



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI TO THE CATHOLIC RELIGION TEACHERS

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Saturday, 25 April 2009*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It is a real pleasure for me to meet you today and to share with you some reflections on your important presence in the panorama of school and culture and in the heart of the Christian community in Italy. I greet you all with affection, starting with Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco, President of the Italian Bishops' Conference, whom I thank for his courteous words on presenting to me this large and lively Assembly. I likewise address a cordial welcome to all the authorities present.

The teaching of the Catholic religion is an integral part of the history of schools in Italy and the religion teacher is a very important figure on the teaching staff. It is significant that so many children keep in touch with their teachers even after leaving school. Furthermore, the large number of those who choose to study this subject is a sign of its irreplaceable value in the educational process and proof of the high standard of quality it has attained. In a recent message, the Presidency of the Italian Bishops' Conference (CEI) said that "the teaching of the Catholic religion encourages reflection on the deep meaning of life, helping people to rediscover, beyond individual forms of knowledge, a sense of unity and an overall intuition. This is possible because such teaching focuses on the human person and his or her inalienable dignity, letting itself be illuminated by the unique life of Jesus of Nazareth, whose identity it takes care to investigate. Thus for 2,000 years it has not ceased to call men and women into question".

Putting man created in the image of God at the centre (cf. Gn 1: 27) is in fact the distinctive mark of your daily work, in unity of intention with other educators and teachers. On the occasion of the [Ecclesial Convention in Verona in October 2006](#), I myself had the opportunity to touch on the "fundamental and decisive question" of education, indicating the need "to enlarge the area of our

rationality, to reopen it to the larger questions of the truth and the good, to link theology, philosophy and science between them in full respect for the methods proper to them and for their reciprocal autonomy, but also in the awareness of the intrinsic unity that holds them together" (*Address to the participants in the Fourth National Ecclesial Convention*, Verona, 19 October 2006). The religious dimension is in fact intrinsic to culture. It contributes to the overall formation of the person and makes it possible to transform knowledge into wisdom of life.

Your service, dear friends, fits precisely into this fundamental crossroads, in which without improper invasion or the confusion of roles the universal aspiration to truth and the 2,000-year-old testimony offered by believers in the light of faith converge, the extraordinary peaks of knowledge and art acquired by the human spirit and the fruitfulness of the Christian message that so deeply nourishes the culture and life of the Italian people. With the full and recognized scholastic dignity of your teaching, you contribute on the one hand to giving school a soul and, on the other, to assuring to the Christian faith full citizenship in the places of education and culture in general. Thanks to the teaching of the Catholic religion, school and society are enriched with true laboratories of culture and humanity in which, by deciphering the significant contribution of Christianity, the person is equipped to discover goodness and to grow in responsibility, to seek comparisons and to refine his or her critical sense, to draw from the gifts of the past to understand the present better and to be able to plan wisely for the future.

Today's meeting is also taking place in the context of the Pauline Year. The Apostle to the Gentiles continues to exercise great fascination on all of us. In him we recognize the humble and faithful disciple, the courageous herald, the gifted mediator of Revelation. These are characteristics to which I invite you to look to nourish your identity as educators and witnesses in the world of the school. It is Paul, in the First Letter to the Thessalonians (4: 9) who defines believers with the beautiful expression *theodidaktoi*, that is, "taught by God", who have God as teacher. In this word we find the secret of education itself, as St Augustine also recalls "We who speak and you who listen, recognize each other as faithful disciples of one Teacher (*De serm.* 23,2).

In addition, in the Pauline teaching religious formation is not separate from human formation. The last Letters of his correspondence, the so-called "pastoral" Letters, are full of significant references to the social and civil life that Christ's disciples must keep clearly in mind. St Paul is a true "teacher" who has at heart both the salvation of the person in whom has been inculcated a mentality of faith, and the person's human and civil formation, so that the disciple of Christ may express to the full a free personality, a human life that is "complete and well prepared", which is also shown by attention for culture, professionalism and competence in the various fields of knowledge for the benefit of all. Consequently the religious dimension is not a superstructure, it is an integral part of the person from the very earliest infancy; it is fundamental openness to otherness and to the mystery that presides over every relationship and every encounter with human beings. The religious dimension makes the person more human. May your teaching always

be able, like Paul's, to open students to this dimension of freedom and the full appreciation of man redeemed by Christ as he is in God's plan, thereby expressing true intellectual charity to countless children and their families.

One of the main aspects of your teaching is of course the communication of the truth and beauty of the word of God and knowledge of the Bible is an essential element of the curriculum for teaching the Catholic religion. There is a connection between the scholastic teaching of religion and the existential deepening of faith, as happens in parishes and in the various ecclesial structures. The very person of the Catholic religion teacher constitutes this bond: to you, in fact, in addition to the duty of the human, cultural and didactic competence proper to every teacher, belongs the vocation to make it clear that the God of whom you speak in the classrooms is the essential reference point of your life. Far from constituting interference or a curtailment of freedom, your presence on the contrary is an effective example of that positive spirit of secularism which makes it possible to promote a constructive civil coexistence, based on reciprocal respect and loyal dialogue, values which a country always needs.

As the words of the Apostle Paul which constitute the theme of your meeting suggest, I hope that the Lord may give to all of you the joy of never being ashamed of his Gospel, the grace to live it and the enthusiasm to share and to cultivate the newness that it radiates for life of the world. With these sentiments I bless you and your families, together with all those students and teachers whom you encounter every day in that community of people and life which is school.

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