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Address of the President of Latvia, Egils Levits, at the launch of collection of articles about the centenary of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the Republic of Latvia

Your Excellency Archbishop Gallagher, excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

We just celebrated the 50th Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations between the European Union and the Holy See. The actual anniversary was last October, and it was postponed due to reasons we all know, which makes this spring's celebrations even happier and more memorable.

Today we are launching an incredible and extremely significant publication. It covers the hundred years of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the Republic of Latvia, which declared independence in 1918. This important material has been compiled by Mihails Volohovs, priest of the clergy of Roman Catholic Metropolitan Archdiocese of Riga, and Latvian historian Inese Runce.

I want to say a big thank you to both of them for completing this enormous research and giving us a clearer understanding of how global events and political processes of the 20th century shaped the Latvia-Holy See relationship we have today.

Let me also express my sincere gratitude to Historical Archives of the Secretariat of State for all the support provided during the making of this publication. I would also like to thank the Vatican Apostolic Archive in advance for kind support and openness to further research requests from our academicians.

And a special thank you goes to His Excellency Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher, Secretary for Relations with States of the Holy See, for his active personal involvement and help.

I would also like to thank everyone else who helped make this book possible for their dedication and utmost commitment to this project!

I

Polite smiles have always been a part of the diplomatic game, even today. However, the then President of Latvia Alberts Kviess in 1935 had especially warm memories of the early

relations between two states: 'Ever since Latvia became free, relations between the Holy See and our country have been very cordial and trusting, and every matter important for the Catholic Church in Latvia has always been resolved by the parties in the most honest and considerate manner'.

Let us not forget that Pope Benedict XV ordered the restoration of the Diocese of Riga and appointed his representative on 29 September 1918, even before Latvia was formally proclaimed.

So, the founding of the Latvian State actually started the process of aligning the Catholic Church in Latvia to the Vatican's codes of canon law and geographic borders of the new state.

One of the first international agreements signed by free Latvia was a concordat with the Vatican. It was signed under the pontificate of Pope Pius XI.

In the interwar period, Papal nuncios Antonio Zecchini and Antonino Arata played a major role in the development of the Catholic Church in Latvia, while also strengthening the diplomatic presence of the Holy See in our country.

Our first Ambassador to the Holy See was Hermanis Albats, who was later killed by the Soviets when Latvia was occupied.

Unfortunately, the violent occupation of Latvia by the Soviet Union on 17 June 1940 put everything on hold.

The Holy See restored its diplomatic relations with a newly independent Latvia fifty years later on 1 October 1991.

II

Satversme, or the Constitution of Latvia, which will turn 100 years old next year, separates church from state. However, the state has continued to support the church, and both have constantly cooperated.

Latvia supports religious freedom and diversity. We are proud to have close ecumenical cooperation between different Christian denominations, which enhances unity among people in Latvia.

Ecumenical service is a tradition that accompanies every 18 November when we celebrate the founding of the Latvian State together with spiritual leaders of all churches in Latvia. Such living and breathing ecumenism is one of Latvia's special traits.

III

The bond between Latvia and the Catholic Church formed a long time ago. It began to grow along with the spread of Western culture and traditions towards North-East Europe.

Livonia considered itself the edge of civilization, or the farthest geographical point where Western civilisation could be found at the time. Rome used to call the inhabitants of the Eastern coast of the Baltic Sea, the ancient Latvians, "the last pagans in Europe".

Christianisation gave everyone living in Latvia an opportunity to become part of the European spiritual and cultural world. Latvians and Latvia have since been a constant element in the European, or to be more precise, Western European civilisation. Churches also helped secure military and political support required to protect the Baltic region from the East.

IV

Catholics in Latvia and the Catholic Church have continuously maintained deep and broad ties.

These ties played a crucial role in the founding of the state of Latvia in 1917–1918, when including Latgale, which is predominantly Catholic, into the soon-to-be Latvian State became the main domestic priority.

Latgale accounts for roughly a quarter of Latvia's land area. Its culture, history and political system developed separately from other Latvian lands for quite some time.

At critical moments for our state, Catholic priests in Latvia, who had strong influence on the people, played a decisive role in the formation of the single Latvian State with its current borders.

V

When Latvia was re-occupied by the USSR in 1944, it was subjected to a most tragic, violent treatment that defied all Christian and human values.

Soviet occupation forces arrested more than 60 Latvian Catholic priests from 1945 to 1973. Many of them were convicted, deported or tortured. 14 of them died while in prison.

Latvian archbishops of the Roman Curia were under constant control of the Soviet occupation authorities until 1990. Catholic leaders were forced to find a modus vivendi with Soviet power to survive.

V

The Holy See refused to recognise the forceful incorporation of Latvia into the USSR in 1940 from the first day when power was seized.

We are grateful to the Catholic Church for maintaining its bond with Latvian Catholics, who were forced to live behind the Iron Curtain or in exile, despite these turbulent times.

During the Cold War, as world superpowers divided Europe, The Holy See continued to follow developments in occupied Latvia, supporting Catholics and clergy with everything they could possibly offer. Sacred Catholic literature and periodicals were smuggled into the country in all kinds of ways.

One of the ways to tune into the outside world was through Latvian broadcasts on Vatican Radio. Monsignor Ārvaldis Andrejs Brumanis is definitely one of the quiet heroes of the Vatican Radio, whose dedication to the station for all those years deserves admiration.

