

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO H.E. MRS CORINNE (LINDY) CLAIBORNE BOGGS
NEW AMBASSADOR OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
TO THE HOLY SEE**

16 December 1997

Your Excellency,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the Vatican for the presentation of the Letters of Credence by which you are appointed Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the United States of America to the Holy See. I am grateful for the greetings which you convey from President Clinton, and I reciprocate with good wishes to him and to the American people.

You represent a nation which plays a crucial role in world events today. The United States carries a weighty and far-reaching responsibility, not only for the well-being of its own people, but for the development and destiny of peoples throughout the world. With a deep sense of participation in the joys and hopes, the sorrows, anxieties, and aspirations of the entire human family, the Holy See is a willing partner in every effort to build a world of genuine peace and justice for all. I am certain that, following upon the good work of your predecessors, you will apply your many personal talents and your long experience of public life to strengthening understanding and cooperation between us.

The Founding Fathers of the United States asserted their claim to freedom and independence on the basis of certain "self-evident" *truths* about the human person: truths which could be discerned in human nature, built into it by "nature's God". Thus they meant to bring into being, not just an independent territory, but a great experiment in what George Washington called "ordered liberty:" an experiment in which men and women would enjoy equality of rights and opportunities in the pursuit of happiness and in service to the common good. Reading the founding documents of the United States, one has to be impressed by the concept of freedom they enshrine: a freedom designed to enable people to fulfill their duties and responsibilities towards the family and towards the common good of the community. Their authors clearly understood that there could be no true freedom without moral responsibility and accountability, and no happiness without respect and support for the natural units or groupings through which people exist, develop and seek the higher purposes of life in concert with others.

The American democratic experiment has been successful in many ways. Millions of people around the world look to the United States as a model, in their search for freedom, dignity, and prosperity. But the continuing success of American democracy depends on the degree to which each new generation, native-born and immigrant, make its own the moral truths on which the Founding Fathers staked the future of your Republic. Their commitment to build a free society with liberty and justice for all must be constantly renewed if the United States is to fulfill the destiny to which the Founders pledged their "lives...fortunes...and sacred honor."

I am happy to take note of your words confirming the importance that your Government attaches, in its relations with countries around the world, to the promotion of human rights and particularly to the fundamental human right of religious freedom, which is the guarantee of every other human right. Respect for religious conviction played no small part in the birth and early development of the United States. Thus John Dickinson, Chairman of the Committee for the Declaration of Independence, said in 1776: "Our liberties do not come from charters; for these are only the declaration of pre-existing rights. They do not depend on parchments or seals; but come from the King of Kings and the Lord of all the earth" (Cf. C. Herman Pritchett, *The American Constitution*, McGraw-Hill, 1977, p. 2). Indeed, it may be asked whether the American democratic experiment would have been possible, or how well it will succeed in the future, without a deeply rooted vision of divine providence over the individual and over the fate of nations.

As the Year 2000 draws near and Christians prepare to celebrate the bi-millennium of the birth of Christ, I have appealed for a serious examination of conscience regarding the shadows which darken our times (cf. Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 36). Nations and States too can make this a time of reflection on the spiritual and moral conditions of their success in promoting the integral good of their people. It would truly be a sad thing if the religious and moral convictions upon which the American experiment was founded could now somehow be considered a danger to free society, such that those who would bring these convictions to bear upon your nation's public life would be denied a voice in debating and resolving issues of public policy. The original separation of Church and State in the United States was certainly not an effort to ban all religious conviction from the public sphere, a kind of banishment of God from civil society. Indeed, the vast majority of Americans, regardless of their religious persuasion, are convinced that religious conviction and religiously informed moral argument have a vital role in public life.

No expression of society's commitment to liberty and justice for all can be more basic than the protection afforded to those in society who are most vulnerable. The United States of America was founded on the conviction that an inalienable right to life was a self-evident moral truth, fidelity to which was a primary criterion of social justice. The moral history of your country is the story of your people's efforts to widen the circle of inclusion in society, so that all Americans might enjoy the protection of law, participate in the responsibilities of citizenship, and have the opportunity to make a contribution to the common good. Whenever a certain category of people - the unborn or the sick and old - are excluded from that protection, a deadly anarchy subverts the original understanding of justice. The credibility of the United States will depend more and more on its promotion of a genuine culture of life, and on a renewed commitment to building a world in which the weakest and most vulnerable are welcomed and protected.

As they have done throughout your country's history, the Catholic people of the United States will continue to make an important contribution to the development of American culture and society. The recently completed Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for America has highlighted the range and variety of activity which Catholics, out of commitment to Christ, undertake for the betterment of society. May this transforming and elevating work continue to flourish for the good of individuals, the strengthening of families, and the benefit of the American people as a whole.

Your Excellency, these are some of the thoughts prompted by your presence here as your country's diplomatic representative. These reflections evoke a prayer: that your country will experience a new birth of freedom, a freedom grounded in truth and ordered to goodness. Thus will the American people be able to harness their boundless spiritual energy in service of the genuine good of all humanity. Be assured that the various Offices of the Holy See will be ready to assist you in the fulfillment of your mission. Upon you and upon the people of the United States of America I cordially invoke abundant divine blessings