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LUQA - 17.04.2010 - 17.00
International Airport of Malta
Welcoming ceremony

Original text

**Mr President,
Dear Brother Bishops,
Distinguished Authorities,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Jien kuntent hafna li ninsab fostkom! [*I am delighted to be here with you!*]

It gives me great joy to be here in Malta with you today. I come among you as a pilgrim to worship the Lord and to praise him for the wonders he has worked here. I come also as the Successor of Saint Peter to confirm you in the faith (cf. *Lk 22:32*) and to join you in prayer to the one living and true God, in the company of all the Saints, including the great Apostle of Malta, Saint Paul. Though my visit to your country is short, I pray that it will bear much fruit.

I am grateful, Mr President, for the kind words with which you have greeted me in your own name and on behalf of the Maltese people. I thank you for your invitation and for the hard work that you and the Government have done in order to prepare for my visit. I thank the Prime Minister, the civil and military authorities, the members of the Diplomatic Corps and everyone present, for honouring this occasion by your presence and for your cordial welcome.

I greet in a special way Archbishop Paul Cremona, Bishop Mario Grech and Auxiliary Bishop Annetto Depasquale, as well as the other Bishops present. In greeting you, I wish to express my affection for the priests, deacons, men and women Religious and all the lay faithful entrusted to your pastoral care.

The occasion of my visit to these islands is the nineteen hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Saint Paul's shipwreck off the island of Malta. Saint Luke describes this event in the Acts of the Apostles, and it is from his account that you have chosen the theme of this visit: "Jehtieg iżda li naslu fi gżira" [*"But we are to be stranded on some island"*] (*Acts 27:26*). Some might consider Saint Paul's arrival in Malta by means of a humanly unforeseen event to be a mere accident of history. The eyes of faith, however, enable us to recognize here the workings of divine Providence.

Malta, in fact, has been at the crossroads of many of the great events and cultural exchanges in European and Mediterranean history, right up to our own times. These islands have played a key role in the political, religious and cultural development of Europe, the Near East, and North Africa. To these shores, then, in the mysterious designs of God, the Gospel was brought by Saint Paul and the early followers of Christ. Their missionary work has borne much fruit over the centuries, contributing in innumerable ways to shaping Malta's rich and noble culture.

On account of their geographical position, these islands have been of great strategic importance on more than one occasion, even in recent times: indeed, the George Cross upon your national flag proudly testifies to your people's great courage during the dark days of the last world war. Likewise, the fortifications that feature so prominently in the island's architecture speak of earlier struggles, when Malta contributed so much to the defence of Christianity by land and by sea. You continue to play a valuable role in the ongoing debates on European identity, culture and policy. At the same time, I am pleased to note your Government's commitment to humanitarian projects further afield, especially in Africa. It is greatly to be hoped that this will serve to promote the welfare of those less fortunate than yourselves, as an expression of genuine Christian charity.

Indeed, Malta has much to contribute to questions as diverse as tolerance, reciprocity, immigration, and other issues crucial to the future of this continent. Your Nation should continue to stand up for the indissolubility of marriage as a natural institution as well as a sacramental one, and for the true nature of the family, just as it does for the sacredness of human life from conception to natural death and for the proper respect owed to religious freedom in ways that bring authentic integral development to individuals and society.

Malta also has close links to the near East, not only in cultural and religious terms, but even linguistically. Allow me to encourage you to put this ensemble of skills and strengths to ever greater use so as to serve as a bridge of understanding between the peoples, cultures and religions which surround the Mediterranean. Much has still to be done

to build relationships of genuine trust and fruitful dialogue, and Malta is well placed to hold out the hand of friendship to her neighbours to north and south, to east and west.

The Maltese people, enlightened for almost two millennia by the teachings of the Gospel and continually fortified by their Christian roots, are rightly proud of the indispensable role that the Catholic faith has played in their nation's development. The beauty of our faith is expressed in various and complementary ways here, not least in the lives of holiness which have led Maltese to give of themselves for the good of others. Among these we must include Dun Ġorġ Preca, whom I was pleased to canonize just three years ago (3 June, 2007). I invite all of you to invoke his intercession for the spiritual fruitfulness of this, my first pastoral visit among you.

I look forward to praying with you during my time in Malta and I wish, as a father and as a brother, to assure you of my affection for you and my eagerness to share this time with you in faith and friendship. With these thoughts, I entrust all of you to the protection of Our Lady of Ta' Pinu and your father in the faith, the great Apostle Paul.

Il-Mulej ibierek lill-poplu kollu ta' Malta u ta' Għawdex! *[God bless all the people of Malta and Gozo!]*
