



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE ITALIAN BISHOPS ON THE OCCASION OF THEIR 52nd GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Dear Italian Bishops, 1. "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 1: 3). I greet with deep affection each one of you, meeting at the Basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Assisi for your 52nd General Assembly. I accompany you with prayer and wish you days of intense communion and fruitful work together. I greet in particular your President, Cardinal Camillo Ruini, the three Vice-Presidents and the General Secretary, and all those who collaborate with generous commitment in the activities of your Conference. 2. On this occasion, your pastoral solicitude will focus on a topic of fundamental importance in the life and mission of the Church: the parish. It is very appropriately presented on the agenda of your Assembly as a "Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters" (cf. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, n. 26). I want you to know that I share your conviction that the parish has a central and indispensable role in making participation in the life of the Church possible and, in a certain sense, easy and natural, for every person and family. Actually, as the Second Vatican Council stated in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, parishes "in some way represent the visible Church constituted throughout the world" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 42). The profusion of parishes throughout the Italian territory, their vitality, their ability to carry out a pastoral and social service attentive to the population's needs, are an extraordinary resource for the Church in Italy. In your Assembly you will search for the most suitable ways to preserve and increase this wealth in the midst of the great social and cultural changes of our time, besides responding to the multiple challenges that also seek to distance from the faith and from the Church the Italian people, whose Christian roots are so firm and so deep. To achieve these goals it will be especially important for Italian parishes to keep the characteristic "family" style that distinguishes them and makes them, as it were, large "families of families": this will ensure that parishes are lively, welcoming places, actively able to defend and uphold the family, that precious, unique reality which unfortunately is constantly threatened today. 3. Your Assembly also affords me a favourable opportunity to address an affectionate, grateful and encouraging greeting to all priests of Italy involved in parish ministry, starting with the parish priests. I am well aware of their daily effort, the problems they so often encounter, their constant disappointments, and I want to assure them of my cordial closeness. However, I also know the zeal and confidence that motivate them, the spirit of faith, the sense of Church from which they draw ever new energy. May these priests know that the Pope carries them in his heart. May they know that he trusts them to preserve the faith in the People of God and increase the apostolic and missionary zeal of both Pastors and faithful, so that parish communities may be true cells of Christian outreach. 4. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, I would like to express to you my deepest appreciation for the constant pastoral solicitude with which you follow and accompany social life in Italy. A year after my Visit to the Italian Parliament this beloved Nation, that has contributed and continues to

contribute so much to building Europe and spreading the authentic values of civilization, is still afflicted by various problems and disputes, while the evil weed of political terrorism has not been completely uprooted. I therefore stand beside you in the work each one of you is doing to foster peace and harmony in the relationships between the different political, social and institutional elements. Furthermore, I wholeheartedly share in your continuous commitment to safeguard human life, the family founded on marriage, authentic educational freedom, and likewise, your concern for the development of employment and the support of the poorest classes.⁵ Dear Italian Bishops, you have gathered at Assisi on the 750th anniversary of the death of St Clare. This place, to which I am bound by unforgettable memories, is a symbol of peace for the whole world. I join you in spirit to pray for the gift of peace for humanity, tormented by so many bloody conflicts. Together with you I entrust to the Lord the Italians who died in Iraq while carrying out their duty in the service of that population. Lastly, let us pray for Italy and for all the Churches entrusted to your pastoral care, so that the faith and love of Christ may be light and nourishment for the entire Nation. With sentiments of deep affection I impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you, to your Dioceses and to each Italian parish. *From the Vatican, 14 November 2003* JOHN PAUL II