



# The Holy See

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***MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI  
TO H.E. Mr. GIORGIO NAPOLITANO  
PRESIDENT OF THE ITALIAN REPUBLIC  
ON THE 150th ANNIVERSARY OF THE UNIFICATION OF ITALY***

*Most Distinguished and Honourable  
Mr Giorgio Napolitano  
President of the Italian Republic*

The 150th anniversary of the political Unification of Italy affords me a felicitous opportunity to reflect on the history of this beloved country, whose capital is Rome, the city in which Divine Providence has established the See of the Successor of the Apostle Peter. Therefore, in expressing my most fervent congratulations to you and to the entire nation, I am happy to share with you these reflections of mine, as a sign of the close bonds of friendship and collaboration which unite Italy and the Holy See.

The process of Unification which took place in Italy in the 19th century and which has gone down in history as the Risorgimento, was the natural political outlet for the development of a national identity that began much earlier. In fact, the formation of the Italian nation as a community of people united by language and by a sense of belonging despite the plurality of the political communities spread across the peninsula, began in the Middle Ages. Christianity contributed in a fundamental way to the construction of the Italian identity through the work of the Church of her educational and charitable institutions, establishing models for behaviour, institutional structures and social relations, but also through an extremely rich artistic activity: literature, painting, sculpture, architecture, music.

Dante, Giotto, Petrarch, Michelangelo, Raphael, Pierluigi da Palestrina, Caravaggio, Scarlatti, Bernini and Borromini are only a few of the names in a long line of great artists who down the centuries made a fundamental contribution to the formation of the Italian identity. The many experiences of holiness that have spangled the history of Italy have also made a strong

contribution to building this identity; and not only in the specific perspective of putting into practice the Gospel message which in time marked the religious experience and spirituality of the Italians (only think of the many great expressions of popular piety), but also the cultural and even political perspectives.

St Francis of Assisi, for example, is known for his contribution to forming the national language; St Catherine of Siena, although only a simple woman of the people, gave a formidable stimulus to the creation of Italian political and juridical thought. The contribution of the Church and of believers to the process of the formation and consolidation of the national identity has continued in the modern and contemporary era. Even when part of the peninsula was subject to the sovereignty of foreign powers, it was precisely because of this identity – by then clear cut and strong – that despite the duration of the era of geopolitical fragmentation, the Italian nation could continue to exist and be conscious of itself. Thus Italian unity, achieved in the second half of the 19th century, could be brought about as the natural political outlet for a strong and well-established national identity that had existed for some time rather than as an artificial political construction of diverse identities.

The unitary political community born at the demise of the Risorgimento had, ultimately, the pre-existing national identity as a cohesive factor which held together the already existing local diversities. Christianity and the Church made a fundamental contribution to shaping this identity.

For complex historical, cultural and political reasons, the Risorgimento has been seen as a movement in opposition to the Church, in opposition to Catholicism and, at times, even in opposition to religion in general. Without denying the role of traditions of different currents of thought, some marked by separatist or secularist veins, the contribution of the thought — and sometimes action — of Catholics in the formation of the single State cannot be omitted.

From the viewpoint of political thought it would suffice to recall the episode of neo-Guelphism, of which Vincenzo was a distinguished representative; or the Catholic liberal thought of Cesare Balbo, Massimo d'Azeglio or Raffaele Lambruschini. For philosophical, political and even juridical thinking we have the great figure of Antonio Rosmini, whose influence unfolded over the course of time, to the point that it shaped significant parts of the present Italian Constitution.

As for literature, which contributed so much to the “making of the Italians”, giving them a sense of belonging to the new political community that the Risorgimento was creating, how could we fail to mention Alessandro Manzoni, a faithful interpreter of the Catholic faith and morals, or Silvio Pellico, who with his autobiographical work on the sorrowful vicissitudes of a patriot witnessed to the fact that it is possible to reconcile the love of one's homeland with steadfast faith? Then there are saints such as St John Bosco who was motivated by pedagogical concern to compose manuals on the history of the fatherland which shaped membership in the institute he founded on a paradigm consistent with a healthy liberal concept: “upright citizens before the State, religious before the Church”.

The political-institutional construction of the unitary State involved various political, diplomatic and military personalities, some of whom also are exponents of the Catholic world. This process, since it inevitably had to deal with the problem of the temporal sovereignty of the Popes (but also because it led to giving the territories gradually acquired a legislation in ecclesiastical matters which had a pronounced secular bias), had divisive effects on the individual and collective conscience of Italian Catholics, split by the opposing sentiments of nascent fidelity to their citizenship on the one hand and membership in the Church on the other.

However it should be recognized that if the process of political-institutional Unification produced the conflict between the State and the Church, known to history as the “Roman Question”, consequently creating the expectation of a formal “Conciliation”, there was no conflict in the social body, which was marked by a profound friendship between the civil and ecclesial communities.

The Italian national identity, so firmly rooted in Catholic traditions, truly formed the most solid basis of the newly acquired political unity. Ultimately, the Conciliation had to take place between institutions, not in the social body where there was no conflict between faith and citizenship. Even during the years of division, Catholics worked for the country’s unity. Abstention from political life, following the “*non expedit*”, led the reality of the Catholic world to assume great responsibilities in the social sphere: education, instruction, social work, health care, cooperation and social economy were areas that encouraged the growth of a supportive and immensely cohesive society. The dispute between the State and the Church, that began with the proclamation of Rome as the capital of Italy and with the demise of the Papal States, was particularly complex. It was certainly an Italian problem, since Italy alone houses the See of the Papacy. Moreover, the question had indisputable international importance. It should be noted that once its temporal power had come to an end and in spite of claiming the fullest freedom and the sovereignty to which it was entitled, the Holy See has always rejected the possibility of a solution of the “Roman question” being imposed from the outside, trusting in the sentiments of the Italian people and the Italian State’s sense of responsibility and justice.

