



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE ITALIAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE

*Synod Hall
Thursday, 24 May 2012*

Venerable and Dear Brothers,

Your annual General Assembly is an event of grace in which you exchange your deep experience of discernment and sharing for your common progress, enlivened by the Spirit of the Risen Lord. It is a moment of grace that expresses the Church's nature. I thank Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco for his cordial words of welcome interpreting your sentiments and I address to you, Your Eminence, my congratulations and good wishes on the renewal of your appointment as head of the Italian Episcopal Conference.

May the collegial affection that inspires you increasingly nourish your collaboration at the service of the ecclesial communion and of the common good of the Italian nation, in fruitful dialogue with its civil institutions. In this new quinquennium may you pursue together the ecclesial renewal entrusted to us by the [Second Vatican Ecumenical Council](#); and may the 50th anniversary of its opening that we shall be celebrating this autumn be a reason for deepening our knowledge of its texts, a condition for their dynamic and faithful reception. "The greatest concern of the Ecumenical Council is this: that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be guarded and taught more efficaciously", [Bl. Pope John XXIII](#) said in his opening Discourse. And it is worth reading and meditating on these words.

The Pope asked the Fathers to examine in depth and to present this perennial doctrine in continuity with the 1,000-year-old Tradition of the Church: "to transmit the doctrine, pure and integral, without any attenuation or distortion", but in a new way, according "to that work which our era demands of us" (Pope John XXIII's *Opening Speech to the Second Vatican Council*, 11

October 1962). With this key to interpreting and applying it — not of course in the perspective of an unacceptable hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture but rather of a hermeneutic of continuity and reform — listening to the Council and making its authoritative instructions our own is the way to identify the modalities by which the Church can offer a meaningful response to the great social and cultural changes of our time which also have visible consequences on the religious dimension.

In fact not only do scientific rationality and the technological culture tend to homogenize the world but they also often exceed their respective specific spheres, claiming to outline the perimeter of the certainties of reason with the sole empirical criterion of their own breakthroughs. Thus the power of human skills ends by considering itself the yardstick for action, free from every moral norm.

In this very context, often in a confused way, a unique and growing demand for spirituality and for the supernatural does not fail to re-emerge. This is a sign of anxiety which dwells in the hearts of people who are not open to the transcendent horizon of God. This situation of secularism is particularly characteristic of societies with an ancient Christian tradition and has a wearing effect on the cultural fabric which, until a recent past, was a unifying reference that could embrace the whole of human existence and mark its most significant events, from birth to the transition to eternal life.

The profound value of the spiritual and moral patrimony in which the West has put down roots and which is its lifeblood, is no longer understood, to the point that people no longer grasp its authoritative truth. Even a fertile land thus risks becoming an inhospitable desert and the promising good seed is in danger of being crushed, trodden on and lost.

A sign of this is the dwindling of religious practice, visible in the participation in the Eucharistic liturgy and, especially, in the sacrament of Penance. So many of the baptized have lost their identity and belonging: they do not know the essential content of the faith or think they can cultivate it without the mediation of the Church. And while many look doubtfully at the truths taught by the Church others reduce the Kingdom of God to several great values which certainly have to do with the Gospel but do not yet concern the central nucleus of the Christian faith.

The Kingdom of God is a gift that transcends us. As [Bl. John Paul II](#) said, “The kingdom of God is not a concept, a doctrine, or a programme subject to free interpretation, but it is before all else a person with the face and name of Jesus of Nazareth, the image of the invisible God” (Encyclical Letter, [Redemptoris Missio](#), 7 December 1990, n. 18).

Unfortunately it is God himself who is excluded from the horizon of so many people; and when the topic of God does not meet with indifference, closure or rejection, people wish in any case to relegate it to the subjective context, reducing it to an intimate and private factor, marginalized from public awareness. The heart of the crisis that is damaging Europe — a spiritual and moral crisis —

can be identified in this neglect; this lack of openness to the Transcendent, since man claims to have a complete identity simply in himself.

In this context, how can we measure up to the responsibility that has been entrusted to us by the Lord? How can we sow the Word of God with trust so that everyone may find the truth about himself, his own authenticity and hope?

We know that new methods of Gospel proclamation or pastoral action do not suffice to ensure that the Christian proposal meet with wider acceptance and sharing. In the preparation for the [Second Vatican Council](#) the main question to which the Council meeting intended to answer was: "Church, what have you to say for yourself?". Going deeply into this question the Council Fathers were so to speak led back to the heart of the answer: it was a matter of starting afresh from God, celebrated, professed and witnessed to. In fact, apparently by chance, but basically not by chance, the first Constitution to be approved was on the [Sacred Liturgy](#): divine worship orients human beings towards the future City and restores to God his primacy, fashions the Church, ceaselessly convoked by the Word, and shows the world the fruitfulness of the encounter with God.

