



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE ITALIAN BISHOPS TAKING PART IN THE 54th ASSEMBLY
OF THE ITALIAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCE***

Monday, 30 May 2005

Dear Italian Brother Bishops,

I am happy to meet you here this morning, gathered at your General Assembly, after celebrating Holy Mass with many of you in Bari yesterday for the conclusion of the National Eucharistic Congress. I greet your President, Cardinal Camillo Ruini, and thank him for his warm words on your behalf. I greet the three Vice-Presidents, the General Secretary and each one of you, and I in turn would like to express to you my sentiments of deep communion and sincere affection.

Only a few weeks have passed since my election, and the sentiments that brought us close in the days of the suffering and death of my Venerable Predecessor, the Servant of God John Paul II, are very much alive. He was a father, example and friend to each one of us. I am particularly grateful to you, for I feel that you are welcoming me in the same spirit as that with which you accompanied him during the 26 years of his Pontificate.

Dear Brothers, the bond between us also has a precise root because that is what unites all the Bishops of the world with the Successor of Peter, but it is particularly strong in this Nation because the Pope is Bishop of Rome and Primate of Italy. History has shown, in the span of 20 centuries, what great fruits of good this special bond has borne, for the life of faith and the blossoming of the Italian People's civilization, as well as for the ministry of the Successor of Peter himself.

I am thus beginning the new and unexpected service to which the Lord has called me, feeling deeply comforted by your closeness and solidarity. Together we will be able to carry out the mission that Jesus Christ has entrusted to us, together we will be able to bear witness to Christ and make him as present today as he was in the past in Italian homes and hearts.

Indeed, not only does Italy's relationship with the Christian faith date back to the apostolic generation and the preaching and martyrdom of Peter and Paul, but it is also still deep and alive. The kind of culture that is based on a purely functional rationality which contradicts and seeks to exclude Christianity, and the religious and moral traditions of humanity in general, is of course as present and active in Italy as it is more or less everywhere in Europe.

Here, however, its supremacy is not total, nor, still less, is there any lack of opposition to it. Indeed, many people, even those who do not share or at any rate do not practise our faith, feel that such a form of culture is actually a harmful mutilation of man and of his reasoning.

Moreover, in Italy in particular the Church has a far-reaching network among people of every age and condition; thus, she can propose the message of salvation that the Lord has entrusted to her in the most varied situations.

Dear Brothers, I am aware of your commitment to keeping this presence alive and increasing its missionary outreach. In the Pastoral Guidelines that you presented to the Italian Dioceses for this first decade of the new century, taking up the teaching of John Paul II in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, you rightly base everything on contemplation of Jesus Christ, and in him, of the true face of God the Father and the living, daily relationship with him.

Here, in fact, lies the heart and the secret energy of the Church, the source of our apostolate's effectiveness. Especially in the mystery of the Eucharist, we ourselves, our priests and all our faithful can live to the full this relationship with Christ: here he becomes tangible among us, he gives himself ever anew, he becomes ours, so that we may become his and learn his love. The *Year of the Eucharist* and the Congress just celebrated in *Bari* are incentives that help us to penetrate deeper into this Mystery.

In contemplating the face of Christ, and in Christ, the face of the Father, Mary Most Holy precedes, sustains and accompanies us. Love and devotion for the Mother of the Lord, so widespread and deeply rooted in the Italian People, are a precious heritage that we must always nurture and a great resource in view of evangelization.

On these foundations, dear Brothers, we can truly propose to ourselves and to our faithful the vocation to holiness as "the high standard of ordinary Christian living", in keeping with John Paul II's felicitous words in *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (n. 31): actually, the Holy Spirit comes to us, from Christ and from the Father, precisely to usher us into the mystery of the life and love of God, over and above any human endeavour or expectation.

In practice, a characteristic of the Church's presence among the Italian People is first and foremost the close network of parishes and the vitality that they still manifest, despite the major social and cultural changes. Consequently, in one of your recent Pastoral Notes (*Il volto missionario delle*

parrocchie in un mondo che cambia) [the missionary face of parishes in a changing world], you were wisely concerned to support parishes, reasserting their value and role and thereby giving special encouragement to pastors, who as parish priests bear a heavy burden of responsibility.

