



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI TO MEMBERS OF VARIOUS ITALIAN CONFRATERNITIES

St. Peter's Square
Saturday, 10 November 2007

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am happy to welcome all of you, who ideally represent the vast and variegated world of Confraternities present in every region and diocese of Italy. I greet the Bishops who have accompanied you and in particular Bishop Armando Brambilla, Auxiliary of Rome and Delegate of the Italian Bishops' Conference for Confraternities and Sodalties, thanking him for the words that he has addressed to me in your name. I greet Dr Francesco Antonetti, President of the Confederation that brings together the Italian Confraternities, as well as the members of the Boards of Directors and Chaplains. You, dear friends, have come to St Peter's Square with your traditional garments that are reminiscent of your ancient Christian traditions well rooted in the People of God. Thank you for your visit, which wishes to be a choral manifestation of faith and at the same time a gesture that expresses filial attachment to the Successor of Peter.

How can I fail to recall immediately the importance and influence that Confraternities have exercised in the Christian community of Italy from the earliest centuries of the last Millennium? Many of them, raised up by zealous persons, quickly became aggregations of faithful laity dedicated to bringing to light some characteristics of popular religiosity linked to the life of Jesus Christ, especially his passion, death and Resurrection, to the devotion for the Virgin Mary and the Saints, almost always uniting concrete works of mercy and solidarity. Hence, from your origins, your Confraternities have distinguished themselves for their typical form of popular piety, to which many charitable initiatives toward the poor, the sick and the suffering are united, involving many volunteers of every social condition in this event of generous assistance to the needy. This spirit of fraternal charity can be better understood if one takes into account that they began to come about during the Middle Ages, when structured forms of public assistance that would guarantee social

and health-care service for the weakest sector of society still did not exist. This situation began diminishing in successive centuries until, we could say, our days, when, although economic well-being has grown, still large areas of poverty have not disappeared and therefore, today as in the past, there is still much to do in the field of solidarity.

Confraternities are not, however, simple societies of mutual assistance or philanthropic associations, but a union of brethren who, wanting to live the Gospel in the awareness of putting into practice the commandment of love, are urged to open their hearts to others, especially those in difficulty. Evangelical love - love for God and for neighbour - is the distinctive sign and the life programme of every disciple of Christ and of each Ecclesial Community. In Sacred Scripture it is clear that love for God is strictly linked to love for neighbour (cf. Mk 12: 29-31). "For the Church", I wrote in the Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, "charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally well be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being" (n. 25). To communicate to the brethren the providential tenderness of the Heavenly Father, however, it is necessary to draw from the source, which is God himself, thanks to prolonged periods of prayer, constant listening to his Word and an existence entirely centred in the Lord and nourished by the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist.

In the season of great changes that we are passing through, the Church in Italy also needs you, dear friends, to make the proclamation of Gospel charity reach everyone, travelling ancient and new paths. Rooted on the solid foundation of faith in Christ, with the striking variety of charisms and ecclesial vitality that distinguishes them, your meritorious Confraternities continue, therefore, to spread the message of salvation among people, working on the many frontiers of the new evangelization! You can bring your important mission to fulfilment if you always cultivate a profound love for the Lord and a docile obedience to your parish priests. Under these conditions, keeping the requisites of Gospel-fidelity and "ecclesiality" steadfast, your Confraternities will continue to be popular schools of lived faith and sources of holiness. They can continue to be Gospel "ferment" and "yeast" in society and contribute to rousing that spiritual awakening for which we all await.

Therefore, the field in which you must work is vast, and I encourage you to multiply the initiatives and activities of each of your Confraternities. I ask you above all to take care of your spiritual formation and to tend to holiness, following the examples of authentic Christian perfection who are not absent from the your Confraternities' history. Not a few of your brethren, with courage and great faith, have distinguished themselves in the course of the centuries as sincere and generous labourers of the Gospel, sometimes even to the sacrifice of their life. Follow in their footsteps! Today, it is still most necessary to cultivate a true ascetical and missionary impetus in order to face the many challenges of the modern age. May the Holy Virgin protect and guide you, and may your Patron Saints assist you from Heaven! With these sentiments I offer you present here and each Confraternity of Italy the wish of a fruitful apostolate and, while I assure you of my remembrance in prayer, I warmly bless you all.

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