In our turn while we must cultivate a grateful look for the growth of good quality wheat even in a soil that is often dry, we realize that our situation demands a fresh outreach, that aims at what is essential in faith and in Christian life.

In a period in which for many God has become the great Unknown and Jesus merely an important figure of the past, missionary action will not be relaunched without the renewal of the quality of our faith and our prayer: we will not be able to offer appropriate answers without a new reception of the gift of Grace; we will not know how to win people over to the Gospel except by being the first to return to a profound experience of God.

Dear Brothers, our first true and unique task remains that of dedicating life to what is worthwhile and endures, to what is really reliable, necessary and final. Men and women live from God, from the One whom they are often seeking unconsciously or groping for to give full meaning to their life: it is our task to proclaim him, show him and guide them to the encounter with him.

However it is always important to remember that the first condition for speaking of God is speaking to God, becoming increasingly people of God, nourished by an intense life of prayer and shaped by his Grace.

St Augustine, after a journey of anxious but sincere seeking for the Truth at last succeeded in finding it in God. He then realized an unusual aspect which filled his heart with joy and amazement: he understood that throughout his journey it had been the Truth which was seeking him and had found him.

I would like to say to each one of you: let us allow ourselves to be found and grasped by God, to help every person we meet to be reached by the Truth. It is in the relationship with him that our communion is born and that the ecclesial community — which spans all epochs times and all places — is brought into being to constitute the one People of God.

For this reason I wished to proclaim a *Year of Faith* which will begin next 11 October, in order to rediscover and to receive once again this precious gift which is faith, in order to have a deeper knowledge of the truths that are our lifeblood, to lead the people of today, who are often distracted, to a renewed encounter with Jesus Christ, “the way, the life and the truth” .

In the midst of transformations that were affecting large categories of humanity, the Servant of God [Paul VI](#) clearly pointed out the task of the Church as that of affecting and as it were upsetting, “through the power of the Gospel, mankind's criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation” (Apostolic Exhortation [Evangelii Nuntiandi](#) ,8 December 1975, n. 19).

Here I would like to mention that on the occasion of his first journey as Pope to the land of his birth, Bl. John Paul II visited an industrial district of Krakow known as a sort of “Godless city”. The stubbornness of the workers alone led to the erection first of a cross and then a church. It was in these symbols that the Pope recognized the beginning of what, for the first time, he described as the “new evangelization”. He explained that “The evangelization of the new millennium must refer to the Teaching of the Second Vatican Council. It must be, as that Council taught, a work shared by bishops, priests, religious and laity, by parents and young people”. and he concluded: “You have built the church; build your lives with the Gospel” ([Homily, Mass at the Shrine of Holy Cross, Mogila, Poland, 9 June 1979](#)).

Dear Brothers, the ancient and new mission which lies before us is that of introducing the men and women of our time to the relationship with God, helping them to open their minds and hearts to God who is seeking them and wants to become close to them, to lead them to the realization that doing his will does not curtail freedom but is being truly free, attaining the true good of life. God is the guarantor and not rival of our happiness and wherever the Gospel enters — hence Christ’s friendship — human beings experience that they are the subject of a love that purifies, warms and renews, it enables people to love and serve man with divine love.

As the main theme of your Assembly appropriately highlights, the new evangelization stands in need of adults who are “mature in faith and witnesses of humanity”. Attention to the adult world expresses your awareness of the crucial role of those who are called in the various milieus of life to take on educational responsibility for the new generations.

Be alert and strive to ensure that the Christian community can train adults in the faith because

they have encountered Jesus Christ who has become the fundamental reference of their life; people who know him because they love him and love him because they have become acquainted with him; people who can give sound and credible reasons for life. In this formative process the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* — 20 years after its publication, is an especially important tool for a thorough and complete knowledge of the content of faith, that offers guidance to the encounter with Christ. Thanks too to this instrument may the assent to faith become a criterion of knowledge and action that involves the whole of life.

Since we are in the Novena of Pentecost, I would like to conclude these thoughts with a prayer to the Holy Spirit:

Spirit of Life, who was moving over the abyss, help human beings in our time to understand that the exclusion of God leads them to lose their way in the desert of the world, and that it is only where faith enters that dignity and freedom flourish and the whole of society is built in justice.

Spirit of Pentecost, who made the Church one Body, restore to us, the baptized, an authentic experience of communion; make us living signs of the Risen One's presence in the world, a community of saints that lives in service to charity.

Holy Spirit, who equips us for the mission, grant that we may recognize that so many people in our time too are in quest of the truth about their life and about the world.

Make us work for their joy by proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ,

God's grain of wheat that enriches the soil of life and ensures an abundant harvest.

Amen.