



The Holy See

CELEBRATIONS FOR THE 150th ANNIVERSARY OF THE PROCLAMATION OF THE DOGMA OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

LETTER OF JOHN PAUL II TO CARD. SALVATORE DE GIORGI ARCHBISHOP OF PALERMO (ITALY)

*To my Venerable Brother
Cardinal Salvatore De Giorgi
Archbishop of Palermo
President of the Bishops' Conference of Sicily*

1. I was very pleased to learn that the celebrations for the 150th Anniversary of the proclamation of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary have given rise to a fervent and unanimous participation in the Church of Sicily. Precisely for this reason a week of prayer and reflection was held during this month of October, open to the clergy, Religious and faithful of the Sicilian Ecclesial Community. The common jubilation will be visible especially in the solemn Eucharistic Celebration on Sunday, 24 October, in Palermo; through my Message I, too, wish to be spiritually present.

I greatly appreciated, Venerable Brother, that in preparation for this anniversary, both the Bishops and the Minister Provincials of the Franciscan Families of Sicily specially undertook to re-propose to the People of God the deep historical roots of devotion to Mary Immaculate, of which Sicilian soil can "boast".

2. Indeed, such devotion undoubtedly dates back to the time of Byzantine rule, between the sixth and ninth centuries. The Mother of Christ was especially venerated under the title of *Panaghia*, the All-Holy, from whom the liturgical celebration of the "holy Conception" began and whose veneration continued and developed throughout the Island without interruption. In the 15th

century, following the preaching of Franciscan Friars, the feast then became a precept and there was an increase in the number of churches and chapels dedicated to Mary Immaculate, whose image became widespread.

Following the Council of Trent, numerous Confraternities of Mary Immaculate sprang up in Sicily, including one that deserves mention; it was established in Palermo in 1593 at the Basilica of St Francis of Assisi. In the 17th century, under Spanish influence, veneration for Mary Immaculate was institutionalized by the Kingdom's Authorities, and the City of Palermo submitted an official request to the Holy See for the proclamation of the Dogma.

Mary Immaculate was declared principal Patroness of All Sicily and the faithful were duty bound to profess and defend this truth until death; it is a vow that has retained its validity until today, overcoming the changes of time and regimes.

In 1850, to the question posed by Pope Pius IX, the Sicilian Bishops responded unanimously in favour of the dogmatic definition, affirming that faith in the Immaculate Conception of Mary was an integral and inalienable part of the patrimony of faith and piety of the Island's Christian population.

3. A century and a half later, it is a true satisfaction for the Successor of Peter to know that the Ecclesial Communities of Sicily, led by their Pastors, gather to celebrate this historical magisterial act and to deepen its meaning.

Present-day Sicily has changed greatly, as has Italian society as a whole; but it becomes more than ever important that the new generations know how to preserve intact that patrimony of values that has made the Island's history so renowned. An outstanding part of this noble patrimony is undoubtedly made up of the religious traditions that have blossomed on the ancient trunk of Christian faith. Among these the manifestations of devotion to the Most Holy Virgin hold a place of honour: devotion that has always distinguished the Sicilian faithful.

In a rapidly-changing world, there are some things that must never change. One of these is certainly the bond of filial love between the members of the Church and the Virgin Mary "full of grace" (Lk 1: 28), who Jesus, from the Cross, entrusted to us as "Mother" (cf. Jn 19: 27).

4. In the midst of the joy and expectation, sorrow and anguish of life, Mary is a sign of consolation and sure hope for the elderly and youth, for families and consecrated persons. As I say this, I think especially of the beloved People of Sicily. I pray for you all, invoking the maternal protection of Mary Immaculate upon every diocesan and parish community.

With these sentiments, I impart to you, your Eminence, and to my Brothers in the Episcopate, Priests and Religious, and to the entire People of God in Sicily a special Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 18 October 2004

JOHN PAUL II

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