



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II
TO THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY
OF ITALIAN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS**

Saturday, 30 October 1999

1. *"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Mt 4: 4).*

With this powerful phrase that the Lord Jesus draws from Deuteronomy (8: 3), I am pleased to address you, dear friends of Italian Catholic schools, who have gathered today in St Peter's Square to close with the Pope your important National Assembly. This meeting is taking place eight years after the unforgettable convention which also saw us gathered in this square on 23 November 1991. The truth which comes from God is the principal nourishment which makes us grow as persons, stimulates our intelligence and strengthens our freedom. This conviction is the origin of that zeal for education which has accompanied the Church down the ages and is the basis for the growth of Catholic schools.

I greet the Cardinal President and the other members of the Italian Episcopal Conference, to whom I extend all my gratitude for organizing this assembly. I greet Cardinal Pio Laghi, Prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education, and all the Bishops here. I greet the Superiors of the male and female religious congregations who are involved in Catholic schools. I greet the civil authorities, the political leaders and the representatives of public order and the world of culture. I thank the Vice-President of the Council of Ministers and the Minister of Public Education for their presence.

I extend a special greeting to the schools of Madrid, Sarajevo and Palestine which have joined us by satellite. To each of you - teachers, students, parents or friends and supporters of Catholic schools in any capacity - I express my affection, esteem and my deepest solidarity for the work to which you are dedicated. From this assembly it must draw new trust and dynamism.

2. The theme of your meeting - "*For a school programme on the threshold of the 21st century*" - clearly shows that you know how to look ahead and act with a vision that is not only particular to Catholic schools, but also addresses issues that concern every kind of scholastic institution today.

You rightly do so because the experience of Catholic schools bears a great heritage of culture, of pedagogical wisdom, of attention to the character of children, adolescents and young people, of mutual support for their families, of the ability to anticipate, with the insight that stems from love, the new needs and problems that arise with the changing times. This heritage puts you in a better position to find the most effective answers for the educational questions of the younger generation, children of a complex society marked by constant pressure and constant change: barely able, therefore, to offer its children and young people clear and reliable reference-points.

In the united Europe we are building, where the cultural traditions of individual nations are meant to encounter and benefit one another, there is an even broader scope for Catholic schools, which by nature are open to universality and are based on an educational programme that stresses the common roots of European civilization. For this reason too it is important that Catholic schools in Italy should not be weakened but should rather find new vigour and energy: it would be very strange if their voice were to become too weak precisely in that nation which, because of its religious tradition, culture and history, has a specific task to carry out for the Christian presence on the European continent (cf. *Letter to the Italian Bishops*, 6 January 1994, n. 4).

3. Nevertheless, dear friends of Italian Catholic schools, you know from experience how difficult and precarious are the circumstances in which the majority of you live and work. I am thinking of the declining number of vocations in religious congregations which began with a specifically educational charism; I am thinking of how difficult it is for many families in Italy to meet the additional expenses incurred by choosing a non-State school; I am thinking with deep regret of those prestigious and praiseworthy institutes that are forced to close year after year.

Without doubt, to move beyond a situation that is less and less sustainable, the main problem to be solved is the full recognition of the juridical and financial equality of State and non-State schools, by overcoming a long-standing resistance that is alien to the basic values of the European cultural tradition. The recent steps taken in this direction, even though noteworthy in some respects, are unfortunately still insufficient.

I therefore join wholeheartedly in your request to move ahead courageously and to adopt a new mentality, 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.

This is a necessary transition, if we wish to introduce a reform process that will really modernize

and improve the overall structure of Italian schools.

4. As we insistently ask political and institutional leaders to respect in practice the right of families and young people to make their educational choices in full freedom, we must take an equally sincere and courageous look at our own institutions, in order to identify and carry out all the appropriate collaborative efforts that can improve the quality of Catholic schools and avoid any further lessening of their presence in Italy.

Fundamental in this respect are the solidarity and moral support of the whole ecclesial community, from the Dioceses to the parishes, from the religious institutes to the lay associations and movements. In fact, Catholic schools fully belong to the Church's mission, just as they are at the service of the whole country. Thus there should be no areas of mutual exclusion or indifference, as though ecclesial life and activity were one thing and Catholic schools and their problems another. I am therefore pleased that the Italian Church in recent years has been provided with institutions such as the National Council of Catholic Schools and the Study Centre for Catholic Schools: these express both the Church's concern for Catholic schools and the unity of Catholic schools themselves, as well as their commitment to future planning.

Practically speaking, it is very important to find effective ways of coordinating Dioceses, religious institutes and Catholic lay organizations which work in the school sector. In many cases it seems useful or necessary to share common initiatives, experiences and resources for an organized and far-sighted collaboration which will avoid overlapping and useless competition between institutes, and will aim instead not only at ensuring the permanence of Catholic schools in places where they have been traditionally present, but also at enabling them to be established in new places, both in poorer areas and in critical sectors for the country's development.

5. The educational capacity of every scholastic institution largely depends on the quality of the people who are part of it and, in particular, on the competence and dedication of its teachers. Catholic schools, which are primarily educational communities, are no exception to this rule.

I therefore turn with affection, gratitude and trust to you, teachers of Catholic schools, both religious and lay people, who often work under difficult conditions and are forced to accept an inadequate salary. I ask you always to put your heart into your work, sustained by the certainty that you are thus participating in a special way in the mission Christ entrusted to his disciples. With equal affection, I turn to you, students, and to your families to tell you that Catholic schools belong to you; they are for you and are your home; so you are not wrong to choose them, to love them and to support them.

Dear friends who are present in this square and all of you who share the same goals, let us close this National Assembly with a humble prayer to the Lord and a strong mutual commitment, so that Catholic schools can respond ever better to their vocation and see their due place recognized in

Italian civil life.

May Blessed Mary, Seat of Wisdom and Star of Evangelization, and all the saints who have marked the path of Christian education and Catholic schools, guide and support your work.

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