



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI TO THE ITALIAN PREFECTS

Clementine Hall

Friday, 14 October 2011

*Hon. Mr Minister,
Distinguished Prefects,*

I am glad to meet you, especially this year when — as has been mentioned — the 150th anniversary of the Unification of Italy is being celebrated and I address my respectful and cordial greeting to you all, well aware of the importance of the Prefects' role in the structure of the Italian State.

I address a special greeting to Hon. Mr Roberto Maroni, Minister of the Interior, and thank him for his courteous words interpreting your common sentiments. You come from the Provinces of the entire peninsula in which testimonies of the presence of Christianity abound. Christianity down the ages has made the Italian culture fruitful, giving rise to a civilization rich in universal values. Traces of the Christian faith impressed on the morals of the Italian people can in fact be seen everywhere, giving rise to noble and deeply rooted religious and cultural traditions and to an artistic heritage unique in the world.

Bearing a message of salvation valid for human beings in every age, the Catholic Church is firmly rooted, well-organized and active throughout the Italian territory. She is a living and life-giving reality, like the leaven of which the Gospel speaks (cf. Mt 13:33). The Church is a significant presence, characterized by her closeness to the people to understand their deepest needs in her readiness to serve. The expectations and needs to which the Gospel proclamation and initiatives of fraternal solidarity must respond are multiple.

The more pressing these needs are, the harder the Church tries to be an attentive and fruitful presence. Respectful of the legitimate autonomies and competencies, the ecclesial community

seeks to address its precise mandate to the human being in every sphere of life: cultural, work, service and leisure time. Aware that “we are all really responsible for all”, as [Bl. John Paul II](#) wrote (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, n. 38), the Church wishes to construct, together with the other institutions and bodies in the territory, a solid platform of moral virtues on which to build a coexistence on the human scale.

She knows that in this mission she can count on the warm and effective collaboration of the Prefects who carry out roles of encouragement and social coherence that guarantee civil rights and constitute an important reference point for the various entities in the territory.

In this regard, as I emphasize with deep pleasure the close relationship and fruitful cooperation of the respective Prefectures with the dioceses and parishes, I wish to encourage each one to continue along the lines of this mutual understanding in the interest of the citizens and of the common good.

Distinguished Prefects, I know that you endeavour to carry out your lofty and highly qualified service to the nation with sincere dedication, paying attention at the same time to the needs of the local bodies and to the various problems that arise in business firms, the family and personally.

Indeed, the figure of the Prefect is increasingly perceived by the public as a reference point in the territory for the solution of social problems, who may be asked to guarantee mediation and public services. In your responsibility at the provincial level, concerning order and basic public security you are placed as the unitary and principal promoters and guarantors of the criterion of loyal cooperation in a pluralistic system. In this regard do not forget that “as an instrument of the State, public administration at any level — national, regional, community — is oriented towards the service of citizens.... The role of those working in public administration is not to be regarded as impersonal or bureaucratic, but rather as an act of generous assistance for citizens, undertaken in a spirit of service” (cf. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, n. 412).

Furthermore, your delicate institutional role is, as it were, to safeguard the weakest categories and is made even more complex and crucial by the present social and economic uncertainty. Do not be discouraged by difficulties and misunderstandings, but always be ready to deal with the matters entrusted to you with a strong sense of duty and prudence, never lacking respect for the truth or the courage to defend the supreme good.

In this regard the luminous figure of St Ambrose, your heavenly patron, spontaneously springs to mind. He was called unexpectedly to the Episcopate — as you know — and obliged to give up a brilliant career as a senior public official. And he was not yet baptized! This holy Bishop admired and loved the Roman Empire which he had served loyally and generously until he was 35 years old, before being chosen as Pastor of the Ambrosian Church [the Church of Milan].

This esteem for legitimate authority, which he had cultivated since his youth, was invigorated by the grace of Baptism to the point that he not only passionately loved the Church for her spiritual riches of truth and life, but also for the practical nature of her institutions and for the people of whom she was composed, especially the poor and the lowliest. St Ambrose was able, in a certain sense, to transfer to the exercise of his pastoral ministry the substantial features of that *habitus* which had distinguished him and had earned him the admiration of many for being an honest civil servant. Moreover, having become a bishop, he was able to point out to those in charge of the civil institutions the Christian values that give fresh energy and new splendour to the work of all who are involved in public life.

St Ambrose affirmed in his Commentary on Luke's Gospel: "The institution of civil power derives so clearly from God that whoever exercises it is also a minister of God" (*Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* 4:29). This means that the civil role is so eminently distinguished as to assume an almost "sacred" character. Therefore it needs to be exercised with great dignity and a keen sense of responsibility.

This holy Bishop and Doctor of the Church, inspired by great love and respect for the institutions of both State and Church, is an extraordinary example of rectitude, especially with his loyalty to the law, his firm opposition to forms of injustice and oppression, as well as the freedom of speech, with which he rebuked even the powerful and taught the principles of genuine freedom and of service to all.

He wrote: "The Apostle [Paul] taught me what goes beyond freedom itself, namely that service is also freedom. 'For though I am free from all men,' he says, 'I have made myself a slave to all' [1 Cor 9:19].... For the wise, therefore, service is also freedom" (*Ep* 7:23-24).

You too, as important representatives, are called in the exercise of your duties to combine authority and professionalism, especially at moments of tension and of conflict. May the witness of St Ambrose be an incentive and encouragement to you, so that your work may be every day at the service of justice, peace, freedom and the common good. God will not fail to sustain you in your efforts, enriching them with an abundance of good results for an ever broader and more far-reaching dissemination of the civilization of love. With these hopes, and their realization, I invoke the blessing of the Almighty upon you all.

Thank you.

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