



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

TO THE PERMANENT COUNCIL OF

THE ITALIAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCE (C.E.I.) Tuesday, 23 January 1979 Beloved Brothers, 1. I

am grateful to your President for his kind words and I express to everyone my joy at today's meeting. I think that the reasons for this joy are so obvious that there is no need of explanation. I have looked forward to this meeting particularly and attribute unusual importance to it. "Arcano Dei consilio", by virtue of God's inscrutable decree, called on 16 October 1978 by the votes of the College of Cardinals, I have assumed, after my great and beloved predecessors, the guidance of the Roman See of St Peter and together with it that ministry over the whole Church, as a result of which the Bishop of Rome has become, according to St Gregory's definition, Servant of the Servants of God". Just as it is my deep desire to carry out this ministry and all the tasks that derive from it, committing my strength and my love for all the Churches which are in the universal unity of the Catholic Church and for all their pastors, who are my brothers in the episcopal office, so, but in quite a special way, I wish to discharge my service for the Church in this Italian land chosen by Providence, and for the Bishops who, in union with the successor of Peter, are its pastors. 2. This is really the land chosen by Providence to become the centre of the Church. Here, where there was the capital of the Roman Empire, Peter came (and at the same time also Paul) to bring the Gospel and to initiate not only this see, but also many others. Everywhere there arose Christian communities full of faith and sacrifice, ready to give their lives and shed their blood for Christ, during the persecutions which followed one another until the year 313. In this peninsula, between the Alps and Sicily, numerous episcopal sees go back to such ancient times and to times more recent, but which are still distant. For two millennia they have become centres of evangelization and of the life of the new People of God, points of support for so many Christians, and of human backing for so many communities, initiatives and institutions. With what sentiments of veneration and emotion does the son of a nation which has bound its millenary history so plainly to this centre of faith and culture which has developed around St Peter's see, find himself in the midst of all these riches of Christian life and tradition! How inexpressibly grateful he is for all that the sons and daughters of this noble land have demonstrated to him during the first months of the new pontificate! I wish to put in your hands today, dear and revered Brothers, who, as members of the Permanent Council, represent here the whole Italian Episcopate, the expression of this gratitude. If the election of John Paul II has become — as we often hear it said — a new manifestation and a proof of the universality of the Church, then allow me to say that also the People of God, in Rome

and in the whole of Italy, has its part in this. Awareness of the universality of the Church is certainly also one of the signs of that "sensus fidei" of which the constitution *Lumen Gentium* speaks. "The whole body of the faithful who have an anointing that comes from the Holy One (cf. 1 Jn 2:20 and 27) cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural appreciation of the faith (*sensus fidei*) of the whole people, when, 'from the bishops to the last of the faithful' they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals. By this appreciation of the faith, aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth, the People of God, guided by the sacred teaching authority (magisterium), and obeying it, receives not the mere word of men, but truly the word of God (cf. 1 Th 2:13), the faith once for all delivered to the saints (cf. Jude 3). The People unfailingly adheres to this faith, penetrates it more deeply with right judgment, and applies it more fully in daily life" (n. 12, cf. n. 35).

3. And so, finding myself before you today, I wish to re-propose, together with you, that cause which is common to all of us, namely, to build up the Church of God, to proclaim the Gospel, to serve the elevation of men to the dignity of sons of God, and to spread all the values of the human spirit closely connected with this elevation. I wish to exercise this mission together with you, dear Brothers, drawing inspiration from all the principles of that collegial unity which were elaborated by the Second Vatican Council with depth, simplicity and precision. The latter stresses that the Lord Jesus constituted the Apostles "in the form of a college or permanent assembly, at the head of which he placed Peter, chosen from amongst them" (*Lumen Gentium*, 19). And just as St Peter and the other Apostles constituted one college, by the Lord's will, so the bishops and the successor of Peter are united with one another in one college or episcopal body with and under the successor of Peter (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 19-22; *Christus Dominus*, 22). For this reason the Roman Pontiff — as the Council states further — "is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful. The individual bishops are the visible source and foundation of unity in their own particular Churches, which are constituted after the model of the universal Church; it is in these and formed out of them that the one and unique Catholic Church exists" (*Lumen Gentium*, 23). Hence there arises the necessity of a full communion of the bishops with one another and with the successor of Peter in faith, love, aims, and pastoral action. This communion expands into the *communion of individual bishops with their own priests and men and women religious*, that is, with the souls that have given their life completely to the service of the Kingdom. Here communion is expressed, on the one hand, in the concern of pastors for the spiritual and material needs of those sons who are closest to them and often most exposed to the difficulties arising from a secularized environment, and, on the other hand, in the commitment of priests and men and women religious in rallying round their bishops, listening to their voices docilely, and carrying out their directives faithfully. Communion between bishops, clergy, and religious, constructs *communion with the laity*. The latter, with all their riches of gifts and aspirations, capacity and initiatives, have a decisive task in the work of evangelizing the modern world. There may legitimately exist in the Church various degrees of connection with the hierarchical apostolate, and multiple forms of commitment in the pastoral field. From cordial acceptance of all the forces of clearly Catholic inspiration and from their utilization in plans of pastoral action, there cannot but derive an unquestionable advantage for a more and more incisive presence of the Church in the

