



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE ITALIAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCE (CEI)

Dear Italian Bishops,

1. With great joy I express my affection and my warmest congratulations to all of you who have gathered for your 49th General Assembly on the happy occasion of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Italian Bishops' Conference (CEI).

With you I thank the Lord, Source of all good, for these 50 years of faithful, generous and enlightened collegial service to the Church in Italy and to the beloved Italian nation. I remember with gratitude and sadness the bishops who helped make your Conference prosper and whom the Lord has now received into his dwelling of light and peace.

2. With the first meeting, held in Florence on 10 January 1952, of the Presidents of the Regional Episcopal Conferences - active in Italy since the last decades of the 19th century - the life and activity of the Italian Episcopal Conference started and a renewed journey of affective and effective communion began that has been fruitful for the Church and the country. Naturally, it has constantly developed in special union of heart and mind with the Successor of Peter, Bishop of Rome and Primate of Italy.

Grafted onto the great legacy and living tradition of Christian faith, holiness and culture created in Italy by apostolic preaching from the earliest years of the Christian era (cf. *Letter to the Italian Bishops*, 6 January 1994, n. 1; *ORE*, 19 January 1994, p. 5), your Bishops' Conference has greatly contributed to preserving and renewing this legacy and tradition in the present historical circumstances, with a special and important reference to that fundamental ecclesial event, the Second Vatican Council, from which even today we receive indications about the paths we are to take for the proclamation and witness of the Gospel in the century that has just begun.

CEI's work: pastoral programmes, Caritas, conventions, catechisms, Christian cultural project

Among the CEI's multiple teachings and initiatives, how can we forget the publication of the new catechisms for Christian life, addressed to the various age groups as effective instruments of conciliar renewal and, likewise, the establishment of the Italian *Caritas* to promote the practice of the Gospel precept of charity at all levels? We have also seen the great importance of the ten-year pastoral programmes or orientations which, since the 1970s and in accord with the Second Vatican Council, your Conference has identified and presented giving evangelization an important pastoral priority in our time, even in a country with an ancient and deep-rooted Christian tradition like Italy.

With the national ecclesial conventions that have marked the last three decades, the representatives of the entire People of God have been called to assume ever greater responsibility for reviving the Christian presence in Italy and adapting it to the changing circumstances. In recent years, with the formulation and first implementation of its Christian "cultural project", your Conference has known how to devise a way to respond to that decisive challenge: the evangelization of the culture of our time.

3. Dear Italian Bishops, in the Bull of Indiction of the Great Jubilee *Incarnationis mysterium*, I affirmed that "the journey of believers towards the third millennium is in no way weighed down by the weariness which the burden of 2,000 years of history could bring with it" (n. 2). These words are particularly true of Italy, as is attested by the intensity of spiritual life and extraordinary capacity for presence and service of so many of your communities.

So let us not lose heart, even when we face the undeniable and serious difficulties, in Italy as in many other countries, that undermine the Christian faith and the very foundations of human civilization; rather, let us renew and deepen our faith in the Lord, who manifests his power in our weakness (cf. II Cor 12,9) and whose mercy is always able to overcome evil with good.

4. Dear Brothers, on this most important occasion of your Conference's 50th anniversary, I would like to reaffirm my affection, support and spiritual closeness. Persevere with great charity and serene firmness in exercising your pastoral responsibilities. Continue, in particular, to pay special attention to families and to the acceptance and defence of life, encouraging family ministry and supporting the rights of the family founded on marriage. Always have great confidence in children and young people and spare no efforts in encouraging their genuine education, first of all in the family, then at school and in the ecclesial communities. The 17th World Youth Day that awaits us in Toronto this July gives a further impetus to this common commitment.

Looking to the Church's future and her missionary dimension and presence, be ardently committed to encouraging authentic Christian vocations, especially to the priesthood and to the consecrated life. Today too, in fact, the Lord is giving the Church all the vocations she needs, but it is up to us, with prayer, the witness of our lives and pastoral concern, to ensure that they are not lost.

Continue to be credible witnesses to solidarity and generous peacemakers. Indeed, our world, ever more interdependent yet marked by deep, underlying divisions, stands in great need of true peace.

The beloved Italian nation also needs to find social harmony and undertake a sincere quest for the common good to regain its inner and social strength, and make its own contribution to building ever more just and supportive international relations.

5. In the Letter I wrote to you Italian Bishops eight years ago, on 6 January 1994, I stressed that "Italy as a nation has a great deal to offer Europe as a whole" (n. 4). I now repeat this conviction, at the time when the process of building the "common European house" has entered a particularly important phase, with a view to defining its institutional profiles and expansion to the nations of Central and Eastern Europe.

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, by virtue of its history, culture, and current Christian vitality, Italy can truly play an important role to ensure that the Europe in the making does not lose its spiritual roots, but, on the contrary, finds the faith lived out by Christians an inspiration and an incentive in its journey towards unity. Doing your utmost to this end is a legitimate part of your mission as Italian Bishops.

6. I offer my fraternal and affectionate greeting to you all, and especially to your President, Cardinal Camillo Ruini, to the three Vice-Presidents, and to the General Secretary, Bishop Giuseppe Betori.

At your General Assembly you will be giving special attention to the most important and fundamental topic of all: the proclamation of Jesus Christ, the one Saviour and Redeemer, in the context of the cultural and religious pluralism of today. May the Assembly be an intense and joyful experience of communion for each one of you that will give you new energy in the daily effort of our ministry.

I join in your prayer and with you, I remember before the Lord each one of your Churches, your beloved priests, the deacons and seminarians, the men and women religious, the lay faithful and their families, the authorities and the entire Italian people.

As a pledge of my affection I impart to you all my Apostolic Blessing, to favour continuous divine assistance.
