



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II ON THE OCCASION OF THE BICENTENARY OF THE BENEDICTINE POPE PIUS VII'S ELECTION

*To the Right Reverend Fathers Dom Isidoro Catanesi
President of the Benedictine Cassinese Congregation
and Dom Innocenzo Negrato*

*Visitor of the Italian Province of the Benedictine Congregation of Subiaco*¹. I learned with deep pleasure that the Benedictine Cassinese Congregation and the Italian Benedictine Historical Center are planning to commemorate with suitable events the 200th anniversary of the election to the Chair of Peter of my venerable Predecessor, Pope Pius VII. On this happy occasion, I am pleased to send my cordial greetings and good wishes to the entire Benedictine community, as well as to the organizers of the International Historical Congress and to all who will take part in the Jubilee celebrations, glad that the figure and work of this distinguished Pontiff and faithful son of St Benedict will be commemorated as he deserves. Luigi Barnaba Chiaramonti, the youngest of the six children of Count Scipione and Marchioness Giovanna Coronata Ghini, was born in Cesena on 14 August 1742, the eve of the Feast of Our Lady of the Assumption, to whom the monastery where he would receive his formation is dedicated: on that same Marian solemnity, he was baptized in the Cathedral of St John the Baptist, so dear to the people of Cesena. Therefore the very date of his birth seems to link him to the Benedictine Abbey of the Madonna del Monte, near Cesena, which I had the joy of visiting in 1986. At the age of 11 he entered this abbey as a monastic student. His novice master would be Dom Gregorio Calderara who, before he died, was able to see his former novice become Supreme Pontiff. After the solemn profession of his monastic vows in 1758, Gregorio Chiaramonti was sent to Padua, to St Justina's Abbey, the cradle of the ancient Benedictine Congregation, to complete the philosophical and theological studies at which, with his acute intelligence, he shone. He later came to Rome for advanced studies at the Pontifical College of St Anselm, annexed to the urban residence of the Abbey of St Paul-outside-the-Walls, that is, at St Calistus in Trastevere, which was reserved for the ablest students of the Benedictine Cassinese Congregation. The monastic discipline and spiritual and cultural riches he acquired with a tenacious effort during his years of formation were the best preparation for the exalted universal ministry which he would carry out in a particularly turbulent period for the Church and for Europe.² Ordained a priest in 1765, Dom Gregory was sent to Parma to teach philosophy at St John the Evangelist Abbey. There, when he reached the age of 30 in 1772, he was awarded the academic title of "lector", with which his congregation qualified him for teaching theology and canon law. In this regard, it should be recalled that the nine years he spent in Parma were crucial for the cultural formation of the future Pope who, in that context, had his first important contact with French culture and its attempts at renewal, which later resulted tragically in the Revolution. The young monk Chiaramonti felt that his congregation needed a profound renewal, especially in the area of formation. On the one hand, he hoped for the

