

Pope John Paul II celebrates bicentennial of U.S. Constitution

The following speech was delivered by the Pope on Sept. 10 in Miami, Florida, at a meeting with President Reagan. The text was distributed to the press, in an unofficial translation.

Mr. President,

1. I am grateful for the great courtesy that you extend to me by coming personally to meet me in this city of Miami. Thank you for this gesture of kindness and respect.

On my part I cordially greet you as the elected chief executive of the United States of America. In addressing you I express my own deep respect for the constitutional structure of this democracy, which you are called to "preserve, protect and defend." In addressing you, Mr. President, I greet once again all the American people with their history, their achievements, and their great possibilities of serving humanity.

I willingly pay honor to the United States for what she has accomplished for her own people, for all those whom she has embraced in a cultural creativity and welcomed into an indivisible national unity, according to her own motto: *E pluribus unum*. I thank America and all Americans—those of past generations and those of the present—for their generosity to millions of their fellow human beings in need throughout the world. Also today, I wish to extol the blessings and gifts that America has received from God and cultivated, and which have become the true values of the whole American experiment in the past two centuries.

2. For all of you this is a special hour in your history: the celebration of the Bicentennial of your Constitution. It is a time to recognize the meaning of that document and to reflect on important aspects of the constitutionalism that produced it. It is a time to recall the original American political faith with its appeal to the sovereignty of God. To celebrate the origin of the United States is to stress those moral and spiritual principles: those ethical concerns that influenced your Founding Fathers and have been incorporated into the experience of America.

Eleven years ago, when your country was celebrating

another great document, the Declaration of Independence, my predecessor Paul VI spoke to American Congressmen in Rome. His statement is still pertinent today: "At every turn," he said, "your Bicentennial speaks to you of moral principles, religious convictions, inalienable rights given by the Creator." And he added: "We earnestly hope that . . . this commemoration of your Bicentennial will constitute a rededication to those sound moral principles formulated by your Founding Fathers and enshrined forever in your history" (Address of April 26, 1976).

3. Among the many admirable values of this nation there is one that stands out in particular. It is freedom. The concept of freedom is part of the very fabric of this nation as a political community of free people. Freedom is a great gift, a great blessing of God.

From the beginning of America, freedom was directed to forming a well-ordered society and to promoting its peaceful life. Freedom was channeled to the fullness of human life, to the preservation of human dignity and to the safeguarding of all human rights. An experience in ordered freedom is truly a cherished part of the history of this land.

This is the freedom that America is called to live and guard and to transmit. She is called to exercise it in such a way that it will also benefit the cause of freedom in other nations and among other peoples. The only true freedom, the only freedom that can truly satisfy is the freedom to do what we ought as human beings created by God according to his plan. It is the freedom to live the truth of what we are and who we are before God, the truth of our identity as children of God, as brothers and sisters in a common humanity. That is why Jesus Christ linked truth and freedom together, stating solemnly: "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). All people are called to recognize the liberating truth of the sovereignty of God over them both as individuals and as nations.

4. The effort to guard and perfect the gift of freedom must also include the relentless pursuit of truth. In speaking to



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Pope John Paul II on a visit to Munich, West Germany, earlier this year. Behind him is a banner of the Schiller Institute, with the slogan, "Peace Means Development."

Americans on another occasion about the relationship between freedom and truth, I said that as a people you have a shared responsibility for preserving freedom and for purifying it. Like so many other things of great value, freedom is fragile. Saint Peter recognized this when he told the Christians never to use their freedom "as a pretext for evil" (1 Pt 2:16). Any distortion of truth or dissemination of non-truth is an offense against freedom; any manipulation of public opinion, any abuse of authority or power, or, on the other hand, just the omission of vigilance, endangers the heritage of a free people. But even more important, every contribution to promoting truth in charity consolidates freedom and builds up peace. When shared responsibility for freedom is truly accepted by all, a great new force is set at work for the service of humanity" (Address of June 21, 1980).

5. Service to humanity has always been a special part of the vocation of America and is still relevant today. In continuity with what I said to the President of the United States in 1979 I would now repeat: "Attachment to human values and to ethical concerns, which have been a hallmark of the American people, must be situated, especially in the present context of the growing interdependence of peoples across the globe, within the framework of the view that the common good of society embraces not just the individual nation to which one belongs but the citizens of the whole world. . . . The present-day relationships between peoples and between nations demand the establishment of greater international cooperation also in the economic field. The more powerful a nation is,

the greater becomes its international responsibility, the greater also must be its commitment to the betterment of the lot of those whose very humanity is constantly being threatened by want and need . . . America, which in the past decades has demonstrated goodness and generosity in providing food for the hungry of the world, will, I am sure, be able to match this generosity with an equally convincing contribution to the establishing of a world order that will create the necessary economic and trade conditions for a more just relationship between all the nations of the world, in respect for their dignity and their own personality" (Address at the White House, October 6, 1979).

6. Linked to service, freedom is indeed a great gift of God to this nation. America needs freedom to be herself and to fulfill her mission in the world. At a difficult moment in the history of this country, a great American, Abraham Lincoln, spoke of a special need at that time: "that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom." A new birth of freedom is repeatedly necessary: freedom to exercise responsibility and generosity, freedom to meet the challenge of serving humanity, the freedom necessary to fulfill human destiny, the freedom to live by truth, to defend it against whatever distorts and manipulates it, the freedom to observe God's law—which is the supreme standard of all human liberty—the freedom to live as children of God, secure and happy: the freedom to be America in that constitutional democracy which was conceived to be "One Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."