



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO MEMBERS OF THE ITALIAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 59th GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

*Synod Hall
Thursday, 28 May 2009*

Dear Italian Brother Bishops,

I am pleased to meet you once again all together on the occasion of this important annual event for which you gather at your Assembly to share the anxieties and joys of your ministry in the dioceses of the beloved Italian nation. Your Assembly, in fact, visibly expresses and promotes that communion by which the Church lives and which is also put into practice in the harmony of your pastoral initiatives and action. I come in person to uphold with my presence that ecclesial communion which I have seen constantly growing and being reinforced. I thank in particular the Cardinal President who, on behalf of you all, has confirmed the fraternal adherence and cordial communion with the Magisterium and pastoral service of the Successor of Peter, thereby reaffirming the special unity that binds the Church in Italy to the Apostolic See. In recent months I have truly received a great many moving testimonies of this adherence. I cannot but offer you my heartfelt thanks! In this atmosphere of communion it is possible to nourish profitably with the word of God and the grace of the sacraments the Christian people, deeply rooted in the land, who feel a keen sense of faith and a true sense of belonging to the ecclesial community. This is all thanks to your pastoral guidance, your generous service to so many priests and deacons, religious and lay faithful who with assiduous dedication support the ecclesiastical fabric and the daily life of the numerous parishes scattered in every corner of the country. Let us not conceal from ourselves the difficulties they encounter in our time in leading their members to adhere fully to the Christian faith. Indeed, in this perspective various sources are calling for the renewal of their lay members through increased cooperation and missionary co-responsibility.

For these reasons, in your pastoral action you have appropriately desired to implement the

missionary commitment that has marked the Church's progress in Italy since the Council. You have done so by making the fundamental task of education the focus of your Assembly's reflection. As I have had the opportunity to say on several occasions, this is a constitutive and ongoing requirement in the Church's life, which today is tending to acquire a character of urgency and even emergency. In these days you have been able to listen, reflect and discuss the need to start an educational type of project that springs from a consistent and complete vision of man, which can only derive from the perfect image and fulfilment that we have in Jesus Christ. He is the Teacher at whose school we must rediscover the educational task as a most lofty vocation to which every member of the faithful is called in different ways. At a time when relativist and nihilistic concepts of life exert a strong attraction and the very legitimacy of education is called into question, the first contribution we can offer is that of witnessing to our faith in life and in the human being, in human reason and in the human capacity to love. This is not the fruit of an ingenuous optimism but comes to us from that "trustworthy hope" (*Spe Salvi*, n. 1) that is given to us in faith in the redemption brought by Jesus Christ. With reference to this well-founded act of love for man, an educational alliance can arise between all who have responsibility in this delicate context of social and ecclesial life.

Next Sunday, the conclusion of the three-year *Agora of Italian Youth* that has involved your Conference in a structured process for the animation of your youth ministry is an invitation to check the educational process under way. It also asks you to embark on new projects for a specific group, that of the new generations, extremely broad and significant for the educational responsibilities of our ecclesial communities and of society as a whole. Furthermore, the task of formation, extends to adults who are not excluded from a real responsibility for continuing education. No one is excluded from the duty of taking care of his or her own growth and that of others until we all attain to "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4: 13).

The difficulty of forming authentic Christians is intricate and merges with the complex task of helping men and women to grow more responsible and mature. Knowledge of truth and goodness and free adherence to them form the core of the educational project, which can give shape to a global growth process, duly prepared and accompanied. For this, in addition to an adequate project that points to the goal of education in the light of the approved model to be followed, authoritative educators to whom the new generations can look with trust are essential. In this Pauline Year, which we have lived by deepening our knowledge of the words and example of the great Apostle to the Gentiles, and which you have celebrated in various ways in your dioceses and, precisely yesterday, all together in the [Basilica of St Paul Outside-the-Walls](#), his invitation rings out, especially effectively: "Be imitators of me" (1 Cor 11: 1). These are courageous words. A true educator stakes himself first and is able to combine authority and exemplarity in the task of educating those entrusted to his care. We ourselves are aware of this, placed as we are as guides among the People of God, we to whom in turn the Apostle Peter addressed the invitation to tend God's flock by being "examples to the flock" (1 Pt 5: 3). These too are words on which to meditate.

