



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE MEMBERS OF THE ITALIAN VOLUNTARY
SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS**

Paul VI Audience Hall

Saturday, 10 February 2007

Dear friends of Misericordie d'Italia,

I am happy to receive you and address my welcome to all of you present here, grateful for this visit that offers me the occasion to know you better.

I greet the President of your Confederation and I thank dear Cardinal Antonelli for the kind words he has addressed to me in the name of all of you.

The *Misericordie* - it is only right to emphasize - are the most ancient form of organized voluntary service in the world.

In fact, they go back to the initiative of St Peter Martyr of Verona, who in 1244, in Florence, gathered some citizens of every age and social condition desiring to "honour God with works of mercy to one's neighbour", in a totally free, unobtrusive way.

Today, the Confederation of the *Misericordie d'Italia* embodies some 700 confraternities - as you eloquently call them - especially centred around Tuscany but present throughout the national territory, in particular in the central and southern regions.

To this, the numerous groups of blood donors called "*Fratres*" must be added. So more than 100,000 belong to your beneficent organization; they are committed in a permanent way in the social health-care field.

The variety of your input, besides being a response to the emerging needs of society, is a sign of

zeal, of a "creativity" in charity that stems from a beating heart whose "motor" is love for humankind in difficulty.

This is exactly why you merit appreciation: with your presence and action you contribute to the spreading of the Gospel of God's love for all people.

In fact, how can we not recall the impressive Gospel passage where St Matthew calls us to encounter the Lord definitively? Then, as Jesus himself said, the Judge of the world will ask us if in the course of our existence we have given the hungry to eat, the thirsty to drink; if we have welcomed the foreigner and opened the door of our hearts to the needy.

In a word, at the Last Judgment God will ask us if we have loved, not in an abstract way, but concretely, with deeds (cf. Mt 25: 31-46).

Reading anew these lines, it always truly touches my heart that Jesus, the Son of Man and final Judge, precedes us with this act, making himself man, making himself poor and thirsty, and lastly, he embraces us, drawing us to his Heart. And so God does what he wants us to do: to be open to others and to live love, not with words, but in practice. At the end of his life, St John of the Cross loved to repeat that we will be judged on love.

What is necessary even today, indeed, especially in this our epoch marked by so many human and spiritual challenges, is for Christians to proclaim with their works the merciful love of God!

Every baptized person must "live the Gospel". In fact, many people who do not welcome Christ and his exigent teachings easily are nevertheless sensitive to the witness of those who communicate his message through the concrete witness of charity.

Love is a language that directly reaches the heart and opens it to trust. I exhort you, then, as St Peter did to the first Christians, to be ever ready to reply to anyone who asks you the reason "for the hope that is in you" (I Pt 3: 15).

I would then like to add another reflection: the reality of your association constitutes a typical example of the importance that your "Christian roots" have in Italy and in Europe. Your confraternities, the *Misericordie*, are a very realistic living and viable manifestation of these Christian roots.

Nowadays, the *Misericordie* are not an ecclesial aggregation, but their historic roots remain unequivocally Christian. The very name "*Misericordie*" expresses it, and it is also manifested by the fact, already recalled, that at your origins are the initiative of a Saint.

Now, for the roots to continue to bring forth fruit, they must stay alive and well. For this reason you

opportunistically propose to your members regular periods of qualification and formation, to increasingly deepen the human and Christian motivation of your activity.

The risk, in effect, is that volunteerism can turn into simple activism. If, instead, the spiritual side remains alive, it can communicate to others more than the materially necessary things: it can offer one's neighbour in difficulty a loving look that is needed (cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 18).

Lastly, I would like to show you a third reason why you are appreciated. Together with other volunteer associations, you carry out an important educational role, such as contributing to keep alive the sensitivity to noble values such as fraternity and disinterested help to whoever finds himself in difficulty.

In particular, youth can benefit from the experience of volunteer work because, if it is done well, it can become a "school of life" for them that helps them to give their own existence a meaning and higher and more prolific value.

May the *Misericordie* help them to grow in the dimension of service to one's neighbour and to discover a great Gospel truth: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20: 35; cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 30).

Dear friends, tomorrow, 11 February, Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, the World Day of the Sick reaches its 15th anniversary. This year our attention is addressed in a special way to persons afflicted with incurable diseases. To many of them, you also, dear friends, dedicate your service.

May the Immaculate Virgin, Mother of Mercy, watch over your confraternity, indeed, watch over each member of the *Misericordie d'Italia*. May she help you to fulfil your mission with authentic love, thus contributing to the spread of God's love in the world, the source of life for every human being.

To you present here, to the whole *Misericordie d'Italia*, and to the blood donors *Fratres* I impart my heartfelt Blessing.