Latvian Catholics continued to praise God and express their loyalty to the Holy Father despite the Soviet regime's attempts to denounce and persecute religion. Many older women helped around the churches, secretly brought in their grandchildren for baptism and took them along to Holy Mass.

In a way, women were the ones who kept spreading the word of God despite the Soviet occupation. They introduced young generations to God and kept the religion in the family.

By the way, the use of Latin written characters was forbidden in Latgale at the time of the Russian Empire, from 1865 to 1904, so women decided they will keep teaching their children to pray in Latgalian, which is a regional dialect of Latvian. They also hand-copied prayer books and distributed them through clandestine networks.

VI

The Holy See showed its firm stance on Latvia's independence also through political acts. Julijans Vaivods, a Catholic priest cruelly persecuted by the Soviets, was appointed bishop in a consecration ceremony at Saint Peter's Basilica on 18 November 1964, Latvia's Independence day.

The Holy See made sure the ceremony was attended by Boļeslavs Sloškāns and Jāzeps Rancāns, Latvian Catholic bishops living in exile, thus sending a clear signal that the Latvian Catholic Church continues to maintain Latvia's statehood, unity and integrity.

Both bishops hold a dear place in the history and heart of Latvia.

Fearless Bishop Boļeslavs Sloškāns continued to serve in Russia even after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. He later became the apostolic administrator of Mogilev and Minsk. He was sent to jail by Soviet authorities a number of times.

The Latvian Catholic Church, the Vatican and the Latvian government fought hard throughout his imprisonment to get Bishop Sloškāns released. He finally returned to Latvia in 1933. After the Second World War, with the blessing of Pope Pius XII, he continued his apostolic work in exile. His beatification would be the highest praise of Bishop Sloškāns life-long spiritual pursuit of truth and service to others, his unshakeable faith and spirit that even totalitarian rule could not brake. The Catholic community of Latvia, and Belarus, for which Boļeslavs Sloškāns became their Bishop for some time, would greatly appreciate such a step.

For his part, Bishop Jāzeps Rancāns, who was a firm supporter of parliamentary democracy, became the Acting President of Latvia in exile from 1947 to 1969 and kept very close ties with the Holy See.

For many years the Latvian Catholic Church was represented at the Holy See by Latvian Catholic priest and teacher Monsignor Jāzeps Čamanis. He will always be remembered for his kindness and holiness.

VII

The inauguration of Pope John Paul II revived great hopes around Central and Eastern Europe. His words and deeds inspired non-violent resistance by national liberation

movements against suffocating totalitarian regimes, helping to free his people and other nations, such as the Baltic states. People listened to and followed his words.

John Paul II paid a state and pastoral visit to Latvia in September of 1993. He went to Riga and Aglona, where he visited the Aglona Roman Catholic Basilica of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary – the main Catholic religious centres in Latvia.

It is a sacred site well known beyond the borders of Latvia. Hundreds of pilgrims regularly make their way to the Basilica to worship the Mother of God.

Pope John Paul II was the first head of the Roman Catholic Church to pay an official visit to Latvia and the first global leader to come to the Baltic states following the renewal of their independence.

The Holy See has always, through different times, known and accepted what our region needs, both in terms of our religious and political aspirations. We are deeply grateful and appreciate the warm, cordial support and courtesy showed to us by the Holy See.

VIII

Our country celebrated the centenary of its statehood in 2018. Pope Francis took part in centenary celebrations by visiting Riga and Aglona on 24 September. In his speech, Pope Francis focused on our shared responsibility for shaping a pro-life and pro-creative future. Pope Francis' social agenda has won praise around the world, and his global goals sit well with our values.

The role of multilateralism is bound to increase as the world recovers from the global crisis caused by the pandemic. We welcome Fratelli Tutti, the Encyclical letter of the Holy Father Francis, which urges the UN to promote the rule of law instead of the law of force and give preference to multilateral agreements that protect weaker states.

Latvia has always highly valued the spiritual benefits of ecumenical traditions. We truly admired and cheered for the Pope when he went on his historic visit to Iraq as 'Pilgrim of Peace' to show his concern for ecumenism and nations living in peace with one another.

Latvia is also one of the states actively engaged in addressing global challenges such as sustainability and socially responsible development, or an education policy aligned with future of Europe. We try to understand how digital transformation will affect society. We wish to find the best legal framework for Europe to enable more a rapid uptake of the digital technologies emerging globally.

Climate change is an area in which Pope Francis takes great interest and a field in which Latvia is active.

Latvia is a green country. A country which still offers some balance of the rational and poetic in the way it treats nature and all things living. However, we, too, must revisit how we consume energy, move around and eat. That is how we will restore the primordial harmony with nature that Pope Francis constantly urges us to strive for.

The speeches of Pope Francis urge us to help the disadvantaged. Today, after the meeting with pontiff, our President Egils Levits presented Pope Francis with hundred candles in the

national colours of Latvia and the Holy See, hand made by young people with developmental disorders.

It is a special social project. These youngsters handcraft and sell candles to raise money for a group home for assisted, semi-autonomous living. Our support is crucial in making their dreams and hopes come true.

IX

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

We all relate to Pope Francis' pleas to revive Europe's conscience and to contribute to a society that fosters dignity in relations between humans and states, nature and man.

It is possible to create such relationship. 100 years of successful diplomatic cooperation between Latvia and the Holy See is a perfect example. It has left a lasting impact on European diplomacy in the 20th century. It has enriched us, showed us how to build a new society. It has opened new horizons and been a blessing.

Once again, thank you to all the writers and supporters who made this publication possible!

Thank you!