

DOCUMENTATION

Address from the Holy See to the Government, Diplomatic Corps and Religious Leaders, 11 May 1984, Bangkok, Thailand.

Mr Prime Minister,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Friends,

1. It is a distinct pleasure for me to address you this evening and to offer you, and those whom you represent, my very cordial greetings and heartfelt gratitude for your presence here.

The friendly relations that have existed between the Holy See and the Kingdom of Thailand stretch back into history some three hundred years. In 1669, during the reign of King Narai the Great and the pontificate of Pope Innocent XI, the first Vicariate Apostolic was erected in the sacred city of Ayutthaya. Modern times witnessed a growing desire for closer ties between the Holy See and Thailand, until formal diplomatic relations were established in 1969.

The present status of relations reflects the *mutual trust* that exists between the Holy See and Thailand. It gives ample assurance to the Government of Thailand that there is no incompatibility on any level between a Thai citizen's loyalty to his country and his acceptance of the Christian Gospel and membership of the Catholic Church. Indeed, the promotion of the virtue of patriotism has a long tradition in Catholic teaching, as the history of the many heroic Catholic patriots in various countries round the world attests to.

2. The Catholic Church is a universal community whose members belong to almost all countries and continents, nations, races, languages and cultures. She sees as an important part of her mission the task of seeking out ways for understanding and peaceful collaboration among peoples, and she promotes initiatives which safeguard and defend the *God-given dignity of the human person*.

For this reason, I wish to take the opportunity tonight to call to your attention, as representatives of governments and nations, a problem of immense magnitude. To keep silent about it would be a kind of denial of what the Catholic Church teaches about human dignity and about how individuals and nations can and should respond in defence of that dignity. I speak of *the plight of the thousands and thousands of refugees* currently living in this country. My deep concern for their welfare and future impels me to mention the subject in this assembly and to speak out on their behalf.

Through the courtesy of the Thai Government, I had the opportunity this morning to visit *the Refugee Camp at Phanat Nikhom*, a processing and transit centre for over seventeen thousand men, women and children who have been exiled from their own countries and have sought asylum here in Thailand. It was a particularly moving experience for me because, as I looked into the faces of so many suffering human beings, at the same time I

realized that there were thousands more in a similar situation, living in the various other camps in this country.

The sad lot of these courageous and unfortunate people cannot be ignored by *the international community*. Indeed, the conscience of humanity must be made ever more aware of the evils of the situation, so that prompt and decisive action may be taken towards an adequate solution.

3. *The poverty of these victims* of political unrest and civil strife is so extreme on virtually all levels of human existence, that it is difficult for the outsider to fathom it. Not only have they lost their material possessions and the work which once enabled them to earn a living for their families and prepare a secure future for their children, but their families themselves have been uprooted and scattered: husbands and wives separated, children separated from their parents. In their native lands they have left behind the tombs of their ancestors, and thus, in a very real way, they have left behind a part of themselves, thereby becoming still poorer.

Many of the refugees have endured great dangers in their flight by sea or land. All too many were given up for lost or died *en route*, often the victims of shameless exploitation. Arriving here completely destitute, they have found themselves in *a state of total dependence* on others to feed them, clothe them, shelter them and make every decision for their future.

And how much greater is the poverty of the aged, the infirmed and the handicapped, who experience particular difficulty in finding a country willing to give them stable asylum. These countless victims are indeed enduring *a cruel misfortune*: unable to return to their own countries, they cannot remain indefinitely in their present state. What are they to do? Does the path which they have been forced to follow offer them real hope for the future?

4. The desperate appeals of these suffering men, women and children have been heard by *many compassionate people*, both in Thailand and around the world, who offer a ray of hope. At this time, I would like to express my admiration and appreciation to the various groups who have assisted the refugees during their stay in this country.

In the first place, I wish to express my gratitude to *the Government and people of Thailand*. They are to be thanked especially for having agreed to be, for many years now, the country of first asylum for thousands and thousands of refugees from other parts of South-east Asia. The international community knows the difficulties which they have encountered. These difficulties are not only of a material nature. The internal and external political order of the nation have been affected by the steady influx of refugees. The departure of these same people to resettlement countries has not proceeded at nearly the same rate.

History will record the sense of hospitality, the respect for life and the deeply rooted generosity shown by the people of Thailand. These national traits have enabled the Thai authorities to overcome many obstacles and thus provide a measure of hope for so many people living on the verge of despair. To His Majesty the King and to the Government and people of Thailand, I renew my deep appreciation.

I also acknowledge, with profound esteem, the work of *the United Nations High Commission for Refugees*. This organization's great solicitude for the protection and assistance of refugees throughout the world has moved it not only to assume, with the constant help of governments, the financial burdens of first asylum, but also responsibility for encouraging nations to accept refugees and to offer them a real chance of settling down and making a new life. The generous response of these many *host nations* is well known and has certainly earned the enduring gratitude of the refugees.

Similar human solidarity is being manifested in a very clear way by numerous *non-governmental organizations*, both of a confessional and non-confessional nature. I would like to single out the work of COERR (Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees), and I am also glad to mention the many other national and international organizations which are cooperating in this urgent mission of mercy. These bodies have assisted the refugees by providing educational facilities, by helping to safeguard their cultural identity, and by offering them moral and psychological support.

In addition, the contribution of many *Catholic organizations* is an expression of the generosity and solidarity of numerous local churches in other parts of the world. Here, I would like to express a special word of thanks to those who have given religious assistance to the refugees, satisfying their spiritual hunger while at the same time respecting the beliefs of those concerned.

Finally, I cannot pass over in silence the contribution made by *the many volunteers*, especially young people, who have come from all parts of the world to put themselves at the service of the refugees. Their experiences will impress them deeply and may well give a new orientation to their own lives.

To all these individuals and groups I offer a word of deep gratitude and praise. Although they are unable to meet all the needs of their less fortunate brothers and sisters, these generous people, through a magnificent example of cooperation, show the refugees that they are not abandoned and that *they still have reason for hope*, even in the midst of unspeakable tragedy.

Furthermore, when we consider the vast numbers of people living in the camps, these many agencies and groups help to remind us that each refugee is *an individual human being*, with his or her own dignity and personal history, with his or her own culture, experiences and legitimate expectations. Many of the refugees have written to me, expressing their anxieties and aspirations, and I have been deeply moved by their pleas for attention and help.

5. However, the many efforts being made towards relieving the sufferings of the refugees should not be a convenient excuse for the international community to stop being concerned for *the ultimate future* of these people. The fact remains that it is something repugnant and abnormal for hundreds of thousands of human beings to have to leave their own countries because of their race, ethnic origin, political convictions, or religion, or because they are in danger of violence or even death from civil strife or political turmoil. Exile seriously violates the human conscience and the norms of life in society; it is clearly contrary to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to international law itself.

Consequently, the governments of the world and the international community at large must focus their attention on *long-range political solutions* to the complex problem.

Resettlement alone can never be the final answer to these people's plight. They have *a right to go back to their roots*, to return to their native land with its national sovereignty and its right to independence and self-determination; they have a right to all the cultural and spiritual relationships which nourish and sustain them as human beings.

6. In the final analysis, then, the problem cannot be solved unless the conditions are created whereby genuine *reconciliation* may take place: reconciliation between nations, between various sectors of a given national community, within each ethnic group and between ethnic groups themselves. In a word, there is an urgent need to forgive and forget the past and to work together to build a better future.

Within the context of my appeal for reconciliation, I wish to acknowledge the various

representatives of other religious and spiritual traditions who have honoured this assembly tonight. Their presence bears witness to a shared conviction of the duty to discern more clearly the values belonging to the spiritual dimension of human existence. From this perspective, one can readily see that *united efforts* by Christians and members of non-Christian religions in the task of reconciling individuals and groups, one with another, can be a fruitful field of common labour. This is especially true since such efforts respond to a fundamental instinct of the human spirit.

7. Ladies and Gentlemen, from this place tonight I wish to renew the appeals I have made on other occasions to representatives of governments and international organizations, to increase and intensify all efforts so that the *refugees*, both here in Thailand and elsewhere *may be received back into their homeland*, in which they have a *natural human right* to live in freedom, dignity, and peace.

The Catholic Church, for her part, offers the assurance of her *unflinching support* for any measures which pursue this goal. She likewise pledges her constant availability to assist, as much as she can and solely out of her love and respect for the human person, in any efforts aimed at re-establishing the just conditions and circumstances to which every refugee has a human right and without which true and lasting peace cannot be possible.

May our common endeavours on behalf of the dignity of the human person bring upon us abundant blessings from God, who is the source of all human dignity and who calls us to acknowledge and respect that dignity as his precious gift.

May God sustain you in the great mission of *servicing humanity in need*.

SOURCE: Office of the Holy See, Rome.