However, you have also shed light on the need for parishes to assume a more missionary attitude in their daily pastoral work so as to be open to a more intense collaboration with all the living forces available to the Church today. It is very important in this regard to strengthen the communion between the parish structures and the various "charismatic" groups that have sprung up in recent decades and are widespread in Italy, so that the mission can reach out to all the milieus of life. Religious communities, still numerous in Italy despite the scarcity of vocations, certainly make a valuable contribution to this.

The domain of culture is undoubtedly crucial for the future of the faith and the general orientation of a nation's life. I therefore ask you to persevere in the work you have undertaken so that the voice of Catholics may be constantly present in the Italian cultural debate, and especially, to reinforce the ability to work out rationally, in the light of faith, the many questions that are surfacing in the various contexts of knowledge and in the great decisions of life.

Culture and behavioural models today are increasingly conditioned and influenced by images presented by the *media*. Thus, your Conference's efforts to establish also in this context an adequate means of expression in order to offer to all a Christian interpretation of events and problems deserve praise.

The actual situation of the Church in Italy, therefore, confirms and justifies the attention and expectations many of her Sister Churches in Europe and across the world have of her. As my beloved Predecessor John Paul II frequently emphasized, Italy can and must play an important role in the common witness to Jesus Christ, our one Saviour, so that the standard of true humanism may be identified with Christ, in the people's conscience and the whole ordering of social life.

One crucial issue that demands of us the maximum pastoral attention is the family. In Italy, even more than in other countries, the family truly is the fundamental cell of society. It is deeply rooted in the hearts of the young generations and bears the brunt of many problems, providing support and remedies to situations that would otherwise be desperate.

Yet also in Italy, families in today's cultural atmosphere are exposed to the many risks and threats with which we are all familiar. The inner frailty and instability of many conjugal unions is combined with the widespread social and cultural tendency to dispute the unique character and special mission of the family founded on marriage.

Then, Italy itself is one of the nations where the low birth rate is the most serious and constant,

with consequences that are already felt by the whole body of society. This is why for some time you Italian Bishops have been joining your voice to that of John Paul II, primarily in defending the sacredness of human life and the value of the institution of marriage, but also in promoting the role of the family in the Church and in society, requesting financial and legislative measures that support young families in having children and raising them.

In the same spirit, you are currently involved in enlightening and motivating the decisions of Catholics and of all citizens concerning the upcoming referendums on the law on assisted procreation. Your clear and concrete commitment is a sign of your concern as Pastors for every human being, who can never be reduced to a means but is always an end, as our Lord Jesus Christ teaches us in his Gospel and as human reason itself tells us. In this commitment and in all the many different kinds of work that are part of a Pastor's mission and duty, I am close to you with my words and my prayers, trusting in the light and grace of the Holy Spirit who acts in the conscience and heart.

The same concern for the true good of human beings that impels us to take care of the future of families and of respect for human life, is expressed in attention to the poor we have among us, to the sick, to immigrants, to peoples decimated by disease, war and famine.

Dear Italian Brother Bishops, I want to thank you and your faithful for your generous charity, making the Church that new people in which no one is a stranger. Let us always remember the Lord's words: what you have done "for one of my least brothers, you did it for me" (Mt 25: 40).

In August, as you know, I will go to Cologne for the [World Youth Day](#), and I am confident that I will be meeting many of you again, accompanied by a large number of young Italians. Precisely with regard to the young, their formation and their relationship with the Lord and with the Church, I would like to add a final word. In fact, as John Paul II often repeated, they are the hope of the Church; but in today's world, they are also particularly vulnerable to the risk of being "tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine" (Eph 4: 14).

Hence, they must be helped to grow and develop in the faith: this is the first service they should receive from the Church and especially from us Bishops and our priests. We know well that many of them cannot understand and accept all the Church's teaching straightaway, but for this very reason it is important to re-awaken within them the desire to believe with the Church, to trust that this Church, enlivened and guided by the Spirit, is the true subject of faith and that by becoming part of her we enter and participate in the communion of faith.

If this is to happen, young people must feel loved by the Church and concretely loved by us Bishops and priests. In this way they will experience in the Church the Lord's friendship and love for them and understand that in Christ, truth coincides with love. In turn, they will learn to love the Lord and to trust in his Body, which is the Church.

Today, dear Italian Brother Bishops, this is the key point of the great challenge of transmitting the faith to the young generations.

I assure you of my daily prayers for you and for your Churches, for the whole of the beloved Italian Nation, for its present and its Christian future, for the task it is called to carry out in Europe and in the world, and I impart with affection a special Apostolic Blessing to you, to your priests and to every Italian family.

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