

JOHN PAUL II

ADDRESS TO THE WORLD OF CULTURE

*Tuesday, 9 November 1999
Tbilisi, State Residence*

*Mr President,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

1. I have greatly looked forward to this meeting with the men and women of culture, science and the arts of Georgia, for you are in a real way the representatives and the guardians of Georgia's unique cultural heritage. Georgia is well known as a country of poets and artists, and the proud heir of an ancient tradition, enriched down the centuries by elements drawn from contacts with other nations and peoples. Now, with the collapse of walls which for so long symbolized the separation between East and West, Georgia has entered upon a new and challenging chapter in its history, and is fully committed to rebuilding its social fabric and creating a future of hope and prosperity for its people. As representatives of the world of culture, you have an irreplaceable role in this process. It is up to you to forge a new cultural vision that will draw upon the heritage of the past in order to inspire and shape the future. This noble task becomes a sacred trust at the time when Georgia is about to celebrate its three thousandth anniversary as a nation.

I am particularly grateful to President Shevardnadze for presiding at this meeting, and I thank him for his warm welcome and kind words of introduction. To all of you, distinguished guests, I express the hope that my visit will serve to highlight Georgia's special vocation as a builder of peace throughout this region and as a bridge between the countries of the Caucasus and the rest of Europe.

2. In addressing you today, I cannot but recall the contribution of Christianity to Georgian culture. It is a significant fact that for many centuries your national literature was almost exclusively religious in inspiration. This reflects something which holds true for all human culture. Culture in fact is a reality born of self-transcendence; it takes shape from an impulse by which human individuality seeks to rise above its limitations in an interior drive to communicate and share. In this sense, we may say that culture has its ultimate roots in man's "naturally religious soul". For the inner force which man experiences, and which impels him to seek the fulfilment of his being in his relations with others, remains unsatisfied until it attains the Other who is Absolute.

It is precisely in this movement of self-transcendence, of recognition of the other, of the need to communicate with the other, that culture is created. But this drive towards the other is possible only through love. Ultimately, it is love alone which succeeds in uprooting the tragic selfishness that lies deep within the human heart. It is love which helps us to place others and the Other at the centre of our lives. Christians have always sought to create a culture which is fundamentally open to the eternal and transcendent, while at the same time attentive to the temporal, the concrete, the human. Generations of Christians have striven to build and to pass on a culture, the goal of which is an ever more profound and universal fraternal communion of persons. Yet this universality is not one of oppressive uniformity. Genuine culture respects the mystery of the

human person, and must therefore involve a dynamic exchange between the particular and the universal. It must seek a synthesis of unity and diversity. Love alone is capable of holding this tension in a creative and fruitful balance.

3. These thoughts come spontaneously to mind in considering the ancient Christian culture of Georgia. The preaching of the Gospel not only made known the word of salvation but also prompted the birth of the Georgian alphabet and the subsequent growth of your national identity. The Christian faith inspired a love for the written word which has had a profound effect on your language, your literature and your whole cultural life.

The tradition according to which Georgians present at the Crucifixion of Christ brought back from Jerusalem the seamless tunic of the Lord symbolizes as it were the nation's resolute aspiration to unity. So too, the traditions according to which the Gospel was preached in your country by the Apostles Andrew and Simon, as well as by Saint Clement of Rome, exiled to the mines of the Chersonese. While they emphasize the venerable antiquity of the Church in Georgia, such traditions are also an indication of a profound consciousness of the bonds of communion which the Church in this land maintained within the one Church of Christ. A sign of the importance attached to this communion are the many translations which are part of Georgian religious literature; these represent a genuine treasure which you have shared with the whole Christian world, preserving as well texts which otherwise would have been lost. Another testimony of this openness and exchange are the Georgian monasteries and monks present in different parts of the Christian world; we need only think of the Monastery of Iviron on Mount Athos. This openness of your culture, so evident in the past, is equally important today. We all know how essential it is, especially in this part of the world, to promote a culture of solidarity and cooperation, a culture capable of combining all the richness of your own identity with the wealth found in the encounter with other peoples and societies.

4. We now see a process of globalization which tends to underestimate distinctiveness and variety, and which is marked by the rise of new forms of ethno- centrism and exaggerated nationalism. In such a situation, the challenge is to promote and pass on a living culture, a culture capable of fostering communication and brotherhood between different groups and peoples, and between the different fields of human creativity. Today's world is challenging us, in other words, to know and respect one another in and through the diversity of our cultures. If we respond, the human family will enjoy unity and peace, while individual cultures will be enriched and renewed, purified of all that poses an obstacle to mutual encounter and dialogue.

One of the most difficult challenges of our time is the encounter between tradition and modernity. This dialogue between old and new will in great part determine the future of the younger generation, and therefore the future of the nation. It is a dialogue which calls for much thought and reflection, and demands a wise equilibrium, for much is at stake. On the one hand, there can be the temptation to take refuge in forms of nostalgia closed to what is positive in the contemporary world. On the other hand there is a strong tendency today to adopt uncritically the syncretism and existential aimlessness which are typical of a certain modernity. In meeting the cultural challenges of the present, Georgia's spiritual heritage is a resource of inestimable value, for it preserves the great treasure of a unified and comprehensive notion of man and his destiny. This heritage and the traditions which spring from it are a precious birthright of all Georgians, which even the stones proclaim — we need only think of that remarkable jewel which is the church of Jvari, a beacon of spiritual light for your land.

5. Today there is an urgent need to recover the vision of an organic unity embracing man and all of human history. Christians are convinced that at the heart of this unity is the mystery of Christ, the Incarnate Word of God, who reveals man to himself and discloses his sublime vocation (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 22). Do not be afraid of Christ! Faith in him opens before us a spiritual world that has inspired and continues to inspire humanity's intellectual and artistic energies. Christ sets us free for authentic creativity precisely because he makes us capable of entering into the mystery of Love, the love of God and the love of man, and in doing so he makes it possible for us to appreciate and at the same time to transcend particularity.

May men and women committed to the arts, science, politics and culture use their creativity for the promotion of life in all its truth and beauty and goodness. This can only be done by striving for an integral vision of man. Where such a vision is weak, human dignity is diminished, and the goods of creation, meant for the benefit and progress of humanity, sooner or later turn against man and against life. The century now drawing to a close, with its painful experiences of war, violence, torture and various forms of ideological oppression, testifies all too eloquently to this. At the same time, it stands as a witness to the enduring power of the human spirit to triumph over all that seeks to suffocate the irrepressible quest for truth and freedom.

Dear friends, I offer my cordial good wishes for your work and I pray that the Jubilee of Christ which we are preparing to celebrate will be an invitation to all people of good will to work together to build a future of hope, a true civilization of love. Upon all of you I invoke the light and joy which are the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life.

(Pope John Paul II Address to the world of culture, State Residence, Tbilisi, Tuesday, 9 November 1999)