recovery of the original inspiration of monastic life, and on the other, for a modernization of the teaching programmes, so as to bring the young monks into more direct contact with the practical religious and social problems of the day. He then became lecturer and librarian at St Anselm's College in Rome, and Prior of the Abbey of St Paul-outside-the-Walls. Pius VI, who had known him personally during his term of office as commendatory abbot of Subiaco, departing from the measures prescribed by the Constitutions of the ancient Cassinese Congregation, raised him to the rank of titular abbot.³ In December 1782, he was appointed Bishop of Tivoli and in 1785 was transferred to the episcopal see of Imola and also appointed Cardinal. On 14 March 1800, at the end of the Conclave which took place in Venice, the Lord called him to guide the Church of Rome and all Christendom as Successor of the Apostle Peter. He was elected at a time of serious concern and anxiety about the future of the Christian community. As is well known, in 1800 not even the Holy Year could be celebrated. Once the difficult situation, marked for believers by forms of oppression, had been overcome, a season of relative tolerance for the Christian faith could be glimpsed, although it was still relegated to the fringes of European society. This was the atmosphere of his Pontificate, during which he could effectively make the most of his far-reaching influence and the precious gifts of nature and grace with which God had endowed him: a spirit of simplicity and docility, an outstanding sense of justice, a clear ability to combine prudence and firmness, an extraordinary zeal for the salvation of souls. Pius VII's Pontificate made a significant mark on the Church's history, thanks also to the effective juridical instrument of the Concordat which later proved very useful in regularizing relations with the States.⁴ Pius VII was fully aware of the social and political climate marked by the fierce confrontation with Napoleon Bonaparte's personality and the emergence of incentives for restoration in Italy and in Europe. Thus trials and disputes were not wanting: in 1809 he was arrested at the Emperor's orders and taken as a prisoner to France, then to Savona. He was released in 1814. A year later, after the invasion of Rome and the Papal States, he was once again obliged to return to the sorrowful road of exile and seek shelter in Genoa. In these conditions, he displayed constancy in defending the Church and tenacious courage in bearing insults and suffering. Supported by faith, he did not yield to abuse and violence, witnessing to an attachment to his mission and to a service of the Church and of the world which was a cause of undying admiration. Indeed, since his election, Pius VII showed his awareness of the troubles he would have to face. In his first Encyclical, addressed to the Catholic world from the Venetian monastery of St George, recalling the sad events of his immediate Predecessor, Pope Pius VI, and gradually reviewing the Church's history, he shed light on how persecution and misunderstanding were not new to Vicars of Christ. At the same time, he urged Christians to persevere courageously in the midst of adversities, trusting in God and staying firm in their Gospel witness. He well knew what the mission of the Successor of Peter is: to strengthen his brethren in the faith [cf. *Lk* 22: 32].⁵ In his ministry, Pius VII was always supported by indomitable trust in the Lord and filial love for the heavenly Mother of God. I would like, in this regard, to emphasize his devotion for the Most Holy Virgin, which had been communicated to him in the family, as if with his mother's milk, and which he then constantly nurtured over the years. Raised to the papal throne, he showed continuous signs of it. It is enough to remember that he insisted on personally crowning many Marian images. On his first journey to Rome, passing through Spoleto on 30 June 1800, he crowned the sacred icon of Our Lady of St Luke, venerated in that city's cathedral. He was released from the Napoleonic prison on 22 January 1814 and, before returning to Rome, not only did he himself want to be the one to crown the venerable likeness of the Madonna del Monte in Cesena on 1 May 1814, but during that same month of May, he repeated this act of exquisite devotion for Our Lady of Compassion, popularly known as Our Lady of the Water, who is revered in the cathedral of Rimini, as well as for Our Lady of All the Saints in the cathedral of Ancona. He also returned to Savona on 10 May 1815, solemnly to crown there the image of Our Lady of Mercy, fulfilling a vow he had made during the interminable months of his three-year exile in Savona.⁶ Precisely to stress the constant relations between this Pontiff and the Mother of God, the historical congress

commemorating his election has chosen as its opening date 15 September, the liturgical Memorial of Our Lady of Sorrows, which, in memory of the sorrows afflicting the Church during the period of the French Revolution and Napoleonic domination on 18 September 1814, he extended to the whole Church. In addition, on 15 September 1815, to perpetuate the memory of his triumphal return to Rome on 24 May 1814, he decreed that every year on 14 May the Diocese of Rome should celebrate the Feast of Mary Help of Christians, later included in the individual calendars of many Dioceses and religious families. During troubled times for the Pontificate, it was the Blessed Virgin herself, who supported him in his unshakeable certainty that the rights of God and of the Church would triumph at last. Another feature of my illustrious Predecessor's pontificate was his great love of study and culture, drawn from the Benedictine tradition and which earned him the praise he deserved for the recovery of the Holy See's artistic and historical heritage, widely dispersed by the Napoleonic raids. His efforts to increase it are eloquently testified by the Chiaramonti Museum, called after him, and the frescos in the Vatican Library, which still recount his actions.⁷ Consequently there are many important reasons for commemorating this worthy Successor of the Apostle Peter, harshly tried by adversities and misunderstandings. His witness of invincible and persevering service to the Church is a useful lesson for everyone. Thinking of all he had to suffer to carry out his apostolic ministry prompts meditation on the vocation of every apostle of Christ. In fact, Christians of every epoch, despite disputes and humiliations, obstacles and persecutions, are called to persevere without ceasing in fidelity to their Lord. They know it is their duty to adhere to the Gospel without compromise or fear, ready each day to take up their cross and follow him, the crucified Teacher. To walk behind him, lovingly embracing his Gospel: this is the active and generous commitment of all disciples of Jesus. The experience of the Cross is inevitably linked to this mission, in accordance with the Lord's words: *"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me"* (Mt 16: 24). I warmly hope that this Jubilee event will be an opportunity to become better acquainted with Pope Chiaramonti's message and to appreciate more deeply his wisdom and inner fortitude. By looking at his life and example, may the people of our time draw from them valuable information, to face the challenges of the modern age with the same missionary zeal. Today, as in his time, it is necessary to know how to pass through life's difficulties, remaining unshakeable in listening to and obeying the Gospel. May the Lord, through the intercession of Mary, Mother of Christians, obtain in a special way for the monasteries of the two congregations which developed from the one ancient Cassinese Congregation, the gift of ever greater fidelity to their charism. May he also grant them many vocations to the "school of divine service", according to the dictates of St Benedict's Rule. To this end, I assure you my remembrance in prayer, and, as a pledge of abundant heavenly graces, I am pleased to impart to the Most Reverend Father Abbots, to the men's and women's Benedictine communities, as well as to all those who will be taking part in the International Historical Congress, the implored Apostolic Blessing. *From Castel Gandolfo, 14 August 2000.*

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