



The Holy See

VISIT TO THE ITALIAN PARLIAMENT
(PALAZZO MONTECITORIO)

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II*

Thursday, 14 November 2002

Mr President of the Italian Republic,
Honourable Presidents of the Chamber of Deputies and of the Senate,
Mr President of the Council of Ministers,
Honourable Deputies and Senators,

1. I am deeply honoured by the marvellous welcome given me today in this illustrious seat of government, in which you are the worthy representatives of the Italian people. To each and every one of you I extend my warm and respectful greeting, fully aware of the special significance to be attributed to the presence of the Successor of Peter in the Italian Parliament.

I thank the President of the Chamber of Deputies and the President of the Senate of the Republic for the noble words with which they have expressed your shared sentiments, giving voice also to the millions of your fellow citizens whose affection I experience daily in my many meetings with them. That affection has always been with me from the very first months of my election to the See of Peter. On this occasion therefore I again wish to voice my deepest gratitude to the Italian people.

Already in my days as a student in Rome and later during my periodic visits to Italy as a Bishop, especially during the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, I learned to admire your country, where the proclamation of the Gospel, begun in apostolic times, gave rise to a civilization marked by a wealth of universal values and a marvellous flourishing of the arts, which have portrayed the mysteries of the faith in works of incomparable beauty. How often have I touched with my own hand, as it were, the splendid traces which the Christian religion has impressed on the customs

and culture of the Italian people! This can be clearly seen also in countless men and women Saints, whose charism has had an extraordinary impact upon the peoples of Europe and of the world. It suffices to recall Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Catherine of Siena, the Patrons of Italy.

2. *Truly deep is the bond that exists between the Holy See and Italy!* We all know that this association has gone through widely different phases and circumstances, subject to the vicissitudes and contradictions of history. But at the same time we should recognize that precisely in the sometimes turbulent sequence of events that bond has had *highly positive results*, both for the Church of Rome, and therefore for the Catholic Church, and for the beloved Italian Nation.

In fostering this closeness and cooperation, with respect for mutual independence and freedom, much was achieved by the great Popes that Italy has given to the Church and the world during the last century. Suffice it to remember Pius XI, the Pope of the *Reconciliation*, and Pius XII, the Pope of Rome's safety during the War and, closer to us, Popes John XXIII and Paul VI, whose names I too, like John Paul I, have taken.

3. In an effort to present a broad overview of the history of recent centuries, we can well say that Italy's social and cultural identity, and the civilizing mission it has exercised and continues to exercise in Europe and the world, *would be most difficult to understand without reference to Christianity, its life-blood.*

Allow me therefore respectfully to invite you, the elected Representatives of this Nation, and with you the whole Italian people, to maintain *a convinced and pondered trust* in the heritage of virtues and values handed down by your forebears. It is on the basis of this trust that it will be possible to give clear answers to the issues of the moment, however complex and difficult they may be, and even more, to look boldly to the future, asking what more Italy can do for the progress of civilization.

In the light of the extraordinary *juridical experience* acquired in the course of the centuries, beginning from pagan Rome, how can one not feel an obligation, for example, to continue to offer the world the fundamental message according to which, at the centre of every just civil order, there must be *respect for man*, for his dignity and for his inalienable rights? With good reason the ancient adage stated: *Hominum causa omne ius constitutum est*. Such an affirmation implies the conviction that there exists a "truth about man" which asserts itself beyond the barriers of different language and cultures.

In this perspective, speaking at the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization on the Fiftieth Anniversary of its foundation, I recalled that there are universal human rights, rooted in the nature of the person, in which are reflected the objective requirements of a universal moral law. And I added: "These are not abstract points; rather, these rights tell us something important about the actual life of every individual and of every social group. *They also remind us that we do not live*

in an irrational or meaningless world. On the contrary, there is a *moral logic which is built into human life* and which makes possible dialogue between individuals and peoples (No. 3).

