



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PRO JUVENTUTE ASSOCIATION**

Saturday, 24 July 1997

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. I am pleased to extend my welcome and my most cordial greetings to all of you, directors and staff of the "Don Carlo Gnocchi *Pro Juventute* Foundation". I especially thank the President, Mons. Angelo Bazzari for his words, and also for explaining the context of today's audience.

It is as it were *an extension of the celebrations for the 40th anniversary of the death of Don Carlo Gnocchi* which took place last year. In fact, our meeting was planned for last October, but Providence disposed otherwise, so that today we are commemorating Don Gnocchi anew, 50 years after he founded the "Federation *Pro Infanzia Mutilata*", later to become the "*Pro Juventute* Foundation". This gives me the opportunity to examine, together with you, the thoughts which I expressed some months ago in my special Message for your international congress on the theme of rehabilitation.

2. Commemorating figures such as Don Gnocchi makes it possible, especially for believers, to touch almost palpably the reality of *a life that endures*, indeed, that in some way continues to grow *beyond the threshold of death*.

For a Christian the act of *dying* represents the fulfilment of life, of his vocation and mission. Following in Jesus' footsteps, he has learned to die to self and fulfil himself in his gift of self, to find himself completely and in truth "losing himself", like the grain of wheat. For those who have known and believe in God's love (cf. 1 Jn 4:16), the one essential thing is to love, both living and dying. And the authentic and full meaning of life becomes "*giving one's life*".

For a priest, especially, this means following the example of Christ the Good Shepherd, who "lays down his life for the sheep" (Jn 10:11). This is how it was for your founder, in a most admirable

way. His early death was the seal to a life entirely given to God and to his neighbours. It was his wish that even after his death something of himself be donated: he offered the corneas of his eyes to a blind boy and girl, who from 29 February 1956, the day after his death, could thus begin to see.

For those times this was a courageous and original gesture, even if humble and discreet, a gesture capable of stirring consciences and positively inspiring society.

At his *funeral*, an immense crowd surrounded him who, in the period after the Second World War, had become almost a *symbol of hope*. A priest who, having shared as chaplain, the tragic fate of the Alpine troops on the Russian front, devoted himself to their orphaned and disabled children, starting a *tenacious human "rehabilitation"* for which he spent all the energy of his gifted and tireless love.

3. The development of the *Pro Juventute* during these 40 years is the best proof of the fruitfulness of Don Carlo Gnocchi's pastoral work. He not only responded to concrete and urgent needs, but above all he did so in an extremely modern way, anticipating the times, because of his keen educational sensitivity, matured in the early period of his ministry and constantly cultivated. He was not content just to help people but sought to "rehabilitate them", encourage them, enable them to find the condition of life best suited to their dignity. This was his great challenge. And this is still what challenges the foundation that bears his name.

In this perspective, one can rightly refer to Don Gnocchi as an encouraging example of *that charitable action, deeply inserted in history*, which the Italian Church has taken as a model of pastoral commitment for the current decade (cf. Italian Episcopal Conference. *Pastoral Note after the Convention of Palermo*). A charity marked, precisely, by strong and constant educational attention whose object is the integral advancement of the person with a view to building a supportive and fraternal society.

The *Pro Juventute* has shown its ability to continue faithfully the work of its venerable founder — and for this we must first of all congratulate his successors — making fruitful those "talents" that he had received and which, as he lay dying, he entrusted to his collaborators. In particular, the foundation has remained alert to changing needs by developing a capacity to *respond to new situations of need, but without ever losing sight of the centrality of the person or lessening the scientific precision of its intervention*.

4. Dear brothers and sisters, *almost all the foundation's centres are called after Mary*, also in witness to Don Carlo Gnocchi's deep Marian devotion. Today, 24 May, we commemorate the most holy Virgin venerated under the title of *Our Lady Help of Christians*. I would like to entrust your projects and the thousands of people who, through them, find relief for their suffering and hope for the future.

And I want to end my reflection precisely in the sign of *hope*: Don Carlo Gnocchi's whole life, and also his death, is a shining sign of hope. That "persistent hope" which, as he himself wrote, always guided his search for the face of God in that of innocents marked by suffering (cf. *Gli scritti*, cit., p. 527). I hope you will always be able to follow it worthily so as to enjoy, like him, the joy that stems from love. With these sentiments I sincerely impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you all, extending it to the whole family of the *Pro Juventute*.

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