The signing of the Lateran Pact on 11 February 1929 marked the definitive solution of the problem. With regard to the end of the Papal States and recalling Bl. Pope Pius IX and his Successors, I would like to repeat Cardinal Giovanni Battista Montini’s words in his address at the Campidoglio on 10 October 1962: “The Papacy took up with unusual vigour its functions as teacher of life and witness of the Gospel, in such a way that it achieved greatness in the spiritual government of the Church and spread in the world, as never before”.

The fundamental contribution of Italian Catholics to the drafting of the Constitution of the Republic in 1947 is well known. If the Constitution was the positive fruit of an encounter and collaboration of different traditions of thought, there is no doubt that only the Catholic constituents came to the historic appointment prepared, with a precise plan for the fundamental law of the new Italian State. This plan had matured within Catholic Action, especially in the Federation of Italian Catholic

Universities [fuci], the Laureati Movement and the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart. It was the object of reflection and drafting in the *Camaldolese Code* of 1945 and in the *19th Italian Catholic Social Week* that same year, on the theme: “Constitution and Constituent”.

This gave rise to a very significant involvement of Italian Catholics in politics, union activity, public institutions, economic realities, in the expressions of civil society, thereby making an important contribution to the country’s growth, demonstrating their unquestionable fidelity to the State and dedication to the common good, and situating Italy in the plans for Europe. In the painful and dark years of terrorism, too, Catholics bore their witness of blood: how can we fail to recall, among the various figures, the Hon. Aldo Moro and Prof. Vittorio Bachelet?

The Church for her part, thanks also to the broad-ranging freedom she was guaranteed by the Lateran Pacts of 1929, has continued to make an effective contribution to the common good through her institutions and activities, particularly by intervening on behalf of the most marginalized and suffering people, and by continuing to nurture the social corpus with those moral values that are essential for the life of a democratic, just, and orderly society. The country’s good, understood as a whole, is always sought and expressed, especially in moments of great significance, such as the “Great Prayer for Italy”, proclaimed by Venerable Pope [John Paul II](#) on 10 January 1994.

The conclusion of the Agreement for the revision of the Lateran Concordat, signed on 18 February 1984, marked the beginning of a new stage in relations between Church and State in Italy. This passage was clearly perceived by my Predecessor who, in his Discourse on 3 June 1985 during the exchange of the instruments of ratification of the Accord, noted that as “an instrument of harmony and collaboration, the Concordat is now situated in a society marked by the free competition of ideas and the pluralistic articulation of diverse social components: it can and must constitute a factor of promotion and growth, promoting the profound unity of ideals and sentiments by which all Italians feel that they are brothers and sisters in a single nation”. And John Paul II added that in exercising her role of service to mankind, “the Church intends to operate in complete respect for the autonomy of the political order and the sovereignty of the State. Similarly, she is attentive to safeguarding the freedom of all, which is indispensable to the construction of a world that is worthy of the human person, who only in freedom can seek the fullness of truth and sincerely adhere to it, finding in it motivation and inspiration for his or her commitment of solidarity and unity to the common good”. The Accord, which made an important contribution to the delineation of that healthy secularism which characterizes the Italian State and its juridical order, highlighted the two overriding principles that must govern relations between the Church and the political community: the separation of contexts and cooperation. This collaboration is motivated by the fact that, as the Second Vatican Council teaches, both the Church and the political community, “under different titles, are devoted to the personal and social vocation of the same men” ([Gaudium et spes](#), n. 76).

The experience that matured during the years in which the new measures of the pact have been in force has once again seen the Church and Catholics committed in various ways to the “promotion of the human person and the good of the country” which, in respect for the independence and sovereignty of both parties, is a principal inspiration and orientation of the Concordat now in effect (art. 1).

The Church is not only aware of the contribution she makes to civil society for the common good, but also of what she receives from civil society, as the [Second Vatican Council](#) affirms: “whoever promotes the human community at the family level, culturally, in its economic, social and political dimensions, both nationally and internationally, such a one, according to God's design, is contributing greatly to the Church as well, to the extent that she depends on things outside herself” ([Gaudium et spes](#), n. 44).

In contemplating the long course of history, we must recognize that the Italian nation has always had the burden, but at the same time the unique privilege afforded by the special situation which is why the See of the Successor of Peter, hence the centre of Catholicism, is located in Italy, in Rome. And the national community has always responded to this awareness, expressing close emotional ties and solidarity, giving aid to the Apostolic See for its freedom and guaranteeing conditions favourable to the exercise of the spiritual ministry in the world by the Successor of Peter, who is Bishop of Rome and Primate of Italy. Once the turbulence stirred up by the “Roman Question” had passed, and the desired Conciliation had been achieved, the Italian State offered and continues to offer a valuable cooperation from which the Holy See benefits and for which it is consciously grateful.

In presenting these reflections to you, Mr President, I invoke upon the people of Italy an abundance of heavenly gifts, that they may always be led by the light of faith, the source of hope and the persevering commitment to the cause of freedom, justice and peace.

*From the Vatican, 17 March 2011*

**BENEDICTUS P P. XVI**

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