



The Holy See

**HOLY FATHER'S ADDRESS
TO THE OFFICERS OF THE 31ST SQUADRON
OF THE ITALIAN AIR FORCE**

Sunday, 26 september 1999

*Dear Officers and Non-Commissioned Officers,
Dear Brothers and Sisters!*

1. It is always a pleasure for me to be able to welcome and greet you. Today's meeting has become a tradition, which is enriched each time with new motifs and sentiments. It offers me, first of all, the chance to thank you personally, dear members of the 31st Squadron of the Italian Air Force, who, by escorting me on my trips across Italian territory, permit me to participate in ecclesial celebrations and exhibitions in various localities of our beloved Italy.

In this way you cooperate in my ministry and offer me the possibility to bring the Gospel message to many brothers and sisters in the faith, and to support them in their witness and love for Christ and the Church, just as you also enable me to bring comfort to those who are particularly suffering.

2. For this valuable and praiseworthy service and for your attentive and constant readiness, I wish to renew my most sincere and cordial thanks, together with my deep appreciation of your great technical and professional training. Allow me also to mention the ideals of faith that inspire and motivate your difficult job, ideals which your Commander just now recalled while greeting me in the name of you all.

As usual on this occasion, with heartfelt joy I confer special distinctions and pontifical honours on some of you: this is an outward, tangible gesture, which expresses my personal gratitude and that of the Holy See for your generous readiness to place your professional expertise at the Pope's service; and it is likewise a sign of the esteem that I feel for you and for all the members of the 31st Squadron.

3. We are currently in the third year of immediate preparation for the now imminent Great Jubilee. The year 1999 is dedicated to the Father. Jesus taught us how to address our heavenly Father: "Our Father who art in heaven" (*Mt 6: 9*). Certainly, the reference to "heaven", as the place where the Father dwells, is symbolic: heaven, with its boundless reaches and the variety of stars that adorn it, is the place where the beauty and greatness of the Father, "Creator of

heaven and earth", shine forth in a particular way.

The heavens are familiar to you: you pass through them on every flight. May this service and your whole lives be constantly surrounded by the love of the Father, who in Jesus Christ revealed his true face of mercy and love! May he watch over you with his paternal presence and open your spirit to great trust in him.

With these sentiments, I invoke on you, on the 31st Squadron and on your families the Lord's protection, through the intercession of Our Lady of Loreto, for whom the Air Force has a special devotion.

To you all and to your loved ones, my affectionate Blessing!

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