



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II
TO THE ITALIAN BISHOPS ON THE OCCASION
OF THE ANNUAL PLENARY ASSEMBLY
OF THE ITALIAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE**

Dear Italian Bishops,

1. "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 *Cor* 13: 14).

In these words of the Apostle Paul I extend a fraternal and affectionate greeting to each of you. In particular I greet Cardinal Camillo Ruini, your President, the three Vice-Presidents and the General Secretary, Archbishop Ennio Antonelli. I warmly thank them for all the work they do with diligent and inspired commitment in service to your Conference. Special thanks go to the two Vice-Presidents, Cardinal Dionigi Tettamanzi and Bishop Alberto Ablondi, whose mandates end with this assembly.

I accompany you with prayer and am spiritually close to you in the days you are preparing to spend together at Collevalenza, sharing episcopal fraternity and your common concern for the Church of God in Italy. I also want to thank you for the congratulations and sentiments of communion that you expressed to me for my 80th birthday.

2. I would especially like to express my heartfelt approval and personal gratitude for the spirit and dedication with which you lead and guide the celebration of the Great Jubilee in your particular Churches and in pilgrimages to Rome.

On this journey of faith and conversion, which the Lord is abundantly blessing, two particularly significant events are now at hand. The first is the International Eucharistic Congress, which will be celebrated from 18 to 25 June and represents in a certain sense the peak moment of this "intensely Eucharistic" Holy Year (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 55).

The second is World Youth Day, scheduled for August, at which we want to entrust to Catholic young people throughout the world the mission of witnessing to Jesus Christ in the century and millennium opening before us, the same mission that so many Christians fulfilled in the 20th century, even to the shedding of their blood. I repeat to each of you, dear Brothers in the Episcopate, and to the faithful in your care my invitation to share the joy and grace of these events with me and with the Church of Rome. I also express my deep appreciation and gratitude to your Conference for all your diligent and generous collaboration in preparing for them.

3. The principal theme of your assembly concerns the pastoral guidelines which you intend to offer the Churches in Italy for the coming decade: you will thus be able to determine the most appropriate and effective ways to continue and strengthen the work of the new evangelization, which is certainly a pastoral priority for Italy, as it is for many other nations with a great and ancient Christian tradition, but which are threatened by currents of secularization and dechristianization.

The City Mission, held in Rome in preparation for the Jubilee, and similar initiatives already or now being carried out in many other Italian Dioceses show how the paths of evangelization can be followed in practice. Moreover, they offer significant models for missionary activity that makes the most of all the human and spiritual resources of the People of God.

For some time now the Church in Italy has been involved in a Christian-oriented cultural project which provides the coordinates and directions for an evangelization that reaches individuals, families and communities in the social and cultural areas where their convictions and life decisions are formed, with special attention to guiding the changes under way and not to being surprised or marginalized by them. The communications media provide your Conference with a very important tool for evangelization, which I hope will be further strengthened: the media offer Italian Catholics the possibility of being present each day in the exchange of opinions and the presentation of behavioural models, a presence which is indispensable today in the society of "global communications".

4. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, I fully share your concern for the beloved Italian nation, which is facing a difficult turning-point in its history. In these circumstances, it is more necessary than ever for it not to lose that heritage of faith and culture which is its principal wealth.

You therefore have my convinced support in your efforts to encourage the family based on marriage, the true pillar of social life in Italy. In view of the serious and persistent fall in the birth rate, which threatens the future of this nation, it is particularly important that the Ecclesial Community's formation work converge with political and legislative decisions in promoting the acceptance of human life and respect for its inalienable dignity.

I also cherish, dear Brothers, a happy memory of the great National Assembly of Catholic Schools, held in St Peter's Square on 30 October last, in which, together with a multitude of young people,

parents and teachers, we asked for full scholastic parity and the adoption of a new outlook, "which will regard not only Catholic schools, but the various scholastic initiatives that can be fostered in society, as a valuable resource for the formation of the younger generation, on condition that they have the indispensable requirements of seriousness and an educational purpose" (*Address to National Assembly of Italian Catholic Schools*, n. 3; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 1 December 1999, p. 8).

Together with the family and education, employment is rightly at the heart of your concerns and mine. The serious imbalances that persist in Italy in this regard, penalizing some regions in addition to young people and women, should be addressed by making the most of the great capacities for initiative found in this country, in the light of the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity.

Dear Italian Bishops, may the Lord always enlighten and support your pastoral service and grant you the joy of seeing your Christian communities grow strong in faith, active in charity and capable of a courageous missionary witness. As a pledge of all this, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you and to your Churches.

From the Vatican, 22 May 2000.