



The Holy See

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

DEPARTURE CEREMONY

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II

Plovdiv — Airport
Sunday, 26 May 2002

*Distinguished Authorities,
Dear Brother Bishops,
Sisters and Brothers in the Lord!*

1. My visit to the beloved land of Bulgaria, although brief, *has filled my heart with emotion and joy*. The Pope has been given the opportunity to meet the Bulgarian people, to admire their virtues and qualities, to appreciate their great talents and generous energies. I give thanks to God who has granted me the possibility of making this pilgrimage *during the very days on which the memory of the Holy Brothers Cyril and Methodius, the Apostles of the Slav peoples, is celebrated*.

The expression of my gratitude goes to all who have contributed to making this visit pleasant and purposeful. In the first place, I thank the *President* of the Republic and the *Government Authorities*, who invited me, worked efficiently in planning the visit and have honoured me by their presence at the different venues.

My heartfelt thanks go also to *His Holiness Patriarch Maxim*, to the *Metropolitans* and *Bishops* of the Holy Synod, and to *all the faithful* of the Orthodox Church of Bulgaria. Not so long ago, both Catholics and Orthodox underwent harsh persecution for their fidelity to the Gospel: may so many

sacrifices make the witness of Christians in this country bear much fruit and, with the grace of God, may they hasten the day when we shall be able to rejoice in the rediscovered fulness of unity among us!

I extend a cordial greeting also to the *followers of Islam* and to the *Jewish community*. may worship of the one Most High God inspire in everyone intentions of peace, understanding and mutual respect, and a commitment to build a society founded on justice and solidarity.

2. With particular affection, my farewell is addressed to my dear *Brother Bishops* and to the *sons and daughters of the Catholic Church*: I came to Bulgaria to celebrate together with you the mysteries of our faith and to acknowledge the sublime gift of martyrdom with which Blessed Eugene Bossilkov, Kamen Vitchev, Pavel Djidjov and Josaphat Chichkov confirmed their fidelity to the Lord. *May their example be for you all a powerful incentive* to generous consistency in the practice of the Christian life.

In the light of their glorious witness I exhort you: "In your hearts reverence Christ as Lord. Always 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). In this way you will effectively serve the cause of the Gospel and contribute with particular creativity to the true progress of Bulgaria.

3. One last word to *all the beloved Bulgarian people*, without distinction. A word that echoes what was said by my predecessor, Blessed Pope John XXIII, when he left this country in December 1934. On that occasion he referred to an Irish tradition according to which, on Christmas Eve, every house places a lighted candle in the window, as an indication to Joseph and Mary that inside there is a family awaiting them at the fireside. To the crowd that had come to bid him farewell, Archbishop Roncalli said: "If anyone from Bulgaria should ever pass by my house, at night, amid life's difficulties, he will always find the candle burning in my window. Let him knock, let him knock! He will not be asked whether he is Catholic or Orthodox: he is a Bulgarian brother and that is enough. Let him come in: two brotherly arms and a friend's warm heart will welcome him to the feast" (*Christmas Homily*, 25 December 1934).

These words are repeated today by the Pope of Rome, who, as he takes leave of this beautiful *Land of Roses*, keeps before his eyes and in his heart the images of his meetings with all of you.

God bless Bulgaria, with the abundance of his grace may he make its people feel my affection and gratitude, and may he grant to the Nation days of progress, prosperity and peace.

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