



The Holy See

VISIT TO THE TOWN OF ANNIFO

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II**

Saturday, 3 January 1998

Dear Brothers and Sisters, 1. I greet you with affection and deep emotion! Today I am finally able to fulfil the desire that I have been carrying in my heart since I first heard the tragic news of the earthquake that has caused you so much suffering. I wanted to come immediately to the areas struck by the earthquake, but this would have hindered the work of the rescue squads. Over these months I have constantly followed your trials; I have shared your suffering and I have prayed for you. The Lord now permits me to show you personally my sentiments and to embrace you and all those who shared the same sad experience in many towns of these dear regions of Umbria and the Marches. Thank you for your presence! Like a large family, made stronger and more united by your recent trials, you have faced the cold and many hardships to gather round the Pope and to testify in this way to your desire to rebuild the material and human fabric of your community so seriously affected by the earthquake. Here before the little church given to you by Caritas to replace yours which was completely destroyed, I wish to extend my cordial thoughts to my Venerable Brother, Bishop Arduino Bertoldo of Foligno, thanking him for the words that he addressed to me on behalf of you all. With him I wish also to greet the Bishop emeritus, the parish priest and the other religious authorities. I cordially greet the Hon. Micheli, Undersecretary of the Prime Minister's Office, and the Hon. Barberi, Undersecretary of Civil Defence. I also greet the Mayor and the civil and military authorities gathered here. To all I extend the expression of my appreciation. 2. On my way here by helicopter to Annifo, the first stage of a journey that will take me to Cesi and Assisi, as I looked at the area around the Appennines of Umbria and the Marches, I was shocked by the scene of destruction that unfolded before my eyes. From Cascia and Norcia to Spoleto, from Fabriano and Macerata to Camerino, from Foligno to Assisi, the sight of historic homes, churches and palaces laden with history, reduced to a mound of rubble within a few moments, is shocking and moving. To the peoples of these areas, rich in art and culture, whom I was not able to visit, I extend my affectionate greeting. I was able personally to observe how the earthquake has profoundly affected the environment, your patrimony of monuments, the places of work and life, the symbols of the religious and cultural identity of this area. Here in Annifo, then, the seismic shocks, which were particularly violent, almost completely destroyed the residential area, leaving only seven houses standing: a situation that unfortunately is very similar in many of the nearby towns, both in Umbria and in the Marches. How can we fail to see in the homes, churches, roads and squares destroyed the symbol of a privacy invaded, of human bonds violated, of an historical continuity interrupted, of a sense of security lost? How can we fail to share the distress of those who saw collapse with their homes the fruit of years of hard-earned savings and

many sacrifices? How can we fail to think of the sick who felt even more weak and alone, when taken from the protective warmth of their homes and their family's affection? What can we say about the bewilderment of the little ones, suddenly deprived of their familiar surroundings and games and exposed to the unknown, to the hardship of makeshift shelters? At this time, then, my thoughts go in particular to the people who died in those tragic events. In entrusting them to the Lord, I hope that their memory may arouse in everyone the commitment to rebuild as soon as possible the places where they lived, worked, prayed and loved.³ Dear brothers and sisters, the earthquake, which initially made you feel weak and defenceless, did not erase from your hearts the greatest treasure: the heritage of Christian and human values which for centuries has kept your communities together. Indeed, the earthquake emphasized in a surprising way the human and spiritual resources you possess. Admirable acts of goodness, solidarity and fraternal sharing, the work of children and adults, of persons with responsibility and simple citizens, have marked and continue to mark the daily life of your districts in the post-earthquake period. Among the ruins of your towns you are perhaps writing one of the most significant pages of your history. Continue confidently to walk in unity! Look to the future with an open mind. The mystery of Christmas on which we are meditating these days reminds us that the Lord is Emmanuel, God-with-us, the God who came among us to abide with us. May this contemplation, nourished by the Christian faith, the precious inheritance handed down by your fathers and the cornerstone of the lives of your communities, help you in this particular moment to trust unswervingly in divine Providence, nurturing an active hope and a fraternal and common love.⁴ At Christmas these words of joy resounded among you in an unusual way: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased" (Lk 2:14). Annifo and many other centres struck by the earthquake, both large and small, recalled on the holy night the poverty and precariousness of the stable in Bethlehem. This emergency situation makes you, dear brothers and sisters, the privileged recipients of the angels' joyous announcement: may serenity and peace be with you, because Christ has come among us! I would like to repeat these same words to you, while exhorting you not to give in to discouragement, even when faced with great difficulties. Rather, entrust your plans, your suffering, your lives to the Lord! He will soothe your wounds; he will sustain your intentions and he will accompany you in the difficult journey that awaits you. With these wishes, as I invoke on each one of you the maternal protection of the Virgin Mary and of your patron saints, I impart my Blessing with great affection to you and to your families. © Copyright 1998 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana