

# JOHN PAUL II'S SPEECHES TO COMMEMORATE THE SAINTS CYRIL AND METHODIUS ALONG WITH BULGARIANS

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This article analyzes the speeches prepared by John Paul II for the annual visits of Bulgarian delegations on the occasion of celebrations of the Saints Cyril and Methodius (around May 24<sup>th</sup>). The fourteen texts prepared for these visits together with his speeches during the Pope's Apostolic Journey to Bulgaria in 2002 and during the presentations of letters of credence for Bulgarian Ambassadors to the Holy See present a very interesting and understudied material for a better analysis of the Pope's Slavic, ecumenical and European ideas. The Pope sees this tradition as a continuation of politics of John XXIII and Paul VI.

**Key words:** John Paul II, Cyril and Methodius, Bulgaria, Eastern and Western Europe, Karol Wojtyła, Slavic culture, Orthodox tradition, pope's letters, Slavic idea.

Omawia się coroczne wystąpienia Jana Pawła II przy okazji wizyt oficjalnych delegacji Bułgarii dla uczczenia Świętych Cyryla i Metodego (około 24 maja). Tych 14 tekstów uzupełnia obraz papieskiej idei słowiańskiej, europejskiej i ekumenicznej. Mają one bardzo podobną strukturę. Papież za każdym razem podkreśla znaczenie Świętych, cytuje fragment swojej encykliki *Slavorum apostoli*, koncentrując się na zagadnieniach europejskich bądź ekumenicznych. Uważa swoją politykę za kontynuację kontaktów rozpoczętych przez Jana XXIII i Pawła VI. Po wizycie apostolskiej w Bułgarii ton papieża staje się osobisty, a w samych wystąpieniach podkreśla on konieczność dialogu jako narzędzia prowadzącego do wzajemnego zrozumienia.

**Słowa-klucze:** Jan Paweł II, Cyryl i Metody, Bułgaria, Wschodnia i Zachodnia Europa, Słowiańszczyzna, prawosławie, listy papieskie, inkulturacja.

Every year, around May 24<sup>th</sup>, a Bulgarian delegation arrives in Rome to celebrate the day of the Saints Cyril and Methodius. These meetings present an interesting material for the studies of John Paul II's Slavic idea, and they offer a broader view of his vision of modern Europe. In addition, these meetings are the permanent point in the relations between the Vatican and Slavic Orthodox countries.

It is important to highlight the mixed character of all delegations: there are always representatives of the laity, Orthodox church and the Catholic church. In 1993, receiving the Bulgarian delegation under the leadership of the ex-President of the National Assembly at the time,

Stefan Savov<sup>1</sup>, pope John Paul II points out that such character of representatives suggests not only the importance, but also the national character of the day of Saints Cyril and Methodius. The celebrations dedicated to these two saints, equally venerated in the East and the West, are also a festivity of culture and literature in Bulgaria. John Paul II sees these visits not only as a pilgrimage, but mainly as a constant meeting point throughout time between East and West, Greek-Slavic and Latin. In fact, every year the Pope received delegations from Bulgaria (and also Macedonia) and delivered a speech every time. The most readily available context for them are the statements of John Paul II on the occasion of receiving the letters of credence of Bulgarian ambassadors to the Holy See, visits ad limina of the Catholic bishops, and the very interesting and much more complex speeches during the pope's visit to Sofia, Plovdiv and the Rila Monastery (May 23-26, 2002).

The short speeches prepared to welcome delegations have a very uniform structure. The Pope expresses his joy at continuing the tradition of the annual meetings and sends greetings to the whole nation, civil authorities and clergy. The main part of the discourse is based on a quotation – or sometimes two of them – of his encyclical *Slavorum Apostoli*<sup>2</sup> (SA). Of course, even if the Cyrillo-Methodian topic remains central, it strictly interweaves with the Pope's reflections on the history of Europe, ecumenical issues, relation between inculturation<sup>3</sup>, interculturality and culture, and also on the European unity.

John Paul's speech on December 13<sup>th</sup>, 1978, addressed at Bulgarian Foreign Minister Petar Mladenov<sup>4</sup>, can be considered to be his first Cyrillo-Methodian text. For the first time, the Pope points out that thanks to the foundations laid by Cyril and Methodius it is possible to show that Christian faith and culture, although often considered contradictory terms, in fact enrich each other.

The Pope's close relations with Bulgaria are treated as a continuation of the promise made by the future John XXIII, who at the end of his apostolic mission in Bulgaria assured that “*any Bulgarian, Orthodox or Catholic, whoever arrives at my door, wherever I may be, has only to*

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<sup>1</sup> Stefan Savov (January 8th, 1924- January 8th, 2000) – a social and political activist, translator from Spanish, and President of National Assembly 1991-1992.

<sup>2</sup> John Paul II 1985: John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Slavorum Apostoli*: June 2<sup>nd</sup> [date of entering 01.07.2016] <[http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_19850602\\_slavorum-apostoli.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_19850602_slavorum-apostoli.html)>.

<sup>3</sup> In Christianity inculturation is the adaptation of the way Church teachings are presented to non-Christian cultures and, in turn, the influence of those cultures on the evolution of these teachings. This is a term that is generally used by Roman Catholics, whereas Protestants tend to use the term *contextual theology*. The term “inculturation” first appeared in a Vatican document in 1979 (*Catechesi tradendae*, n. 53).

<sup>4</sup> Petar Toshev Mladenov (22 August 1936 – 31 May 2000) was a Bulgarian communist diplomat and politician. He was foreign minister between 13 December 1971 – 24 October 1989. He was the last Communist leader of Bulgaria from 1989 to 1990, and briefly the first President of democratic Bulgaria in 1990.

*knock. It will be enough to say you are a brother from Bulgaria and two arms will embrace you and will prepare you a feast”* (Trevor 2000: 159).

This kind of reference to the sympathy that John XXIII had for the Bulgarian nation appears in several other speeches where John Paul II knowingly assumes this tone; this is particularly clear in the speeches written for receiving the credentials of Bulgarian ambassadors to the Holy See (1992 and 1998).

The first of John Paul II’s *May-texts* addressed to a Bulgarian delegation comes from 25 May, 1979. The Orthodox and the Catholic delegations are also present in the Vatican Library at the opening of the exhibition dedicated to the Vatican’s manuscripts and documents regarding Bulgaria and Bulgarian nation. The Pope uses this fact to highlight that “*the ties of the Holy See with Bulgaria, on the ecclesiastical and civil plane, do not date from yesterday but go back many centuries”* (John Paul II 1979).

According to John Paul II, the annual high-level visits confirm that the Bulgarian nation recognizes the importance of the evangelizing mission of the Holy Brothers and its decisive role for the future of all Slavic peoples, as well as the fact that it has marked the history of spirituality and European culture in an indisputable way.

In 1997, John Paul II, citing the passage from SA 10, notes that the creation of the alphabet for the Slavic language determined the culture and literature of all Slavic nations. In this work, as the Pope has repeatedly emphasized, Bulgaria has played a special role: “*the mission of the holy brothers was confirmed and developed in your country thanks to very dynamic centers of monastic life. From Bulgaria, Christianity then spread to the neighboring countries and extended as far as Kievan Rus”* (John Paul II 1985).

From 1992, we can find two texts addressed to Bulgarian delegations. First, as always, the May text mentions the importance of Saint Kilment Ohridski. The second one is addressed to Kiril Marichkov, on the occasion of the presentation of the letter accrediting him as the first Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Bulgaria to the Apostolic See (1992-1998). For the Pope, it is also an important milestone in the relations between the Holy See and the noble nation of Bulgaria. Using this occasion, through remembering again the Apostolic mission of John XXIII, John Paul II dedicates much more attention to the situation of the Catholic minority in Bulgaria. He emphasizes the fact that the Catholic community, even if not very numerous, “*want[s] to participate actively in society (...) regardless of social or ethnic origin or religious creed, in*

*order to affirm the national conscience which has already expressed itself so greatly in the peaceful transition to democracy*" (John Paul II, 1992b).

In 2004, speaking to the Chairman of the Bulgarian Parliament Oghnjan Gerdjikov<sup>5</sup>, the Pope linked the soul of the Bulgarian people, its identity and strength with the example of the Holy Brothers from Salonika. On this occasion, he pointed out that Bulgaria had managed to find its place on the international stage and underlined that the efforts for acceding to the EU were not only evidence of freedom and democracy prevailing in the country, but that in the future this may lead to cultural enrichment and a spiritual Union. He hoped "*that Bulgaria will be able to achieve its legitimate aspirations and make its own contribution to building Europe, thanks to its cultural and spiritual riches that derive from age-old traditions*" (John Paul II 2004).

In 1997, the Pope said that Europe was currently seeking its identity, needed its Christian roots and one year later he suggested that Cyril and Methodius could help in the continuation of the process of European unification on two planes – religious and social – maintaining their own practices, and co-existing in peace and harmony. In 2001, he showed that Europe was still looking for its own identity and unity and should be *made fruitful by the Gospel, which is deeply rooted in the popular culture* (John Paul II 2001).

In 1995, too, the need of dialogue and the pursuit of unity of the Church were the central theme of Pope's speech. What is more, John Paul II invited new teaching of the mission of Cyril and Methodius in view of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium.

The text of 2003 is the first after the Pope's visit to Bulgaria. The Pope was visibly moved by the memories of his visits. He hoped that from then on visits to Rome may also be a celebration of the anniversaries of that meeting. It was a special celebration, not only because of the important participants, but mainly because the Orthodox Roman municipality – created in a hurry – have received the church of Saint Vincent and Saint Anastasius at the Trevi Fountain on lease. At the end of November in the same year, John Paul II received a visit by the President of the Republic of Bulgaria, Georgi Parvanov<sup>6</sup>, shortly after the President has accepted a religious act, recognizing Orthodoxy as the dominant religion in Bulgaria. In this speech, John Paul II again recalled his stay

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<sup>5</sup> Oghnjan Stefanov Gerdjikov (born 19 March 1946) is a Bulgarian politician and jurist. He served as the chair of the Bulgarian Parliament between July 5, 2001 and February 4, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Georgi Sedefchov Parvanov (born 28 June 1957) is a Bulgarian historian and politician who was President of Bulgaria from 2002 to 2012. He took office on 22 January 2002. He was reelected in a landslide victory in 2006, becoming the first Bulgarian president to serve two terms. Parvanov was a supporter of Bulgaria's membership in NATO and the European Union.

in Bulgaria and pointed out that all of Europe expected from both Catholics and Orthodox Christians joint decisive action in defense of human rights and the culture of life.

This group of texts deserves further study and they need to be placed in a wider context of other texts dedicated to Bulgarians. Some of them add to Cyrilo-Methodian studies, others enrich the Pope's statements often giving them a more personal and specific nature. They are an interesting material on religious and political life in Bulgaria during the pontificate of John Paul II and an important addition to the history of the relations between this country and its Orthodox church with the Holy See. It is worth noting that during the pontificate of Benedict the annual visits continued and the Pope's speeches (2005, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011) are available online, while pope Francis I, although having many texts written for Bulgarians, does not have one dedicated to a delegation to commemorate Saint Cyril and Saint Methodius.

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