

Text of Pope Benedict XVI's arrival speech in Jordan

8 May 2009

Your Majesties,
Your Excellencies,
Dear Brother Bishops,
Dear Friends,

It is with joy that I greet all of you here present, as I begin my first visit to the Middle East since my election to the Apostolic See, and I am pleased to set foot upon the soil of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, a land so rich in history, home to so many ancient civilizations, and deeply imbued with religious significance for Jews, Christians and Muslims. I thank His Majesty King Abdullah II for his kind words of welcome, and I offer my particular congratulations in this year that marks the tenth anniversary of his accession to the throne. In greeting His Majesty, I extend heartfelt good wishes to all members of the Royal Family and the Government, and to all the people of the Kingdom. I greet the Bishops here present, especially those with pastoral responsibilities in Jordan. I look forward to celebrating the liturgy at Saint George's Cathedral tomorrow evening and at the International Stadium on Sunday together with you, dear Bishops, and so many of the faithful entrusted to your care.

I come to Jordan as a pilgrim, to venerate holy places that have played such an important part in some of the key events of Biblical history. At Mount Nebo, Moses led his people to within sight of the land that would become their home, and here he died and was laid to rest. At Bethany beyond the Jordan, John the Baptist preached and bore witness to Jesus, whom he baptized in the waters of the river that gives this land its name. In the coming days I shall visit both these holy places, and I shall have the joy of blessing the foundation stones of churches that are to be built at the traditional site of the Lord's Baptism. The opportunity that Jordan's Catholic community enjoys to build public places of worship is a sign of this country's respect for religion, and on their behalf I want to say how much this openness is appreciated. Religious freedom is, of course, a fundamental human right, and it is my fervent hope and prayer that respect for the inalienable rights and dignity of every man and woman will come to be increasingly affirmed and defended, not only throughout the Middle East, but in every part of the world.

My visit to Jordan gives me a welcome opportunity to speak of my deep respect for the Muslim community, and to pay tribute to the leadership shown by His Majesty the King in promoting a better understanding of the virtues proclaimed by Islam. Now that some years have passed since the publication of the Amman Message and the Amman Interfaith Message, we can say that these worthy initiatives have achieved much good in furthering an alliance of civilizations between the West and the Muslim world, confounding the predictions of those who consider violence and conflict inevitable. Indeed the Kingdom of Jordan has long been at the forefront of initiatives to promote peace in the Middle East and throughout the world, encouraging inter-religious dialogue, supporting efforts to find a just solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, welcoming refugees from neighbouring Iraq, and seeking to curb extremism. I cannot let this opportunity pass without calling to mind the pioneering efforts for peace in the region made by the late King Hussein. How fitting that my meeting

tomorrow with Muslim religious leaders, the diplomatic corps and University rectors should take place in the mosque that bears his name. May his commitment to the resolution of the region's conflicts continue to bear fruit in efforts to promote lasting peace and true justice for all who live in the Middle East.

Dear Friends, at the Seminar held in Rome last autumn by the Catholic-Muslim Forum, the participants examined the central role played in our respective religious traditions by the commandment of love. I hope very much that this visit, and indeed all the initiatives designed to foster good relations between Christians and Muslims, will help us to grow in love for the Almighty and Merciful God, and in fraternal love for one another. Thank you for your welcome. Thank you for your attention. May God grant Your Majesties happiness and long life! May he bless Jordan with prosperity and peace!