The circumstance which, after the Year dedicated to the Apostle to the Gentiles, sees us prepared to celebrate a Year for Priests is therefore particularly fortunate. We are called, together with our priests, to rediscover both the grace and the duty of the priestly ministry. This ministry is a service to the Church and to the Christian People that demands a profound spirituality. In response to the divine vocation, this spirituality must be nourished by prayer and by an intense personal union with the Lord in order to serve him among the brethren through preaching, the sacraments, an orderly community life and assistance to the poor. Thus, throughout the priestly ministry the importance of the commitment to education stands out, in order to develop people who are free, truly free, and hence responsible, mature and aware Christians.

There is no doubt that the sense of solidarity profoundly rooted in Italian hearts draws vitality from the Christian spirit. Furthermore, it finds a way of expressing itself with particular intensity in certain dramatic circumstances in the country's life, the most recent of which was the devastating earthquake that hit some parts of the Abruzzo region. As your President mentioned earlier, during [my Visit](#) to that tragically damaged region I was not only able to take stock personally of the bereavement, suffering and disastrous effects of that terrible quake but also and I found this most striking besides the strength of mind of those people, the prompt wave of solidarity that was organized from every single part of Italy. Our communities responded with great generosity to the requests for aid from that region by supporting the initiatives promoted by the Bishops' Conference through *Caritas*. I would like to renew to the Bishops of Abruzzo and, through them, to the local communities, the assurance of my constant prayers and of my permanent affectionate closeness.

For months we have observed the effects of the heavy blow the financial and economic crisis has dealt, on a global scale and, in varying degrees, to all countries. Despite the measures implemented at various levels, the effects of the crisis on society are not failing to make themselves felt even acutely, especially by the more fragile social sectors of society and families. Thus I would like to express my appreciation and encouragement of the initiative of the solidarity fund called "*Prestito della speranza*" [loan of hope] which next Sunday will be an opportunity to participate unanimously in the national collection which constitutes the basis of the fund. This renewed request for generosity, which comes in addition to the many projects implemented by numerous dioceses, in recalling the gesture of the collection organized by the Apostle Paul for the Church in Jerusalem, is an eloquent testimony of the mutual sharing of burdens. In a difficult period, which is affecting above all those who have lost their jobs, sharing becomes a true act of worship that is born from the charity inspired by the Spirit of the Risen One in believers' hearts. It is an eloquent sign of the inner conversion generated by the Gospel and a touching manifestation of ecclesial communion.

An essential form of charity to which the Churches in Italy are deeply committed is also intellectual. A significant example of this is the endeavour to spread a mindset in favour of life in all its aspects and phases, with special attention to life scarred by conditions of great frailty and precariousness. This commitment is clearly witnessed by the manifesto: "Free to live. Loving life to

the end", which sees the Italian Catholic laity working together to ensure that knowledge of the full truth about man and the promotion of the authentic good of people and of society is not lacking in Italy. The "yese" and "nos" that are expressed in the manifesto outline a true educational action and are an expression of strong, practical love for every person. My thoughts, therefore, return to the central theme of your Assembly the urgent duty of education which requires that the faithful be rooted in the word of God and spiritual discernment, cultural and social planning, and the witness of unity and of free giving.

Dear Brothers, there are only a few days to go before the Solemnity of Pentecost in which we shall be celebrating the gift of the Spirit who breaks down barriers and opens people to an understanding of the whole truth. Let us invoke the Consoler who does not abandon those who turn to him and entrust to him the journey of the Church in Italy and of every person who lives in this most beloved country. May the Spirit of Life come down upon all of us and kindle in our hearts the flame of his infinite love.

I warmly bless you and your communities!

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