world. It is also urgent to make an effort to restore to full ecclesial communion those movements, organisms and groups which, springing from the desire of generous and consistent adherence to the Gospel, are not yet in that community perspective which is necessary for action that is more and more aware of the joint responsibility of all the members of the People of God. It will be necessary to create new opportunities for meeting and confrontation, in an atmosphere of openness and cordiality, nourished at the table of the Word of God and the Eucharistic Bread. It will be necessary to resume dialogue patiently and trustfully, when it has been interrupted, without being discouraged by obstacles and rough patches on the way to comprehension and understanding. But that cannot be reached without obedience, due on the part of all the faithful, to the authentic Magisterium of the Church, even with regard to questions connected with the doctrine concerning the faith and morality. Harmony between institutional unity and pastoral pluralism is a difficult goal, which is never reached once and for all: it depends on the unanimous and constant effort of all ecclesial members and must be sought in the light of the following axiom, which is still relevant today: 'In necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas'. (Unity in things necessary, liberty where there is doubt, and charity in all).⁴ Lastly, I would like to stress that communion has its *defences*, which, as regards bishops, can be summed up above all in prudent and courageous vigilance with regard to the insidious dangers that threaten, from outside and from within, the cohesion of the faithful round the common heritage of dogmatic truths, moral values, and disciplinary norms. Communion has its *instruments*, first among which is your national Conference. It is right, therefore, to desire it to be more and more efficient and to be connected by an ever closer network with the other ecclesial structures, at the regional and diocesan level. Nor should we underestimate the instrument constituted by the press, and in particular the Catholic daily, because of the possibilities it offers of constructive dialogue among the faithful in every part of the nation, with regard to the maturing, on the personal and community plane, of choices that are responsible and, if necessary, courageously prophetic, in the context of a public opinion that is too often solicited by voices that are no longer Christian in any way. I take the liberty, therefore, of appealing to your good will, to your energies, to the organizational capacities of the individual dioceses, for increasingly support for such an important and meritorious cause.⁵ Since the Church is the "Universal sacrament of salvation", upon her "*necessitas incumbit simulque ius sacrum evangelizandi*" (lies an obligation and at the same time a sacred right to preach the gospel) (*Ad Gentes*, 7). The Lord's command to "go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation" (Mk 16:15) is the foundation of the "sacred right" of teaching her own doctrine and the moral principles which regulate human activity with regard to salvation. Only when this "sacred right" is respected in itself and in its exercise, is there put into practice that principle which the Council proclaims as the most important thing among those that regard the good of the Church, and in fact the good of the state itself, and which must always be preserved and defended everywhere, namely that "the Church in its action enjoys the freedom necessary to provide for the salvation of human beings". This, in fact, is the sacred freedom with which God's Only-Begotten Son enriched the Church redeemed by his blood. To this fundamental principle of liberty the Church appeals in her relations with the political community and, in particular, when — by common consent — she pursues the updating of the juridical instruments, ordained to healthy

cooperation between Church and State, in loyal respect for the sovereignty of each, for the good of the human persons themselves, 6. There are still many things that could be said. But in this first talk we must limit ourself to the most important and topical ones. I want this meeting to be the beginning of our collegial cooperation of each of you, dear and revered Brothers, and of all bishops and pastors of the Church in Italy. I wish with all my heart to share your ministry, your solicitude, your difficulties, your hopes, your sufferings and your joys. In conformity with my office, and at the same time, with full respect for the individual and collegial mission of each of you, sons of this Italian land, I would like this wish to be realized in a special way: "fecit illos Dominus crescere in plebem suam" (the Lord made them to grow up into his own people) We are given new life by our common faith and the same love of Christ, who alone knows what is in man (cf. Jn 2:25). Let us go together to meet this man of our times — who is sometimes lost (even in this land rich in the finest Christian heritage) — by means of our service exercised in union with priests, and men and women religious, and in united cooperation with all the laity. I hope and trust that, under the protection of the Mother of the Church and the Patron Saints of Italy, we will be able to carry out well the mission entrusted to us by the Lord, and that our brothers and sisters will experience the joy of our communion, and will live, together with you, the great dignity of the Christian vocation.

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