



The Holy See

OFFICIAL VISIT OF H.E. Mr GIORGIO NAPOLITANO
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF ITALY

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI*

Monday, 20 November 2006

Mr President,

I am deeply grateful to you for the visit with which you honour me today and I offer my cordial greeting to you, and through you, to the whole of the Italian People, whose representatives summoned you last May to assume the highest office of the State. On this solemn occasion, I would like to renew to you personally my warm congratulations on the lofty office which has been conferred upon you.

I also extend my greeting to the distinguished Members of the Delegation that has accompanied you.

At the same time, I would also like to convey once again to all Italians that gratitude which I had the opportunity to express during my Visit to the Quirinal on 24 June 2005. Indeed, almost daily since my election they have shown me with warmth and enthusiasm their sentiments of acceptance, attention and spiritual support in the fulfilment of my mission.

Moreover, in this heartfelt closeness, the Pope finds a meaningful expression of that special bond of faith and history that for centuries has bound Italy to the Successor of the Apostle Peter, whose abode, not without the dispositions of Divine Providence, is located in this Country.

To assure the Holy See "absolute and visible independence" and "to guarantee it indisputable sovereignty also in the international arena", the Vatican City State was established with the Lateran Pacts. By virtue of this Treaty, the Italian Republic offers at different levels and in different ways a precious and daily contribution to my mission as Pastor of the universal Church.

The visit to the Vatican of the Head of the Italian State is therefore a welcome opportunity for me to extend my respectful thoughts to all the State bodies as I thank them for their effective cooperation for the benefit of the Petrine ministry and the work of the Holy See.

Your visit today, Mr President, is not only the felicitous confirmation of a tradition of reciprocal visits over many decades between the Successor of Peter and the highest Office of the Italian State, but it also has an important meaning, for it provides a special pause for reflection on the profound reasons for the meetings of Church and State representatives.

They seem to me to have been clearly explained by the Second Vatican Council, which says in the Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*: "The political community and the Church are autonomous and independent of each other in their own fields. Nevertheless, both are devoted to the personal vocation of man, though under different titles. This service will redound the more effectively to the welfare of all insofar as both institutions practice better cooperation according to the local and prevailing situation" (n. 76).

This vision is also shared by the Italian State, which declares in its Constitution first of all that "the State and the Catholic Church, each in its own province, are independent and sovereign", and goes on to assert that "their relations are regulated by the Lateran Pacts" (art. 7).

This structuring of Church-State relations also inspired the Agreement signed by the Holy See and Italy on 18 February 1984, which revised the Lateran Concordat. This Agreement reasserted the independence and sovereignty of the State and the Church, as well as their "cordial collaboration in support... of the human person... of the common good... of a people" (art. 1).

I willingly associate myself with the hope you expressed, Mr President, at the beginning of your mandate: that this collaboration might continue to develop in practice.

Yes, Church and State, although quite distinct, are both called, in accordance with their respective roles and their own scope and means, to serve the human being, who is both the object of the Church's saving mission and a participator in it, as well as a citizen of the State. It is in man that these two societies meet and collaborate, the better to promote the integral good.

The concern of the civil community for the good of citizens cannot be limited to a few dimensions of the person, such as physical health, financial well-being, intellectual training or social relations. Man also presents himself to the State with his religious dimension, which "consists primarily of those voluntary and free internal acts by which a man directs himself to God" (*Dignitatis Humanae*, n. 3).

"Acts of this kind cannot be commanded or forbidden" by any human authority, who is bound on the contrary to respect and to further this dimension. As the Second Vatican Council authoritatively

taught with regard to the right to religious freedom, no one can be forced "to act against his conscience", nor must he be "prevented from acting according to his conscience, especially in religious matters" (*ibid.*).

It would be reductive, however, to claim that the right to religious freedom is sufficiently guaranteed when personal religious beliefs are not attacked or meddled with, or when this right is limited to respect for the expression of faith in the context of the place of worship.

Indeed, it cannot be forgotten that "his own social nature requires that man give external expression to these internal acts of religion, that he communicate with others on religious matters and profess his religion in community" (*ibid.*).

Religious freedom, therefore, is not only the right of the individual but also of families, of religious groups and of the Church herself (cf. *Dignitatis Humanae*, nn. 4-5, 13), and the exercise of this right is felt in many spheres and situations where believers may work.

The proper respect for the right to religious freedom, therefore, presupposes the civil Authority's commitment "to create conditions favourable to the fostering of religious life, so that the citizens will be really in a position to exercise their religious rights and fulfil their religious duties and so that society itself may enjoy the benefits of justice and peace, which result from man's faithfulness to God and his holy will" (*ibid.* n. 6).

Moreover, these lofty principles which the Second Vatican Council proclaimed are the patrimony of many civil societies, including Italy. Indeed, they are present both in Italy's Constitution and in numerous international documents that proclaim human rights.

And, Mr President, you also fittingly recalled the need to give recognition to the social and public dimensions of the religious element. The same Council recalled that when society respects and encourages the religious dimension of its members, it receives in exchange "the benefits of justice and peace, which result from man's faithfulness to God and his holy will" (*ibid.*).

The freedom that the Church and Christians claim does not jeopardize the interests of the State or of other social groups. It does not aim for an authoritarian supremacy over them but rather, as I said during the recent National Ecclesial Convention held in Verona, is the condition for carrying out that precious service which the Church offers to Italy and to every country where she is present.

This service to society, which consists principally in giving "positive and convincing responses to the longings and questions of our people" (cf. *Discourse to the Participants at the Fourth National Ecclesial Convention in Verona*, 19 October 2006; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 25 October, p. 6), offering to their life the light of faith, the force of hope and the warmth of charity, is also expressed in the civil and political context.

Indeed, if it is true that by her nature and her mission, "the Church... is not and does not intend to be a political agent", she nevertheless "has a profound interest in the good of the political community" (*ibid.* p. 9).

This specific contribution is mainly made by the lay faithful, who, acting with full responsibility and making use of the right to participate in public life, work with other members of society "to build a just order in society" (*ibid.*).

In their action, moreover, they rely on the "fundamental values and anthropological principles and ethics rooted in the nature of the human being" (*ibid.*), which are also recognizable through the proper use of reason.

Thus, when they undertake to confront with their words and actions today's great challenges, such as war and terrorism, hunger and thirst, the extreme poverty of so many human beings, several terrible epidemics, but also the safeguard of human life in all its stages from conception until natural death and the promotion of the family founded on marriage and primarily responsible for education, they are not acting in their own special interests or on behalf of principles that can only be perceived by those who profess a specific religious creed: they do so, instead, in the context of, and abiding by, the rules of democratic coexistence for the good of the whole of society and on behalf of values that every upright person can share.

Proof of this is the fact that the majority of the values that I mentioned are proclaimed by the Italian Constitution, which was drafted almost 60 years ago by people holding different ideals.

Mr President, I would like to end these reflections with the warm wish that the Italian Nation will be able to advance on the path of authentic progress and make its precious contribution to the international Community, always fostering those human and Christian values that substantiate its history, its culture, its spiritual, juridical and artistic heritage, and which are still the basis of the life and commitment of its citizens.

I am sure that this effort will include the loyal and generous contribution given by the Catholic Church through the teaching of her Bishops, whom I will shortly be meeting during their visit *ad limina Apostolorum*, and thanks to the work of all the faithful.

I also express this wish through prayer, imploring from Almighty God a special Blessing upon this noble Country, its inhabitants and in particular, those who govern its future.

**L'Osservatore Romano. Weekly Edition in English* n. 50 p. 5.

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