment in the maturing of the sense of the innate dignity of the human person and the awareness of the rights and duties which flow from this.

It is significant too that, after their liberation from an alien ideology and totalitarian forms of government, the new democracies of Eastern Europe turned to the Council of Europe as the focus of unity for all the peoples of the continent, a unity which cannot be conceived without the religious and moral values which are the common heritage of all the European nations. Their desire to become parties to the *European Convention on Human Rights* reflects the will to

safeguard the fundamental liberties which had for so long been denied them. In this respect, my conviction has always been that the peoples of Europe, East and West, deeply united by history and culture, share a common destiny. At the heart of our common European heritage – religious, cultural and juridical – is the notion of the inviolable dignity of the human person, which implies inalienable rights conferred not by governments or institutions but by the Creator alone, in whose image human beings have been made (cf. *Gen 1:26*).

3. Through the years, the Holy See has been involved in the Council of Europe, seeking in its own distinctive way to accompany and aid the Council's ever more extensive work in the field of human rights. Conscious of the unique role which the European Court of Human Rights plays in the affairs of Europe, the Holy See has been especially interested in the jurisprudence of the Court. The Judges are the guardians of the Convention and its vision of human rights, and I am happy to have the occasion today to welcome the President of the Court, Lucius Wildhaber, with the other honourable Judges, and to wish you well in your noble and demanding task.

The Fiftieth Anniversary of the Convention is a time to give thanks for what has been achieved and to renew our commitment to making human rights ever more fully and widely respected in Europe. It is therefore a time to recognize clearly the problems that must be addressed if this is to happen. Fundamental among these is the tendency to separate human rights from their anthropological foundation – that is, from the vision of the human person that is native to European culture. There is also a tendency to interpret rights solely from an individualistic perspective, with little consideration of the role of the family as "the fundamental unit of society" (*Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, art. 16). And there is the paradox that, on the one hand, the need to respect human rights is vigorously affirmed while, on the other, the most basic of them all – the right to life – is denied. The Council of Europe has succeeded in having the death penalty removed from the legislation of the large majority of its member States. While rejoicing in this noble achievement and looking forward to its extension to the rest of the world, it is my fervent hope that the moment will soon come when it will be equally understood that an enormous injustice is committed when innocent life in the womb is not safeguarded. This radical contradiction is possible only when freedom is sundered from the truth inherent in the reality of things, and democracy divorced from transcendent values.

4. For all the problems now evident and the challenges which lie ahead, we must be confident that the true genius of Europe will emerge in a rediscovery of the human and spiritual wisdom intrinsic to the European heritage of respect for human dignity and the rights which stem from it. As we move into the third millennium, the Council of Europe is called to consolidate the sense of a *common European good*. Only on this condition will the continent, East and West, make its specific and uniquely important contribution to the good of the entire human family. Praying fervently that this will be so, I invoke upon you, your families and your efforts in the service of the peoples of Europe the abundant blessings of Almighty God.

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\* *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, vol. XXIII, 2 pp. 760-763.

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