



The Holy See

**LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO CARD. ANGELO BAGNASCO
ON THE OCCASION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE ITALIAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE**

*To my Venerable Brother
Cardinal ANGELO BAGNASCO
President of the Italian Bishops' Conference*

With this message that I send to you on the occasion of the 62nd General Assembly of the Italian Episcopal Conference, I intend to make myself a pilgrim to Assisi in spirit in order to be present and to reach out personally, to you and to each one of the Bishops who have gathered as caring Pastors of the beloved particular Churches in Italy.

Your solicitude and commitment are expressed in responsible governance of the dioceses and in fatherly closeness to your priests and parish communities. An eloquent sign of this is attention to the topic of education which you have made your priority for the decade that is beginning.

The recently published *Pastoral Guidelines* are an expression of a Church which, at the school of Jesus, intends to take to heart the whole life of every human being, and to this end seeks “in everyday experiences the alphabet for composing words that convey God's infinite love to the world” (*Educare alla vita buona del Vangelo*, n. 3).

1. In these days you are meeting in Assisi, the town in which “a sun was born into the world” (Dante, *Paradise*, Canto XI). He was proclaimed Patron of Italy by Venerable Pius xii: St Francis, who keeps intact his freshness and timeliness — Saints never fade! — due to his being conformed totally to Christ, of which he was a living icon.

The time in which St Francis lived was marked, like ours, by profound cultural transformations, encouraged by the birth of the university, by the development of the municipalities and by the spreading of new religious experiences.

In this season, thanks to the work of Pope Innocent III — the Pope from whom the *Poverello* of Assisi obtained his first canonical recognition — the Church began a profound liturgical reform. An eminent expression of it was the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), that lists the “Breviary” among its fruits. This book of prayers contained the riches of the theological reflection and prayerful life of the preceding millennium.

By taking it on St Francis and his friars made their own the Supreme Pontiff's liturgical prayers. So it was that the Saint assiduously listened to and meditated upon the word of God, to the point of making it his own and introducing it into the prayers he composed, as well as generally into all his writings.

The Fourth Lateran Council itself, reflecting with special attention on the Sacrament of the Altar, introduced the term “transubstantiation” into the profession of faith in order to affirm the real presence of Christ in the Eucharistic sacrifice.

“His Body and His Blood are truly contained in the Sacrament of the Altar under the species of the bread and the wine, since through divine power the bread is transubstantiated into the body and the wine into blood” (DS, 802).

The evangelical life of St Francis and his vocation to walk the way of the Crucified Christ flowed from serving at Holy Mass and from receiving Holy Communion devoutly.

“The Lord”, we read in the Testament of 1226, “gave me so much faith in the Churches that I simply prayed and said: ‘We adore you, Lord Jesus, in all your Churches throughout the world and we bless you because with your holy Cross you redeemed the world’” (*Fonti Francescane*, n. 111).

The great deference in which he held priests and the order he gave the friars to respect them always and everywhere originated in this experience, “for I see nothing of the Most High Son of God corporally in this world other than his Most Holy Body and his Blood, which they [priests] alone consecrate and alone administer to others” (*Fonti Francescane*, n. 113).

Before this gift, dear Brothers, what a responsibility of life derives from it for each one of us! “Take care of your dignity, brother priests”, St Francis recommended further, and “*be holy because he is holy!*”. (*Letter to the General Chapter and to all the Friars, in Fonti Francescane*, n. 220).

Yes, the holiness of the Eucharist demands that we celebrate this Mystery aware of its greatness, importance and effectiveness for Christian life, but it also demands purity, consistence and holiness of life of each one of us, to be living witnesses of the one Sacrifice of Christ's love.

The Saint of Assisi never ceased to contemplate how “the Lord of the universe, God and Son of God, humbled himself to the point of hiding himself, for our salvation, in the meager appearance of

bread" (*ibid.*, No. 221), and with vehemence asked his friars: "I beg you, more than if I did so for myself, when it is appropriate and when you deem it necessary, that you humbly implore priests to venerate above all the Most holy Body and Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ and the holy names and words written of him that consecrate the Body" (Letter to all the Custodians, in *Franciscan Sources*, n. 241).

