

HOLY FATHER'S ANNUAL ADDRESS TO THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS

VATICAN CITY, 9 JAN 2012 (VIS) - This morning in the Sala Regia of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, Pope Benedict pronounced his traditional annual address to members of the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See. Before making his remarks, the Pope was greeted by Alejandro Emilio Valladares Lanza of Honduras, dean of the diplomatic corps, then received the greetings of the ambassadors as a whole formulated in a speech delivered by Jean-Claude Michel of the Principality of Monaco, vice dean.

The Holy See currently maintains full diplomatic relations with 179 States, to which must be added the European Union and the Sovereign Military Order of Malta. It also has relations of a special nature with the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

Furthermore, the Holy See has observer-State status at the United Nations, as well as being a member of seven organisations and agencies of the UN system, observer in eight others, and member or observer in five regional organisations.

Ample extracts of the Holy Father's address are given below:

"Through you my good wishes extend to all the nations which you represent and with which the Holy See maintains diplomatic relations. It is a joy for us that Malaysia joined this community in the past year. ... A sign of the cooperation existing between the Catholic Church and States is seen in the Accords reached in 2011 with Azerbaijan, Montenegro and Mozambique. ... The Holy See also desires to establish a fruitful dialogue with international and regional organisations, and in this context I note with satisfaction that the member States of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) have accepted the appointment of an apostolic nuncio accredited to that organisation. Nor can I fail to mention that last December the Holy See strengthened its longstanding cooperation with the International Organisation for Migration by becoming a full member".

"Finally, I wish to greet South Sudan, which last July became a sovereign State. I am happy that this was achieved peacefully. Sadly, tensions and clashes have ensued in recent months, and I express my hope that all may unite their efforts to enable the people of Sudan and South Sudan to experience at last a period of peace, freedom and development".

"Today's meeting traditionally takes place at the end of the Christmas season, during which the Church celebrates the coming of the Saviour. He comes in the dark of night and so His presence is immediately a source of light and joy. ... Truly the world is dark wherever men and women no longer acknowledge their bond with the Creator and thereby endanger their relation to other creatures and to creation itself. The present moment is sadly marked by a profound disquiet and the various crises - economic, political and social - are a dramatic expression of this.

"Here I cannot fail to address before all else the grave and disturbing developments of the global economic and financial crisis. The crisis has not only affected families and businesses in the more economically advanced countries where it originated, creating a situation in which many people, especially the young, have felt disoriented

and frustrated in their aspirations for a serene future, but it has also had a profound impact on the life of developing countries. We must not lose heart, but instead resolutely rediscover our way through new forms of commitment. The crisis can and must be an incentive to reflect on human existence and on the importance of its ethical dimension, even before we consider the mechanisms governing economic life: not only in an effort to stem private losses or to shore up national economies, but to give ourselves new rules which ensure that all can lead a dignified life and develop their abilities for the benefit of the community as a whole.

"The effects of the present moment of uncertainty are felt particularly by the young. Their disquiet has given rise in recent months to agitation which has affected various regions, at times severely. I think first and foremost of North Africa and the Middle East, where young people, among others, who are suffering from poverty and unemployment and are fearful of an uncertain future, have launched what has developed into a vast movement calling for reforms and a more active share in political and social life. ... Initial optimism has yielded to an acknowledgment of the difficulties of this moment of transition and change. ... Respect for the person must be at the centre of institutions and laws; it must lead to the end of all violence and forestall the risk that due concern for popular demands and the need for social solidarity turn into mere means for maintaining or seizing power. I invite the international community to dialogue with the actors in the current processes, in a way respectful of peoples and in the realisation that the building of stable and reconciled societies, opposed to every form of unjust discrimination, particularly religious discrimination, represents a much vaster horizon than that of short-term electoral gains.

"I am deeply concerned for the people of those countries where hostilities and acts of violence continue, particularly Syria, where I pray for a rapid end to the bloodshed and the beginning of a fruitful dialogue between the political forces, encouraged by the presence of independent observers. In the Holy Land, where tensions between Palestinians and Israelis affect the stability of the entire Middle East, it is necessary that the leaders of these two peoples adopt courageous and farsighted decisions in favour of peace. I was pleased to learn that, following an initiative of the Kingdom of Jordan, dialogue has been resumed; I express my hope that it will be maintained, and that it will lead to a lasting peace which guarantees the right of the two peoples to dwell in security in sovereign States and within secure and internationally recognised borders. ... I am also following closely the developments in Iraq, and I deplore the attacks that have recently caused so much loss of life; I encourage the nation's leaders to advance firmly on the path to full national reconciliation".

