

APOSTOLIC VISIT
OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE CZECH REPUBLIC
(SEPTEMBER 26-28, 2009)

WELCOMING CEREMONY

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER

*Stará Ruzyně International Airport - Prague
Saturday, 26 September 2009*

*Pane presidente,
milí páni kardinálové a bratři biskupové,
Vaše Excellence,
dámy a pánové!*

Mám velkou radost, že mohu dnes být v České republice, a jsem hluboce vděčný vám všem za srdečné přivítání.

[Mr President, Dear Cardinals, Brother Bishops, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great joy to be here with you today in the Czech Republic, and I am most grateful to all of you for the warmth of your welcome.]

I thank the President, Mr Václav Klaus, for inviting me to visit the country and for his kind words. I am honoured by the presence of representatives of the civil and political Authorities, and I greet them along with all the people of the Czech Republic. As it is principally the Catholic communities of Bohemia and Moravia that I am here to visit, I extend a warm fraternal greeting to Cardinal Vlk, Archbishop of Prague, to Archbishop Graubner of Olomouc, President of the Czech Bishops' Conference, as well as all the Bishops and faithful here today. I was particularly touched by the gesture of the young couple who brought me gifts typical of this nation's culture, together with an offering of your native soil. I am reminded how deeply Czech culture is permeated by Christianity since, as you know, these items of bread and salt have a particular significance in New Testament imagery.

While the whole of European culture has been profoundly shaped by its Christian heritage, this is especially true in the Czech lands, since it was through the missionary labours of Saints Cyril and Methodius in the ninth century that the old Slavonic language first came to be written down. Apostles of the Slavic peoples and founders of their culture, they are rightly venerated as Patrons of Europe. Yet it is also worth recalling that these two great saints from the Byzantine tradition here encountered missionaries from the Latin West. Throughout its history, this territory at the heart of the continent, at a

crossroads between north and south, east and west, has been a meeting-point for different peoples, traditions and cultures. Undeniably this has sometimes led to friction, but in the longer term it has proved to be a fruitful encounter. Hence the significant part played by the Czech lands in Europe's intellectual, cultural and religious history – sometimes as a battleground, more often as a bridge.

The coming months will see the twentieth anniversary of the Velvet Revolution, which happily brought a peaceful end to a time of particular hardship for this country, a time in which the flow of ideas and cultural influences was rigidly controlled. I join you and your neighbours in giving thanks for your liberation from those oppressive regimes. If the collapse of the Berlin Wall marked a watershed in world history, it did so all the more for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, enabling them to take their rightful place as sovereign actors in the concert of nations.

Nevertheless, the cost of forty years of political repression is not to be underestimated. A particular tragedy for this land was the ruthless attempt by the Government of that time to silence the voice of the Church. Throughout your history, from the time of Saint Wenceslaus, Saint Ludmila and Saint Adalbert to the time of Saint John Nepomuk, there have been courageous martyrs whose fidelity to Christ spoke far louder and more eloquently than the voice of their executioners. This year marks the fortieth anniversary of the death of the Servant of God Cardinal Josef Beran, Archbishop of Prague. I wish to pay tribute both to him and to his successor Cardinal František Tomášek, whom I had the privilege of knowing personally, for their indomitable Christian witness in the face of persecution. They, and countless brave priests, religious and lay men and women kept the flame of faith alive in this country. Now that religious freedom has been restored, I call upon all the citizens of this Republic to rediscover the Christian traditions which have shaped their culture, and I invite the Christian community to continue to make its voice heard as the nation addresses the challenges of the new millennium. “Without God, man neither knows which way to go, nor even understands who he is” (*Caritas in Veritate*, 78). The truth of the Gospel is indispensable for a healthy society, since it opens us to hope and enables us to discover our inalienable dignity as God's children.

Mr President, I know that you wish to see a greater role for religion in this country's affairs. The Presidential flag flying over Prague Castle proclaims the motto “*Pravda Vítězí* - the Truth wins”: it is my earnest hope that the light of truth will continue to guide this nation, so blessed throughout its history by the witness of great saints and martyrs. In this scientific age, it is instructive to recall the example of Johann Gregor Mendel, the Augustinian Abbot from Moravia whose pioneering research laid the foundations of modern genetics. Not for him the reproach of his patron, Saint Augustine, who regretted that so many were “more concerned with admiring facts than seeking their causes” (*Epistula* 120:5; cf. John Paul II, *Address for the Commemoration of Abbot Gregor Mendel on the First Centenary of his Death*, 10 March 1984, 2). The authentic progress of humanity is best served by just such a combination of the wisdom of faith and the insights of reason. May the Czech people always enjoy the benefits of that happy synthesis.

Zbývá mi jen zopakovat: díky vám všem, a říci, že jsem se opravdu dlouho těšil na tyto dny mezi vámi v České republice, kterou hrdě nazýváte „země česká, domov můj“. Srdečné díky.

[It remains only for me to renew my thanks to all of you, and to say how much I have been looking forward to spending these days among you in the Czech Republic, which you are proud to call “*země Česká, domov můj*”. Thank you very much.]

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