2. The genuine believer, in every epoch, experiences in the Liturgy the presence, primacy and work of God. It is "*veritatis splendor*" (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, n. 35), a nuptial event, a foretaste of the new and definitive city and participation in it; it is a link between creation and redemption, an heaven open above the earth of human beings, a passage from the world to God; it is Easter, in the Cross and in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ; it is the soul of Christian life, called to the "sequela", and reconciliation that moves people to fraternal charity.

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, your gathering has made examination of the Italian translation of the third typical edition of the Roman Missal the focus of your Assembly. The correspondence of the prayer of the Church (*lex orandi*) with the rule of the faith (*lex credendi*) shapes the thought and feelings of the Christian community, giving a form to the Church, Body of Christ and Temple of the Spirit. No human word can do without time, even when, as in the case of the Liturgy, it is a window that opens beyond time. Thus giving voice to an eternally valid reality calls for the wise balance of continuity and innovation, of tradition and actualization.

The Missal itself fits into this process. Every true reformer, in fact, is obedient to faith. He does not move arbitrarily nor does he arrogate to himself discretionary powers concerning the rite; he is not the owner but rather the custodian of the treasure instituted by the Lord and entrusted to us. The whole Church is present in every Liturgy: To adhere to its form is the condition of the authenticity of what is celebrated.

May this reason impel you, in the changed conditions of the time, to make increasingly transparent and practicable that faith which dates back to the epoch of the nascent Church. This task is all the more urgent in a culture that — as you yourselves say — is experiencing an "eclipse of the sense of God and an obfuscation of the dimension of interiority, the uncertain formation of personal identity in a multi-faceted and fragmented context, the difficulties of dialogue between the generations, the separation between intelligence and affectivity" (*Educare alla vita buona del Vangelo*, n. 9). These elements are the sign of a crisis of trust in life and considerably influence the educational process, in which reliable references become short-lived.

Contemporary man has invested great energy in developing science and technology, achieving in these fields goals that are undoubtedly significant and appreciable. This progress, however, has often been made at the expense of the foundations of Christianity, in which the fertile history of the European Continent is rooted. The moral sphere has been confined to the subjective realm and God, when he is not denied, is nevertheless excluded from the public conscience.

Yet, a person grows to the extent that he experiences good and learns to distinguish it from evil, over and above calculation, which considers solely the consequences of a an individual action or uses as a criterion for evaluation the possibility of doing it

To change course a generic call to values or an educational proposal that is content with purely functional and fragmentary interventions does not suffice. Necessary instead is a personal relationship of fidelity between active subjects, protagonists of the relationship, capable of taking sides and of putting their own freedom into play (*cf. ibid.*, n. 26).

Your decision to mobilize all who have at heart the city of men and the good of the new generations to assume responsibility for education is therefore particularly appropriate. This indispensable alliance cannot but start from a new closeness to the family, which recognizes and supports the primacy of education; it is families that a people's face is formed.

As the Church in Italy, attentive to making a profound interpretation of current events and hence to understanding human questions and desires, you renew the commitment to work willingly to listen and to converse, to make available to all the Good News of God's fatherly love. You are encouraged by the certainty that Jesus Christ is the *Way* that leads each one to the complete fulfilment of himself, in accordance with God's plan.

He is the *Truth*, which reveals man to himself and guides him in the process of growth in freedom. He is the *Life*, because in him every human being finds the ultimate meaning of his existence and of his action: full communion of love with God for eternity" (*ibid.*, n. 19).

On this way, I exhort you to appreciate the Liturgy as a perennial source of education in the good life of the Gospel. It introduces the person into the encounter with Jesus Christ, who with words and deeds constantly builds the Church, forming her in the depths of listening, of brotherhood and of mission. The rites are eloquent by virtue of their intrinsic rationality and teach a conscious, active and fruitful participation (*cf. n. 11*).

Dear Brothers, let us lift our heads and let us allow Christ to look into our eyes, the only Teacher, Redeemer from whom proceeds all our responsibility to the communities that have been entrusted to us and to every man. May Mary Most Holy, with a Mother's heart, watch over our way and accompany us with her intercession.

As I renew my affectionate closeness and my fraternal encouragement, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you, Venerable Brother, to the Bishops, to your collaborators and to everyone present.

From the Vatican, 4 November 2010

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