



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE MEMBERS OF THE ITALIAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE
GATHERED FOR THEIR 57th GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

Synod Hall

Thursday, 24 May 2007

Dear Italian Bishop Brothers,

We have today, on the occasion of your 57th General Assembly, a new and pleasant opportunity to meet and to live a moment of intense communion together.

I greet your new President, Archbishop Angelo Bagnasco, and I heartily thank him for the kind words that he has addressed to me in the name of all of you. I renew the expression of my gratitude to Cardinal Camillo Ruini, who as President has served your Conference for many years.

I greet the three Vice-Presidents and the Secretary General. I greet with affection each of you, reliving those sentiments of friendship and communion that I was able to express personally on the occasion of your *ad limina* visit.

That meeting with all the Pastors of the Italian Church is a beautiful memory for me. I thus learned, so to speak, the "exterior" geography, but above all the "spiritual" geography of beautiful Italy.

I was really able to enter intimately into the life of the Church, where there is still great richness, much vitality of faith; where, in our difficult time, problems are not wanting, but one also sees that the strength of the faith is deeply at work in souls. Even where the faith appears to be extinguished, a little flame remains; and we can revive it.

I wish to speak to you above all precisely about the *ad limina* visit that you have had in the past months, because it has been a great comfort and a joyful experience for me, in addition to the opportunity to know you and your Dioceses better and to share with you the satisfactions and

worries that accompany your pastoral solicitude.

As a whole in these meetings with you, I have above all been able to confirm with certainty that the faith in Italy is alive and deeply rooted and that the Church is a reality for the people, capillarily near to persons and families. There are undoubtedly different situations in this Country so rich in history, also religious history, and characterized by multiple heritages besides the different conditions of life, work and income.

The Catholic faith and the presence of the Church remain, however, a strong unifying factor in this beloved Nation and a precious preserver of moral energy for its future.

Naturally, these consoling positive realities do not allow us to ignore or underestimate the difficulties already present and the threats that can grow with the passage of time and generations. Daily we sense, in the images suggested by public debate and amplified by the communication system, but also, although in different measure, in the life and behaviours of people, the weight of a culture marked by moral relativism, poor in reference points and rich instead in frequently unjustified demands.

We also sense the need to reinforce Christian formation through more substantial catechesis, to which the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* can be a great service.

The constant commitment to put God at the centre of the life of our communities is also necessary, giving the primacy to prayer, personal friendship with Jesus and therefore to the call to holiness. In particular, great care must be given to vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life, and also the solicitude for permanent formation and for the conditions in which priests live and work: especially in some regions, indeed precisely the very small number of young priests represents already now a serious problem for pastoral work.

Together with the whole Christian community, we trustingly ask and humbly beg the Lord for the gift of new and holy workers for his harvest (cf. Mt 9: 37-38).

We know that the Lord sometimes makes us wait, but we also know that no one knocks in vain. So, with patient confidence we continue to pray to the Lord for the gift of new holy "labourers".

Dear Brother Bishops, a little prior to beginning the *ad limina* visit these themes were the object of the Convention that brought the Italian Church together at Verona.

My heart keeps a great and grateful memory of the day that I spent with you on that occasion and I am pleased with the results that grew out of the Convention.

Basically, it is now a question of continuing the journey to make increasingly more effective and

concrete that "great "yes"" that God in Jesus Christ has said to man and to his life, to human love, to our freedom and intelligence: in that "yes" is summarized the very sense of the Convention.

Beginning from this fact and making it perceived by all - that is, that Christianity is a great "yes", a "yes" that comes from God himself and is made concrete in the Incarnation of the Son - seems very important to me.

Only if we place our Christian existence within this "yes", if we deeply penetrate the joy of this "yes", can we then live Christian life in every aspect of our existence, even in those that are difficult to live as Christians today.

I am pleased, therefore, that in your Assembly you have approved the *Pastoral Note* that takes up and relaunches the fruit of the work accomplished in the Convention.

It is very important that this hope in Jesus Risen, this spirit of communion and this desire of missionary witness which animated and sustained the preparatory work and then the celebration of the Convention, continues to nourish the life and multiform commitment of the Church in Italy.

In turn, the principal theme of your Assembly is closely linked with the objectives of the Convention in Verona. You are reflecting, in fact, on "*Jesus Christ, the only Saviour of the world: the Church in mission, ad gentes and among us*". Embrace it, therefore, in a perspective of articulated but actually unitary evangelization, because it always concerns the proclamation and witness of the same Jesus Christ, whether to the people who are opening themselves up for the first time to the faith, or to the children of those people who are now coming to live and work in Italy, or even to our own people, who at times distance themselves from the faith and are, however, under the pressure of those secular tendencies that seek to dominate society and culture in this Country and in all of Europe.

