



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO H.E. Mr FRANCESCO MARIA GRECO
NEW AMBASSADOR OF ITALY TO THE HOLY SEE***

Friday, 17 December 2010

Mr Ambassador,

I am glad to accept the Letters with which the President of the Italian Republic accredits you as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the Holy See. In thanking you for your noble words, I extend my thoughts to the Head of State, to the other Authorities and to all the beloved Italian People. I constantly have the opportunity to note how strong is the awareness of the special bonds between the See of Peter and Italy. An important expression of this is the attention the Authorities pay to the Successor of the Prince of the Apostles and to the Holy See and the affection that the people of Italy show me with such great enthusiasm here in Rome and during the journeys I make in the country, as they also did recently on the occasion of my Visit to Palermo. I want to assure you that my prayers closely accompany both the happy and the sorrowful events of Italy, for which I ask the Giver of all good to keep the precious treasure of the Christian faith and to grant it the gifts of harmony and prosperity.

On this happy occasion I offer you, together with my cordial welcome, fervent good wishes for the demanding mission you are officially assuming today. Indeed, the Embassy of Italy to the Holy See — whose prestigious headquarters, also linked to the memory of St Charles Borromeo, I was able to visit two years ago — are an important reference point for the relations of intense collaboration that exist between the Holy See and Italy, not only from the bilateral point of view but also in the broader context of international life. In addition, the Diplomatic Representation whose leadership you are assuming, makes an effective contribution to the development of harmonious relations between the civil and ecclesial communities in the country and also renders invaluable services to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See. I am certain that under your guidance this intense activity will continue with a renewed impetus and from this moment I express my deep

gratitude to you and to your collaborators.

As you mentioned, the celebrations for the 150th anniversary of the Unity of Italy have begun. This affords an opportunity for a reflection that is not only commemorative but also programmatic in character, which is very appropriate in the present difficult phase in national and international history. I am glad that the Pastors and the various components of the ecclesial community are actively involved in recalling the process of the nation's Unification, which began in 1861.

In our time one of the most relevant aspects of this long and at times thwarted process which led to the profile of the Italian State today consists of the search for a correct distinction and proper forms of collaboration between the civil and religious communities, a need so deeply felt in a country such as Italy, whose history and culture are all the more deeply marked by the Catholic Church and in whose capital the visible Head of this Community, spread across the world, has his Episcopal See. These characteristics, which for centuries have been part of the historical and cultural heritage of Italy, cannot be denied or marginalized, as the experience of these 150 years show: when people have tried to deny them, it has caused dangerous imbalances and sorrowful interruptions in the social life of the country.

In this regard, Your Excellency, you have appropriately recalled the importance of the Lateran Pacts and of the Agreement of Villa Madama, which established the coordinates of a just balance in relations, which benefits the Apostolic See and likewise the State and the Church in Italy. Indeed, the Lateran Treaty, in configuring and providing for a series of personal and real immunities, established the conditions for assuring the Pontiff and the Holy See full sovereignty and independence in protecting its universal mission. In turn, the Agreement on the modification of the Concordat aims fundamentally to guarantee the full exercise of religious freedom, that is, of the right which is historically and objectively the first of those fundamental rights of the human person. It is therefore of great important to observe and, at the same time, to develop the letter and the spirit of those Agreements and of those that have derived from them, recalling that they have guaranteed and can still guarantee a serene coexistence to Italian society.

Those international pacts are not an expression of a desire of the Church or of the Holy See to obtain power, privileges or positions of economic and social advantage, nor with them is it intended to exceed the bounds of the area proper to the mission assigned to the Divine Founder of his community on earth.

On the contrary, these Agreements are founded on the just desire on the part of the State to guarantee individuals and the Church the full exercise of religious freedom, a right that has not only a personal dimension because "his own social nature requires that man give external expression to these internal acts of religion, that he communicate with others on religious matters, and profess his religion in community" (Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis humanae*, n. 3). As well as being a right of the individual, religious freedom is therefore also a right of the family, of

religious groups and of the Church (cf. *ibid.*, 4-5.13), and the State is called to protect not only the rights of believers to freedom of conscience and religion, but also to the legitimate role of religion and of religious communities in the public sphere.

The correct exercise and the corresponding recognition of this right permit society to avail itself of the moral resources and generous activity of believers. For this reason it is unthinkable to pursue authentic social progress by taking the way of marginalization or even of the explicit rejection of the religious factor, as in our times there is a tendency to do in various ways.

One of these, for example, is the attempt to eliminate from public places the display of religious symbols, and first of all of the Crucifix, which is certainly the emblem par excellence of the Christian faith but which, at the same time, speaks to all people of good will and, as such, is not a discriminating factor.

I would like to express my appreciation to the Italian Government which in this regard has acted in conformity with a correct vision of secularity and in the light of its history, culture and tradition, finding in this action the positive support of other European nations.

While in certain societies there are attempts to marginalize the religious dimension, recent accounts testify to us that in our day even open violations of religious freedom are occurring. In the face of this sorrowful reality, Italian society and its Authorities have shown a special sensitivity for the fate of those Christian minorities who, because of their faith, suffer violence and are discriminated against or subjected to forced emigration from their homeland.

I hope that awareness of this problem and that, consequently, the efforts to see realized, everywhere and for everyone, the full respect of religious freedom may increase everywhere. I am certain that the commitment by the Holy See in this regard will not lack the support of Italy in the international area.

Mr Ambassador, in concluding my reflections I would like to assure you that in the fulfilment of the lofty mission entrusted to you, You will be able to count on my support and that of my collaborators. Above all I invoke upon your assumption of office the protection of the Mother of God, so beloved and venerated throughout the Peninsula, and of the nation's Patrons, St Francis of Assisi and St Catherine of Siena, and I warmly impart the Apostolic Blessing to you, to your family and to your collaborators, and to the beloved Italian People.