



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 35TH CONVENTION OF THE
RECTORS AND PASTORAL WORKERS OF SHRINES IN ITALY**

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

1. I am pleased to extend my cordial greeting to you on the occasion of the 35th Convention of the Rectors and Pastoral Workers of Shrines, promoted by the Italian National Shrines Liaison. I would particularly like to mention Archbishop Angelo Comastri, Prelate of Loreto, who follows and coordinates your activities with deep concern.

The dense network of shrines which are found in all nations and continents have an important purpose within that unique spiritual and historical organism which is the Church. On my apostolic journeys, I myself have often had the joy of going on pilgrimage to these sacred places, where God's presence is more intensely felt.

Because of my ministry, I have been especially able to visit them in Italy, and I have noted that they bear eloquent witness to the nation's religious history. You should be thanked, then, for preserving, enhancing and promoting this spiritual heritage in the best way possible.

2. With this Message and following my Predecessors' example, I would like first of all to recall the great value that shrines have for the People of God. While offering pilgrims and the faithful precious moments of meditation, reflection and necessary spiritual renewal, they represent a providential opportunity to encounter God and a strong reminder of the wellsprings of faith to the less committed, the troubled or the searching. Therefore, those who visit them should find a welcoming atmosphere and people who are ready to offer them appropriate spiritual assistance and systematic liturgical catechesis, so that the shrine's message does not stop at the emotional level, however important this may be, but becomes for everyone an experience of God, a fraternal encounter and an opportunity of to grow in faith.

3. With deep satisfaction we can see that in recent years the flow of pilgrims and tourists to holy places both great and small has increased, given the opportunities of transportation and communication now available. The evolution of society and the influence of a widespread consumerist mentality do not seem to have impeded this phenomenon. In fact, people have an ever greater need for silence, peace of mind and detachment from the frantic pace of daily life and the world of material concerns; they seek peace, harmony with themselves and nature, and, at a deeper level, with God, the ultimate foundation of life. The risk involved with trends of this sort, on which cultural and social factors have an impact, is sometimes one of superficiality. But this in no way detracts from the at least potential positiveness of the phenomenon, which is one aspect of the great challenge of evangelization in contemporary society.

4. In today's socio-religious context, the ever increasing role of shrines is to be essential places where people go to receive grace, even before they receive favours. The more widespread the secular culture, the more these places acquire a fundamental evangelizing value, in the original sense of a powerful call to conversion (cf. *Letter for the Seventh Centenary of the Shrine of Loreto*, 15 August 1993, n. 7; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 22 September 1993, p. 7).

Far from the confusion of daily concerns, man rediscovers the possibility of thinking, of reflecting, of allowing those inner questions to surface which, although they can be disturbing, are nonetheless beneficial for his soul. On this favourable soil, the shrine is called to scatter the good seed of God's Word, the only seed from which the knowledge of truth and the renewal of life can sprout. In brief, everything at the shrine should strive in such a way that the mutual seeking of God and man can become an encounter.

5. Prompted by this spiritual and social context, the beloved directors and workers at Italian shrines intend to increase their apostolic efforts and to support them by sharing experiences and coordinating pastoral objectives and initiatives. This in itself is good and beneficial, not only from an organizational standpoint, but first and foremost because it encourages a style of communion, the hallmark of the Church, icon of the Trinity.

In this way, dear brothers and sisters, you support one another so that shrines can enhance the proclamation of the Word, as well as the liturgical celebrations, spiritual retreats, conferences on religious themes and reflection on faith. I am delighted with the special attention you give to the sacrament of Reconciliation by encouraging the preparation of ministers: this is very appropriate, especially for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. May pilgrims, in this "year of the Lord's favour", abundantly draw from shrines the regenerating strength of divine mercy!

I accompany this wish with my prayer, entrusting it to the special assistance of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Shrine of the New Covenant, while I cordially impart a special Apostolic Blessing to all of you taking part in the convention and to all who are responsible for shrines and to their co-workers.

From the Vatican, 23 November 1999.

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