



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER TO THE PILGRIMS FROM FRIULI

Saturday, 27 November 1999

*Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and the Priesthood,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear People of Friuli!*

1. It is a joy for me to welcome all of you, who have come to Rome to prepare for the imminent celebration of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, and to recall the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the "*Fogolâr Furlan*" in this city.

I affectionately greet Archbishop Alfredo Battisti of Udine, and I thank him for his warm words a few moments ago expressing the sentiments you share. With him I greet the Bishops and priests, and the authorities and representatives of the various civil, cultural and social institutions, together with the numerous pilgrims from the beloved land of Friuli. Friuli is well represented at our gathering!

A special thought goes to the members of the "*Fogolâr Furlan*" of Rome, the association of Friulians residing in the capital and to the representatives of Aprilia, Latina and the Pontine area, as well as those of Umbria and Sardinia.

Your pilgrimage "*ad Petri sedem*", on the eve of the Jubilee, has a special ecclesial significance: it shows that Friuli's Christian communities wish to prepare themselves with renewed faith for the celebration of the 2,000 years of the great event of the Redeemer's birth by first of all reliving your historical memory.

2. The origins of the mother Church of Aquileia date back to St Mark, interpreter and "son" (cf. 1 *Pt* 5: 13) of St Peter. According to the *Passio* of St Hermagoras, St Mark was sent by Peter to the

great and prosperous Adriatic metropolis of Aquileia, thus becoming the first to preach the Gospel in the land of Friuli. He brought to Rome an illustrious representative of that community, Hermagoras, whom the Prince of the Apostles consecrated as the first Bishop of Aquileia.

Your visit to the "Tombs of the Apostles", therefore, signifies a return to the sources of the Christian faith in Friuli, to strengthen the genuine spirit and the missionary spirit of your communities, following the example of Peter, Mark and the many martyrs and saints of Friuli who have marked your history down the centuries.

The leaven of the Gospel has reinforced the traditional virtues of the Friulian people, who have strengthened their identity with the Christian faith, developing a particular civilization and culture, of which the Friulian language is the key and in a certain sense the soul.

Friuli can be seen in the heart of Europe as an example of coexistence among peoples who differ ethnically and linguistically. Heirs to the great Patriarchate of Aquileia, which welcomed many peoples of different cultures, the Friulian people of today also feel strongly committed to promoting a harmony based on respect for individual cultural identities. This must continue to characterize the attitudes and behaviour of your Christian communities. I am pleased here to recall the meetings promoted among the Friulian, Carinthian and Slovenian peoples, as well as the generous hospitality extended to the many refugees during the tragic events in the Balkans and the solidarity shown to the suffering populations.

3. At a time like this we certainly want to glance at the situation in your region which, starting with the disastrous earthquake of 1976, has shown rapid development, reaching a considerable level of prosperity. But some of the consequences have not been positive: for example, a certain desertification of the mountains, particularly in the Carnic region and the Valleys of Natisone, and a considerable demographic reduction, with the consequent ageing of the population as a whole. No less important are the sociocultural effects which are affecting the community ethos: scholars of religious sociology notice a certain loss of identity by the people with a weakening of their sense of tradition. Many individuals seem disoriented and subject to forms of moral relativism, accompanied by individualistic and consumeristic impulses. Even the family, which enjoyed proverbial respect in Friuli, is today subject to a powerful upheaval, the most evident signs being the instability of marriages and a fall in the birth rate.

4. Fortunately, most people still have a deep sense of religion: it is so rooted in Friulian culture as to define its identity. The religious sense, however, is also affected - and how could it not be? - by the difficulties just mentioned. These risks must be transformed into a new challenge for your communities. Friuli can and must shape its future in continuity with the great ecclesial, cultural and family values of its own Christian tradition.

Venerable Brothers in the episcopate and the priesthood, in your pastoral work make the family

and the young the focus of your concern, and do everything possible to foster a greater awareness of the authentic leadership of the laity. Popular missions with the people will be of great assistance in this regard: they in fact spur the communities themselves and the lay faithful to become missionaries in their towns and districts by deepening their knowledge of their Christian vocation and bearing witness to the faith in daily life.

5. Dear people, the history of the Church in Friuli teaches us to treasure the "*sign of Jonah*" (cf. *Mt* 16: 4), the sign indicated by Christ as a symbol of his Resurrection and the new life of the Christian reborn in Baptism. The Book of Jonah was particularly commented on by Chromatius of Aquileia, one of the great Fathers of the Western Church in the fourth century. Jonah is also the centre point of the magnificent mosaic floor in the Southern Basilica of Aquileia.

But Jonah can also be the symbol of man and of the Christian, who sometimes feels immersed "in the abysses of the sea and in the belly of the great fish" (Chromatius, *Tractatus in Matthaeum*, 27), and also a symbol of the evangelical labours of the apostolic Church and of the present-day Churches in Friuli, heirs to the great Patriarchate of Aquileia. Jonah, therefore, is not only a prefiguration of the Risen One, but a sign of the challenge that the faith involves for every believer and of the evangelizing mission of our Churches.

6. At the end of our meeting I wish to repeat the wish that I addressed to all Friulians at the end of the intense Pastoral Visit that I made to your beloved region in May 1992: "Friulian brethren, I greet you in your mother tongue and I invite you to hold fast to your traditions, the Christian faith and the values of the home and to let them grow in the heart of your children" (*Fourth Eucharistic Congress in Udine, Italy*, 3 May 1992).

As I bless you with affection, together with all the members of the "*Fogolârs*" and with all the beloved people of Friuli, I entrust you to the maternal protection of Our Lady of Castelmonte, so revered in your land, and I greet you with the characteristic expression of the Friulian language "*Mandi!*", which I extend to you here and to all the people of your "*Little Homeland*": "*Mandi Friul!*"