"Education is a crucial theme for every generation, for it determines the healthy development of each person and the future of all society. ... In addition to a clear goal, that of leading young people to a full knowledge of reality and thus of truth, education needs settings. Among these, pride of place goes to the family, based on the marriage of a man and a woman. This is not a simple social convention, but rather the fundamental cell of every society. Consequently, policies which undermine the family threaten human dignity and the future of humanity itself. ... There is a need for policies which promote the family and aid social cohesion and dialogue. It is in the family that we become open to the world and to life. ... In this context of openness to life, I note with satisfaction the recent sentence of the Court of Justice of

the European Union forbidding patenting processes relative to human embryonic stem cells, as well as the resolution of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe condemning prenatal selection on the basis of sex. More generally, and with particular reference to the West, I am convinced that legislative measures which not only permit but at times even promote abortion for reasons of convenience or for questionable medical motives compromise the education of young people and, as a result, the future of humanity.

"A similarly essential role in the development of the person is played by educational institutions. ... There is a need to implement educational policies which ensure that schooling is available to everyone and which, in addition to promoting the cognitive development of the individual, show concern for a balanced personal growth, including openness to the Transcendent. The Catholic Church has always been particularly active in the field of education and schooling, making a valued contribution alongside that of State institutions. It is my hope that this contribution will be acknowledged and prized also by the legislation of the various nations.

"In this perspective, it is clear that an effective educational programme also calls for respect for religious freedom. This freedom has individual, collective and institutional dimensions. We are speaking of the first of human rights, for it expresses the most fundamental reality of the person. All too often, for various reasons, this right remains limited or is flouted. I cannot raise this subject without first paying tribute to the memory of the Pakistani Minister Shahbaz Bhatti, whose untiring battle for the rights of minorities ended in his tragic death.

"Sadly, we are not speaking of an isolated case. In many countries Christians are deprived of fundamental rights and sidelined from public life; in other countries they endure violent attacks against their churches and their homes. ... In other parts of the world, we see policies aimed at marginalising the role of religion in the life of society, as if it were a cause of intolerance rather than a valued contribution to education in respect for human dignity, justice and peace. In the past year religiously motivated terrorism has also reaped numerous victims, especially in Asia and in Africa. ... Religion cannot be employed as a pretext for setting aside the rules of justice and of law for the sake of the intended 'good'".

"I would also like to bring up several encouraging signs in the area of religious freedom. I am referring to the legislative amendment whereby the public juridical personality of religious minorities was recognised in Georgia; I think too of the sentence of the European Court of Human Rights upholding the presence of the crucifix in Italian schoolrooms. ... I hope that Italy will continue to foster a stable relationship between Church and State, and thus serve as an example to which other nations can look with respect and interest.

"On the continent of Africa ... it is essential that cooperation between Christian communities and governments favour progress along the path of justice, peace and reconciliation, where respect is shown for members of all ethnic groups and all religions. It is painful to realise that in different countries of the continent this goal remains distant. I think in particular of the renewed outbreak of violence in Nigeria, the aftermath of the civil war in Cote d'Ivoire, the continuing instability in the Great Lakes region and the humanitarian emergency in the countries of the Horn of Africa.

I once again appeal to the international community to make every effort to find a solution to the crisis which has gone on for years in Somalia.

"Finally I would stress that education, correctly understood, cannot fail to foster respect for creation. We cannot disregard the grave natural calamities which in 2011 affected various regions of South-East Asia, or ecological disasters like that of the Fukushima nuclear plant in Japan. Environmental protection and the connection between fighting poverty and fighting climate change are important areas for the promotion of integral human development. For this reason, I hope that, pursuant to the seventeenth session of the Conference of States Parties to the UN Convention on Climate Change recently concluded in Durban, the international community will prepare for the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio + 20) as an authentic 'family of nations' and thus with a great sense of solidarity and responsibility towards present and future generations".

"Inspired by the certainty of faith, the Holy See continues to offer its proper contribution to the international community in accordance with the twofold desire clearly enunciated by Vatican Council II, whose fiftieth anniversary takes place this year: to proclaim the lofty grandeur of our human calling and the presence within us of a divine seed, and to offer humanity sincere cooperation in building a sense of universal fraternity corresponding to this calling".

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