



# The Holy See

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**LETTER OF JOHN PAUL II  
TO BISHOP FIORINO TAGLIAFERRI  
ON THE OCCASION OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF THE  
ITALIAN FEDERATION FOR SPIRITUAL EXERCISES**

*To my Venerable Brother Fiorino Tagliaferri  
Bishop emeritus of Viterbo  
President of the Italian Federation for Spiritual Exercises*

1. I learned with deep pleasure that the Italian Federation for Spiritual Exercises has organized its national assembly for 13 to 15 February, to reflect on the "times of the Spirit for an important experience of the Father's mercy".

I cordially greet you, Venerable Brother, appointed by the Italian Episcopal Conference as President of this Church association, and at the same time I would like to extend my affectionate greetings to the prelates, the distinguished speakers and conference participants who, as representatives of the institutes of consecrated life, societies of apostolic life, associations and movements, are attending the meeting. I would also like to express to everyone my deep appreciation of their work at the regional and diocesan level in the ministry of spirituality, by organizing, hosting and directing programmes for spiritual exercises, retreats, prayer journeys and vocational guidance.

2. The main objective of your association, as stated in the first article of your Statutes, is "to make known and to promote spiritual exercises, understood as a heightened experience of God, inspired by listening to his word, understood and accepted in one's personal life by the action of the Holy Spirit who, in an atmosphere of silence and prayer and with the guidance of a spiritual director, gives a capacity for discernment for the purification of hearts, for conversion of life and for following Christ, in order to fulfil one's mission in the Church and in the world".

Although it is a study meeting, the content and method of your conference is inspired by features

which characterize these days as "times of the Spirit": it is your intention to experience the love of the Father who enables you to be "clothed with power from on high" (Lk 24:49). This experience of intimacy with God, through moments of intense spirituality, of fruitful dialogue and warm fraternity, cannot but strengthen in everyone the intention to be authentic witnesses to the demands of faith. Indeed, there is an ever deeper yearning for a spirituality that becomes a way of life. Meditation and prayer are of little value, if one's life is not inwardly transformed and prayer does not lead to behaviour consonant with the demands of truth and love.

Enlightened and led by divine mercy, the believer understands his vocation to be the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world" (cf. Mt 5:13-16). It is here that the continual invitation to conversion resounds in the Church: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the Gospel" (Mk 1:15).

3. The characteristics of the three years of preparation for the Great Jubilee are clearly reflected in the path of spiritual exercises and highlight the abiding value they have for Christian life in every age. In fact, the three-year preparation for the Jubilee commemoration of the mystery of the Incarnation has as its foundation and itinerary the call to conversion, lived as a "pilgrimage" of the whole Christian life, and is aimed at "broadening the horizons of believers, so that they will see things in the perspective of Christ: in the perspective of the "Father who is in heaven"" (Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 49).

Christ, encountered in listening to his word, in the careful celebration of the Holy Mysteries and in the brotherhood of ecclesial communion, makes known the mystery of the Father and of his love, and fully reveals man to himself, bringing to light his most high calling (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 22). Before the splendour of the mystery of the incarnate Word, each individual is called to be sincere with himself, if he wishes to undertake, in fidelity to him, the Redeemer of man, a path of authentic conversion, a path which is both a liberation from sin and a positive choice of what is good.

4. This journey begins with an act of courage like that of the prodigal son, who, when he comes to himself, says: "I will arise and go to my father" (Lk 15:18). This interior journey necessarily requires a "hygiene of the spirit", which takes place in exterior and interior silence, making room for the initiative of the Paraclete, doctor of souls. The experience of spiritual exercises, through appropriate time for prayer and reflection and a life-style of moderation, self-discipline and sacrifice, strengthens one's personal fidelity to Christ.

The "pilgrimage of the heart", fruit of the Lord's grace, lies in docility to the breath of the Spirit. "It is the Spirit who impels each of us to "return into ourselves" and to see the need to go back to the Father's house" (Bull *Incarnationis mysterium*, n. 11). Immersed in the lights and shadows of this epochal transition, man realizes the need for a "burst of conscience" that is not a momentary feeling, but a progressive journey towards the full realization of himself. And the believer is called, through an enlightened Gospel witness, to help build a society which is truly attentive to the

deepest longings of the human heart.

The Father's merciful embrace is particularly felt in the sacrament which gives concrete expression to conversion and, by the grace of forgiveness, enables the penitent to be reborn as a child of God. Having chosen to live in the Father's "house", he returns as a brother to all, sits at the same Eucharistic table and is moved to put into practice the sweet commandment of charity: love for God and for his brothers and sisters.

5. Venerable Brother, this FIES assembly has great importance for all pastoral ministry in Italy. I firmly hope that, in fidelity to its vocation, it can help instil in Christian people a greater longing for the universal call to holiness. May the work of the congress emphasize the profound compatibility between spiritual exercises, or more generally, between the "times of the Spirit" and the Jubilee. They are a preparation for welcoming it and, at the same time, they inspire a fitting response in souls to the gift of grace that it offers. Especially in view of the Jubilee pilgrimage, these exercises help people understand that all Christian life must be a "journey" without turning back. "No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" (Lk 9:62).

As I invoke an abundant outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon you and all who are taking part in the congress, I entrust everyone to the protection of the Virgin Mary, Queen of Saints, who throughout her life knew how to be a welcoming vessel of God's grace and majesty. May she be a Teacher and guide of Gospel living and Christian perfection for everyone.

With these sentiments, as I assure you of a constant remembrance in my prayer, I cordially impart a special Apostolic Blessing to all.

*From the Vatican, 11 February 1999.*

**JOHN PAUL II**