



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE 56th GENERAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE ITALIAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCE**

*Synod Hall
Thursday, 18 May 2006*

Dear Italian Brother Bishops,

I am truly glad to meet you all this morning during your General Assembly. I greet Cardinal Camillo Ruini, your President, and I thank him for his cordial words expressing your common sentiments. I greet the three Vice-Presidents, the General Secretary and each one of you, expressing in turn my heartfelt affection and joy in our reciprocal communion.

The main object of your Assembly concerns the life and ministry of priests, in the perspective of a Church which intends to extend increasingly her fundamental evangelizing mission. Thus, you are continuing the work you began at your Assembly in Assisi last November, at which you focused your attention on seminaries and formation for the priestly ministry. In fact, it is an essential duty for us Bishops to be constantly close to our priests who participate in the apostolic ministry that the Lord entrusts to us through the Sacrament of Orders.

It is necessary first of all to select candidates to the priesthood with care, and to verify their personal aptitude for assuming the commitments that their future ministry involves; next, their formation must be supervised, not only during the seminary years but also in the subsequent phases of life; we must have at heart their material and spiritual well-being; we should exercise our fatherhood to them with a fraternal heart; we should never leave them alone in the tasks of the ministry, in sickness or in old age, or in the inevitable trials of life.

Dear Brother Bishops, the closer we are to our priests, the greater will be the affection and trust they feel for us, they will excuse our personal limitations, they will welcome our words and will feel

solidarity with us in the joys and difficulties of the ministry.

Obviously, at the heart of our relationship with priests as well as of our life and of theirs, is our relationship with Christ, our intimate union with him, our participation in the mission that he received from the Father. The mystery of our priesthood consists in that identification with him by virtue of which we, poor and weak human beings, through the Sacrament of Orders can speak and act in *persona Christi capitis*. The whole journey of our life as priests cannot but aim for this goal: to configure ourselves in the reality of daily life and behaviour, with the gift and mystery that we have received.

Jesus' words must guide and comfort us on this path: "no longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (Jn 15: 15). The Lord puts himself in our hands, he transmits to us his deepest, personal mystery, he wants us to share in his power of salvation. But this obviously requires in turn that we be truly the Lord's friends, that our sentiments conform to his sentiments, and our will to his (cf. Phil 2: 5), and this is an everyday journey.

The horizon of friendship to which Jesus introduces us is the whole of humanity: indeed, he wants to be for everyone the Good Shepherd who lays down his own life (cf. Jn 10: 11), and he stresses this strongly in the discourse on the Good Shepherd who came to reunite everyone, not only the Chosen People but all the dispersed children of God.

Our own solicitude, therefore, must be universal. We should certainly first take care of those who, like us, believe and live with the Church - it is very important, even in this dimension of universality, that we first see to those faithful who live their "being Church" every day with humility and love -, and yet we must not tire of going out, as the Lord asks us, "to the highways and hedges" (Lk 14: 23) to invite to the banquet that God has prepared those who are not yet acquainted with him or have perhaps preferred not to know him.

Dear Italian Brother Bishops, I join you in saying a big "thank you" to our priests for their constant and often hidden dedication, and I ask them, with a brotherly spirit, to trust in the Lord always and to walk with generosity and courage on the way that leads to holiness, comforting and supporting us Bishops too, on the same journey.

At this Assembly, you have also addressed the National Ecclesial Congress, now at hand, that will be taking place in Verona and at which I too will have the joy of speaking. The Congress, whose theme is: "Witnesses of the Risen Jesus, Hope of the World", will be an important moment of communion for all the members of the Church in Italy. It will be possible to review the path taken in recent years and especially, to look ahead, to face together the fundamental task of keeping alive the great Christian tradition which is Italy's greatest treasure.

To this end, the decision to focus the Congress on the Risen Jesus, a source of hope for all, is particularly felicitous: starting from Christ, in fact, and only from him, from his victory over sin and over death, is it possible to respond to the fundamental need of the human being, which is the need for God, not for a distant and general God, but for the God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ as love that saves. And it is also possible to shine a new and liberating light on the great problems of the present time.

But giving God priority - above all it is we who have need of God - is of great importance. Consequently, it will be necessary in Verona to concentrate above all on Christ, because in Christ, God is concrete, is present, shows himself and therefore, one must concentrate on the Church's priority mission of living in his presence and making this same presence as visible as possible to all.

On this basis you will rightly examine the various areas of daily life in which the witness of believers must activate the hope that comes from the Risen Christ: in practice, these concern the emotional life and the family, work and rest, sickness and the various forms of poverty, education, culture and social communications, civil and political responsibilities.

In fact, there is no dimension of man that is foreign to Christ. Your attention, dear Brother Bishops, also at this Assembly is addressed in particular to the young. I am glad to recall with you the experience of last August in Cologne, when young Italians, accompanied by so many of you and by your priests, fervently took part in large numbers in the [World Youth Day](#).

It is now a question of starting out on the journey that will lead to the celebration in 2008 in Sydney, making room for the enthusiasm and desire to participate of the young. Thus, they will be able to understand better and better that the Church is the large family in which, living Christ's friendship, one becomes truly free and friends with one another, overcoming the divisions and barriers that extinguish hope.

Lastly, I would like to share with you the concern that motivates you with regard to the good of Italy. As I have had the opportunity to point out in the Encyclical [Deus Caritas Est](#) (nn. 28-29), the Church is well aware that "fundamental to Christianity is the distinction between what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God" (cf. Mt 22: 21), in other words, the distinction between Church and State, that is, the autonomy of the temporal sphere, as the Second Vatican Council underlined in [Gaudium et Spes](#).

Not only does the Church recognize and respect this distinction and autonomy but she rejoices in it, as a great progress for humanity and a fundamental condition for her freedom itself and for the fulfilment of her universal mission of salvation among all people. At the same time and precisely by virtue of this same mission of salvation, the Church cannot fail to carry out her duty to purify reason through the proposal of her own social teaching, reasoned "on the basis of what is in conformity with the nature of every human being" and of reawakening moral and spiritual forces,

opening the will to the authentic requirements of good.

In turn, a healthy secularism of the State indisputably entails the government of temporal realities in accordance with their own norms, to which also belong those ethical elements that are rooted in the very essence of the human being and which, therefore, in the ultimate analysis, refer to the Creator.

In the present circumstances, recalling the value that certain fundamental ethical principles have not only for private but especially for public life rooted in the great Christian heritage of Europe and of Italy in particular, we do not, therefore, commit any violation of the State secularism, but rather contribute to guaranteeing and promoting the dignity of the person and the common good of society.

Dear Italian Bishops, we owe all our brothers and sisters in humanity a clear witness of these values: with it let us not impose on them useless burdens but help them to advance on the path of life and of authentic freedom. I assure you of my daily prayers for you, for your Churches and for the entire beloved Italian Nation, and I impart the Apostolic Blessing with great affection to each one of you, to your priests, to every Italian family and especially to those who are suffering most and feel most acutely the need of God's help.

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