



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC VISIT OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II TO AZERBAIJAN AND BULGARIA

ARRIVAL CEREMONY

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER

Baku International Airport
Wednesday, 22 May 2002

*Mr President,
Civic and Religious Authorities,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

1. My respectful and cordial greetings to all of you. It was with sincere gratitude, Mr President, that I accepted your repeated invitation to visit this noble country, and now I wish to express my joy that God has granted me the gift of coming to the land of the Azeri and meeting its people.

I thank you for your kind words of welcome. This visit takes place on the tenth anniversary of the beginning of diplomatic relations between Azerbaijan and the Holy See. In these years, your experience of independence, attained after a long period of foreign domination, has involved not a little difficulty and suffering, but you have never lost the hope of *building a better future in freedom*. The nation has seen its contacts with other peoples grow and be strengthened. This has led to a mutual enrichment which will surely bring good results in the years to come.

2. I arrive in this ancient land, with my heart filled with admiration for the *variety and richness of its culture*. Enriched by the many specific features of the Caucasus, your culture embraces elements of various civilizations, especially the Persian and Turanian. *Great religions* have been present and active in this land: *Zoroastrianism* lived side by side with the *Christianity* of the Albanian Church, which was so significant in antiquity. *Islam* then played a growing role, and today is the

religion of the majority of the Azeri people. *Judaism* too, present here from very ancient times, has made its own specific contribution, which is esteemed to this day.

Even after the initial splendour of the Church diminished, Christians have continued to live side by side with the followers of other religions. This has been possible thanks to *a spirit of tolerance and mutual acceptance*, which cannot fail to be a reason for pride for the country. I hope and pray to God that any remaining tensions will soon be overcome and that all will find peace in justice and truth.

3. Azerbaijan is *a gateway between East and West*: for this reason it not only enjoys considerable strategic importance, but also *a symbol value of openness and exchange*, which, if fostered by all parties, can ensure a particularly prominent role for the Azeri nation. It is time for the West to reawaken, along with full respect for the East, *a more intense cultural and spiritual encounter* with the values it embodies.

From this gateway of civilization which is Azerbaijan, I address today *a heartfelt appeal* to those lands experiencing the upheavals of conflict, which are bringing unspeakable suffering for their defenceless peoples. *Everyone must be committed to peace*. But it must be true peace, based on mutual respect, on the rejection of fundamentalism and every form of imperialism, on the pursuit of dialogue as the only effective means of resolving tensions, so that entire nations are saved from the cruelty of violence.

4. The religions which in this country are striving to work together in harmony should not be used as a tragic excuse for enmities which have their origin elsewhere. *No one has the right to call upon God to justify their own selfish interests*.

Here at the gateway to the East, not far from where armed conflict continues, cruelly and senselessly, to prevail, I wish to raise my voice, in the spirit of the Assisi meetings. *I ask religious leaders to reject all violence as offensive to the name of God*, and to be tireless promoters of peace and harmony, with respect for the rights of one and all.

My thoughts go also to the *emigrants and refugees* in this country and throughout the whole of the Caucasus. With the help of international solidarity, *may their hopes be restored* for a future of prosperity and peace in their own lands for themselves and for their dear ones.

5. To the *Christians* of this land, and particularly *the Catholic community*, I extend affectionate greetings. The Christians of the whole world look with sincere attachment to these brothers and sisters in the faith, certain that, although they are few, they can make a significant contribution to the progress and prosperity of their homeland, in a climate of freedom and mutual respect.

I am certain that the Lord will compensate for the tragic difficulties endured during the time of

communism, also by the Catholic community, with the gift of lively faith, exemplary moral commitment and local vocations for pastoral and religious service.

At the beginning of my visit to Azerbaijan, *I invoke God's blessings upon its people* and upon their commitment to securing a future of justice and freedom.

To Azerbaijan and its noble people go my best wishes of prosperity, progress and peace!