To all and to each one, the mission of the Church and our pastoral solicitude must be addressed: it seems to me appropriate to recall the Encyclical *Fidei Donum* of Pius XII, particularly on its 50th anniversary.

I am pleased that you have wished to put the fundamental truth that Jesus Christ is the only Saviour of the world at the foundation of this missionary commitment. The certainty of this truth, in fact, has furnished from the beginning the decisive impetus for the Christian mission.

Even today, as the Declaration *Dominus Iesus* confirmed, we must be fully aware that from the mystery of Jesus Christ, true God and true Man alive and present in the Church, flows the salvific oneness and universality of Christian revelation and therefore the inalienable duty to proclaim to all, without tiring or resignation, the same Jesus Christ who is the way, the truth and the life (cf. Jn 14: 6).

It seems to me that if we look at the panorama of the world situation today, one can understand - I would say even humanly, almost without the need of having recourse to faith - that the God who has taken on a human face, the God who has become incarnate, whose name is Jesus Christ and who has suffered for us, this God is needed by all and is the only response to all the challenges of this time.

Esteem and respect for all other religions and cultures, with the seeds of truth and goodness that are present there and that represent a preparation for the Gospel, are particularly necessary today in a world that is growing ever closer together.

One cannot, therefore, diminish the awareness of the originality, fullness and oneness of the revelation of the true God who in Christ has given himself to us definitively, and neither can one tone down or weaken the missionary vocation of the Church.

The relativistic cultural climate that surrounds us makes it always more important and urgent to root and to bring to maturity within the entire ecclesial body the certainty that Christ, the God with a human face, is our true and only Saviour.

The book "Jesus of Nazareth" - a very personal book, not by the Pope but by this man - is written with this intention: that again we can, with the heart and with reason, see that Christ is truly the One whom the human heart awaits.

Dear Brothers, as Italian Bishops you have a precise responsibility not only toward the Churches entrusted to you, but also toward the entire Nation. With full and cordial respect for the distinction between Church and politics, between what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God (cf. Mt 22: 21), we cannot fail to be concerned in fact about what is good for man, creature and image of God: this means in the concrete, of the common good of Italy.

You have given a clear witness of this attention to the common good through the *Note* approved by the Permanent Episcopal Council regarding the family founded on matrimony and the legislative initiatives in matters of *de facto* unions, moving in full consonance with the constant teaching of the Apostolic See.

In this context, the recent manifestation in favour of the family, which took place through the initiative of the Catholic laity but shared also by many non-Catholics, was a great and extraordinary festival of the people, which confirmed how the family itself is profoundly rooted in the heart and life of Italians.

This event has certainly contributed to making visible to all the family's meaning and role in society, which particularly needs to be understood and recognized today in the face of a culture that deludes itself in promoting the happiness of individuals by unilaterally insisting on the freedom

of the individual person. However, each State initiative in favour of the family as such cannot fail to be valued and encouraged.

The same attention to people's true needs is expressed in the daily service to the many the many forms of poverty, old and new, visible or hidden. It is a service in which many ecclesial realities work, beginning with your Dioceses, your parishes, *Caritas* and many other volunteer organizations.

Insist, dear Brother Bishops, on promoting and animating this service, so that it always shines with the authentic love of Christ and so that all can feel that no separation exists between the Church as keeper of the moral law written by God in the heart of man, and the Church that invites the faithful to be good Samaritans, recognizing their own neighbour in every suffering person.

Lastly, I would like to recall the meeting that will bring us together again at Loreto, at the beginning of September, for the pilgrimage and encounter under the name, "*Agorà of the Italian youth*", and that wishes to insert youth more profoundly into the Church's journey following the Convention of Verona and to prepare them for the World Youth Day next year in Sydney.

We know well that Christian formation of the new generations is perhaps the most difficult but also the extremely important duty that the Church faces.

We will therefore go to Loreto together with our young people, so that the Virgin Mary may help them and that they be ever more in love with Jesus Christ and thus remain within the Church, recognized as a trustworthy companion, and communicate to their brethren the joyful certainty of being loved by God.

Dearest Italian Bishops, in exercising our ministry we meet, today as always, not a few difficulties, but also many more abundant consolations of the Lord, transmitted also through the witness of our people's affection.

We thank God for all this and we continue our journey fortified by the communion that unites us and that we have experienced anew today.

With this sentiment I assure you of my prayers for you, your Churches and Italy, and I heartily impart to you and all your faithful the Apostolic Blessing.

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