



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE ITALIAN BISHOPS
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 55th GENERAL ASSEMBLY***

Venerable and dear Brothers,

With this Message, I would like to give you proof of my sentiments of deep communion and spiritual participation in the work of your General Assembly.

I greet with great affection Cardinal Camillo Ruini, your President, the three Vice-Presidents, the General Secretary and each one of you, well aware of the great dedication with which you care for the communities entrusted to you, guiding and sustaining them on their way to holiness.

I still have a vivid memory of the Meeting I had with you last 30 May, on the occasion of your previous General Assembly. I said to you then, a few weeks after my election as Successor of Peter, that I felt "deeply comforted by your closeness and solidarity" ([*Address to the 54th Assembly of the CEI, 30 May 2005*](#); *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition [ORE], 8 June, p. 3).

Today, a few months later, thanks to the Meetings I have had with many of you on the occasion of the [Italian] National Eucharistic Congress in Bari, the 20th World Youth Day in Cologne and at various Audiences, I am more and more sustained by the certainty that "Together we will be able to carry out the mission that Jesus Christ has entrusted to us, together we will be able to bear witness to Christ and make him as present today as he was in the past in Italian homes and hearts" (*ibid.*).

During your Assembly you will be addressing various topics that include, principally, the formation of future priests and the presence of the Church in the world of health care. Both these themes are most relevant; you rightly pay attention to them with a view to approaches and decisions that could be a great help to the People of God and to the entire Italian Nation.

The Church today needs priests who are fully aware of the gift of grace they receive with priestly Ordination and with the mission entrusted to them in a time of rapid and radical changes.

If our communities are to grow harmoniously in truth and charity around the Eucharist and the Word of God, the presence of priests who act in Christ's Name and live in intimate union with the One who has called them and sent them forth is indispensable.

The Church needs priests who always know how to make their actions conform to the model of the Good Shepherd, docilely allowing the Holy Spirit to guide them in full communion with their Bishops.

While I feel the duty, as you do, to thank all the priests in Italy who, with great self-denial and often unobtrusively working non-stop, contribute to making our parishes and communities lively and full of graces, I share your concern about the decrease in clergy and the gradual increase in the average age of priests.

It is therefore necessary and urgent to intensify the pastoral care of vocations and to define ever better the formation programme, so as to guarantee a human, intellectual and spiritual training that is equal to the new challenges which the priestly ministry is called to face.

As I said to the seminarians I met on 19 August in Cologne, the seminary must be the context in which "a personal relationship with Christ" develops, hence, "a significant time in the life of a follower of Jesus", for a formation that has "different strands which converge in the unity of the person" ([*Address to Seminarians, Cologne, Germany, 19 August 2005*](#); *ORE*, 24 August, p. 7).

It is equally important that this formation work take place in a community context in order to be a reflection of Jesus' communion of life with his disciples and to ensure that the various elements of the educational project converge around the needs of pastoral charity.

Since the task of priests is central and irreplaceable, every possible care must be taken with their formation, starting with the quality of the formation teachers. All the faithful, by praying to the Lord of the harvest, can contribute to the flourishing of vocations and the formation of priests, for a priest is shaped in the first place by his own prayer and by the prayers that the whole community raises to the Lord for him and for his ministry.

The other theme to which you will be dedicating a part of your Assembly is pastoral health care. Sickness certainly poses serious and complex problems to social organization and represents one of the principal chapters of the service guaranteed to citizens; but it is also first and foremost a fundamental dimension of human experience, which calls into question the Church's mission and the consciences of believers.

Indeed, it is not by chance that the Lord chose to accompany the proclamation of salvation by healing numerous suffering people, while the Christian community in all ages has made care of the sick a sign of Christ's charity.

The witness that my beloved Predecessor John Paul II bequeathed to us lives on, engraved in our hearts: he made the chair of suffering a key point of his Magisterium.

Illumined and encouraged by such a great witness, the Church is called to express solidarity and tenderness to those who are facing the trial of sickness, in the first place by helping them see illness and death itself not as a denial of the human but as a journey in the wake of the suffering, death and Resurrection of Jesus that leads us to true and eternal life.

Thus, Catholic institutions which do so much in the context of health care and nursing deserve to be supported and promoted so that they may be ever more exemplary in combining innovation and scientific knowledge with priority attention to the person and his or her dignity.

The role of chaplains is especially important. In hospital wards they meet patients and offer them spiritual support by making them aware of the affectionate and comforting presence of our one Saviour, Jesus Christ.

When faced with the demand, which is often expressed, of eliminating suffering even by recourse to euthanasia, it is essential to reaffirm the inviolable dignity of human life from conception to its natural end.

Dear Brother Bishops of Italy, during your Assembly you will be commemorating in particular the 40th anniversary of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. I wholeheartedly join you in this commemoration, in expectation of the celebration that I shall make this 8 December of the extraordinary gift that the Church and humanity have received through the Council.

I also want to tell you that I deeply appreciate the regular discernment and single-minded commitment by which you help your communities and the entire Italian Nation to act for the true good of people and of society. I encourage you to continue on this path with serenity and courage, in order to offer to all the light of the Gospel and the words of the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life (cf. Jn 14: 6) for us and for the world.

I entrust you all to the loving protection of St Mary of the Angels and I invoke Sts Francis and Clare of Assisi, so dear to Italians, so that they may guide you in your reflection and help you nurture faith and holiness of life in the Christian people.

With the expression of my deep affection, I impart my Apostolic Blessing to each one of you, to your Churches and to the entire Nation.

From the Vatican, 10 November 2005

BENEDICT XVI

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