4. Following with affectionate attention the development of this great Nation, I am led to believe that, in order for its characteristic qualities to be more clearly expressed, it needs to *increase its solidarity and internal cohesion.* Thanks to the riches of its long history, as also to the multiplicity and dynamism of its social, cultural and economic enterprise and activities, which in various ways shape its peoples and its territory, the reality of Italy is certainly extremely complex. It would be impoverished and impaired by a forced uniformity.

The path which makes it possible to maintain and use differences to advantage, without them becoming sources of confrontation and obstacles to overall progress, is the path of *sincere and steadfast solidarity.* This solidarity has profound roots in the heart and in the customs of the Italian people, and one of the ways in which it is currently being expressed is in *numerous and praiseworthy forms of voluntary work.* But there is also an evident need for solidarity in the relationships between the various sectors of society and between the diverse geographical areas.

As political leaders and institutional representatives, you yourselves can give a particularly important and effective example in this field. Your example will be all the more meaningful insofar as the dialectic of politics tends rather to emphasize differences. Your activity in fact takes on all its noble significance to the extent that it is seen to be prompted by a true spirit of service to your fellow citizens.

5. Decisive in this perspective is the presence in the heart of each one of *an intense awareness for the common good.* The teaching of the Second Vatican Council in this matter is very clear: "The political community... exists for the common good: this is its full justification and meaning and the source of its specific and basic right to exist" (*Gaudium et spes*, 74).

The challenges facing a democratic State demand from all men and women of good will, irrespective of their particular political persuasion, *supportive and generous cooperation in building up the common good of the Nation.* Such cooperation however cannot prescind from reference to *the fundamental ethical values inscribed in the very nature of the human person.* In this regard, in my Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor* I warned of the "*risk of an alliance between democracy and ethical relativism,* which would remove any sure moral reference point from political and social life, and on a deeper level make the acknowledgement of truth impossible" (No. 101). In fact, as I noted in another Encyclical Letter, *Centesimus Annus*, if there exists no ultimate truth to guide and direct political life "ideas and convictions can easily be manipulated for reasons of power. As history demonstrates, a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism" (No. 46).

6. I cannot fail to mention, on such a solemn occasion, another grave threat that bears upon the

future of this Country, one which is already conditioning its life and its capacity for development. I refer to the *crisis of the birthrate*, the demographic decline and the ageing of the population. Raw statistical evidence obliges us to take account of the human, social and economic problems which this crisis will inevitably impose on Italy in the decades to come. Above all, it encourages – indeed, I would dare to say, forces – citizens to make a broad and responsible commitment to favour a clear-cut reversal of this tendency.

The Church's contribution to the development of an attitude and culture by which this reversal of tendency can become possible is her pastoral action *in favour of families and openness to life*, and more in general in favour of a way of life marked by self-giving. But there is also ample room for political initiatives which, by upholding recognition of the rights of the family as the natural society founded upon marriage, according to the expression of the *Constitution of the Italian Republic* (cf. art. 29), can make the task of having children and bringing them up less burdensome both socially and economically.

7. At a time of often radical change, when past experience seems increasingly irrelevant, there is an ever greater need for *a solid formation of the person*. This too, distinguished Representatives of the Italian people, is an area which calls for the broadest cooperation, to ensure that *the primary responsibilities of parents* can find adequate support. The intellectual training and the moral education of young people remain the two fundamental "ways" for all persons, in the decisive years of their development, to prove themselves, to widen the horizons of the mind and to prepare for the reality of life.

Men and women live a genuinely human existence *thanks to culture*. Through culture they find their true being and come to a deeper "ownership" of themselves. The thoughtful person understands clearly that the human measure of a person is *who he is* rather than *what he has*. The human value of each individual is directly and essentially related to *being*, not *having*. For this reason a nation concerned for its own future promotes *the development of its learning centres in a healthy climate of freedom*, and leaves no effort undone to improve their quality, in close cooperation with families and all sectors of society, as in fact is the case in most European countries.

No less important for the formation of the person is the moral climate prevalent in social relations, and which at the present time is massively conditioned by the *communications media*; this challenge is a concern for every individual and family, but particularly for those charged with major political and institutional responsibilities. The Church, for her part, will never cease to carry out also in this field that educational mission which is part of her very nature.

8. The genuinely "human" nature of society is shown especially in the *attention which it is able to show towards its weakest members*. If we consider Italy's development in the almost sixty years since the devastation of the Second World War, we can only admire the immense progress made

towards a society in which all are guaranteed acceptable living conditions. But it is likewise necessary to acknowledge the *continuing grave crisis of unemployment* affecting the young in particular, and the many forms of poverty, deprivation and marginalization, both old and new, involving numerous individuals and families, whether Italians or immigrants to this country. Great therefore is the need for a willing and comprehensive network of solidarity, in which the Church is entirely committed to making her own specific contribution.

Such solidarity, however, needs to be able to count above all on *constant and close attention on the part of public Institutions*. In this context, and without prejudice to the need to guarantee the security of citizens, attention needs to be given to *the prison situation*, where inmates often live in conditions of appalling overcrowding. A *gesture of clemency towards prisoners* through a reduction of their sentences would be clear evidence of a sensitivity which would encourage them in their own personal rehabilitation for the sake of a constructive re-insertion into society.

9. A self-confident and internally cohesive Italy can be a great enrichment for the other nations of Europe and the world. I wish to share this conviction with you at this time, when *the institutional shape of the European Union* is being defined and its expansion to include many countries of Central and Eastern Europe appears imminent, as it were sealing the end of an unnatural division. It is my hope that, thanks also to Italy's support, the new foundations of the European "common house" will not lack the "cement" of that extraordinary religious, cultural and civil patrimony which has given Europe its greatness down the centuries.

There is a need to guard against a vision of the Continent which would only take into account its economic and political aspects, or which would uncritically yield to lifestyles inspired by a consumerism indifferent to spiritual values. If lasting stability is to be given to the new unity of Europe, there must be a commitment to ensuring that it is supported on those ethical foundations which were once its basis, while at the same time making room for the richness and diversity of the cultures and traditions which characterize individual nations. In this noble Assembly I would like to renew the appeal which in recent years I have made to the various peoples of the Continent: *"Europe, at the beginning of the new millennium, open once again your doors to Christ!"*

10. The new century just begun brings with it *a growing need for concord, solidarity and peace between the nations*: for this is the inescapable requirement of an increasingly interdependent world, held together by a global network of exchanges and communications, in which nonetheless deplorable inequalities continue to exist. Tragically our hopes for peace are brutally contradicted by the flaring up of *chronic conflicts*, beginning with the one which has caused so much bloodshed in the Holy Land. There is also *international terrorism*, which has taken on a new and fearful dimension, involving in a completely distorted way the great religions. Precisely for this reason, the world's religions are challenged to show all their rich potential for peace by directing and as it were "converting" towards mutual understanding the cultures and civilizations which draw inspiration

from them.

In this great enterprise, on whose outcome depends the future of the human race in coming decades, *Christianity has its own particular genius and responsibility*: by proclaiming the God of love, it presents itself as the religion of mutual respect, forgiveness and reconciliation. Italy and the other nations historically rooted in the Christian faith are in a sense inherently prepared to open up for humanity new pathways of peace, not by ignoring the danger of present threats, yet not allowing themselves to be imprisoned by a "logic" of conflict incapable of offering real solutions.

Illustrious Representatives of the Italian People, a prayer arises spontaneously from the depths of my heart: from this ancient and glorious City – from this "Rome where Christ is Roman", in Dante's celebrated phrase (*Purgatorio* 32:102) – I implore the Redeemer of man to grant that the beloved Italian Nation will continue, now and in the future, to live in a way worthy of its radiant tradition, and to draw from that tradition new and abundant fruits of civilization, for the material and spiritual progress of the whole world.

God bless Italy!

Video

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