



# The Holy See

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## **ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II**

### **TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF ITALIAN BISHOPS** *Friday, 18 May 1979 Beloved and revered*

*Confrères of the Italian Episcopate!* I deeply desired to meet you again at the end of this General Assembly, not only for the pleasure that renewed contact or—more exactly—communion certainly gives me and you, but also and above all to express to you my sincere appreciation for the commitment each of you has shown in these laborious days. I have just returned from the visit to Monte Cassino, and also this circumstance, recalling fundamental memories that concern both the history of Christianity and Italic civilization, makes me feel more deeply the spiritual tie that binds me to you. And also I want to thank you for having patiently waited for me, aware as I am that not a few of you should have returned to your respective sees for urgent requirements of your ministry.<sup>1</sup> On my side, I have been careful to follow your work—as far as was possible. I noted, with great satisfaction, its seriousness and clarity in the rightful and pre-eminent consideration you dedicated to the problem-theme of "Seminaries and Priestly Vocations", I have already spoken of this subject during the concelebration in the Sistine Chapel, but its intrinsic importance and the special contributions made by the, Rapporteurs prompt me to add some further considerations in this connection. There is no doubt that the statistical data that have been presented, should offer the necessary reference point for an exact evaluation of the problem; but, as Pastors animated by living faith and prudent realism, we must always keep in mind that the most effective remedy, the adequate solution, lies in *an incessant, courageous, and fervent vocational initiative*. It is not permissible to think of the problem in numerical and bureaucratic terms or in the key of mere recruiting: vocation is and remains an elect gift from God, which, far from dispensing from human collaboration, rather presupposes it and stimulates it. Nor is it permissible to think of its solution by eliminating or weakening those typical characteristics of the priesthood which represent inseparably its nobility and its difficulty: it is not a question of lowering the line so that the obstacle can be cleared! It is necessary to respond to the height of the ideal with generosity of dedication and capacity of sacrifice. Brothers, you understand that a coordinated pastoral effort is necessary for that reawakening of vocations which is desired not only by us gathered here but by the whole People of God, to whose evangelization we are assigned with the indispensable help of the priests. It is to this effort that you have dedicated observations and resolutions in the course of this Assembly. I make them my own, offering you my solidarity and most open collaboration.<sup>2</sup> I listened to the concluding *Communiqué*, drawn up at the end of your work. I am happy to express my convinced adherence to the indications contained in it. The intention that inspired you was to express collegially, in the riches of the contributions offered by you in these days, a unified operational line. In this way too—I think—the community awareness of the whole Episcopate is strengthened and increased, as likewise its capacity of indicating with due deliberation a clear position which, while considering the different circumstances, is responsibly binding on each of the members of the Conference. In such an important hour for the life of the nation, animated by a high sense of duty, you have opportunely pressed for *the dignity and consistency of sound Christian conscience*. And how could I fail to emphasize the importance and validity of such an approach, which—amid

changing events or in the diversity of socio-cultural circumstances—assumes the value of a principle? Yours is an appeal which, objectively, deserves to be shared, and I hope it will be accepted and followed.<sup>3</sup> The fullness of the discussions, the seriousness of the subjects dealt with and capacity in deciding, which you have also shown these days, are an eloquent sign of your affection for the people that is entrusted to you; for this Italian people, to whom I feel driven—almost by a natural impulse—to address a due word of gratitude and praise. Yes, I wish to express public and well-deserved praise to the good and generous people, tenacious and laborious, who add to the recognized virtues of ancient times the dynamism and brilliant achievements of the modern age. These were my thoughts this morning during the journey that took me to the venerated Tomb of St Benedict, patron saint and a luminous example for the whole of Europe. Also when visiting the nearby cemetery where lie—beside those of so many other victims—the remains of the sons of my Poland who shed their blood in this land, I was thinking of the history of Italy which, at critical moments, has always called upon its innermost and admirable energies, finding in them the secret and the courage for recovery. And I was thinking, together with the Saint of Norcia, of Francis of Assisi and Catherine of Siena, a triad which draws the admiring eyes of the world, and not only the Christian world. And I was thinking of the multiform and symbolical relationship that throughout the centuries has marked the history of the Church and of Italy, so rich in admired testimonies of Christian faith. Beloved Brothers, this expression of praise bursts spontaneously from my heart, and I beg you to convey it to your priests and to your faithful when you return to your sees.<sup>4</sup> Allow me, finally, revered and dear Brothers, to touch now upon another matter, which is of fundamental importance for the very activity of your Conference. a) Already some time ago, Cardinal Antonio Poma, who has filled the office of President of the Italian Episcopal Conference for ten years now, asked for his resignation from this post to be accepted. He had presented this request already to Pope Paul VI and then to Pope John Paul I; afterwards he turned to me, too, expressing the same desire. I asked him to remain in office for some time longer. We all know how important the presidency of the Cardinal Archbishop of Bologna was for the Episcopal Community of Italy during the years that witnessed the faithful and generous application of the norms issued by the Apostolic See in implementation of the provisions of the [Second Vatican Ecumenical Council](#). I wish to say here before you all that Cardinal Poma has always been very close to me personally since the times of the Council, during which I was able to admire his high qualifications, his zeal, his prudence and his goodness. In this decade of his presidency there have also taken shape more and more clearly the structures, the sphere of competence, and the tasks of the Italian Episcopal Conference. It has assumed an increasingly organic, incisive and essential dimension, taking the opportune initiatives to increase the spiritual life of the country, in a view at once objective and hopeful, critical and stimulating, of the most serious problems on the plane of the overall apostolate. This is confirmed, among other things, by the interest that its decisions and its documents arouse in public opinion. Cardinal Poma's merits, though shrouded by his modesty, are certainly very great in the growing role taken by the C.E.I., and I am happy to acknowledge it today, publicly and with deep gratitude. b) As a result of this resignation, I found myself up against a problem that we all consider very important. The Statute of the C.E.I. lays down in article 25: "In consideration of the particular ties of the Italian Episcopate with the Pope, Bishop of Rome, the nomination of the President of the Conference is reserved for the Sovereign Pontiff." Realizing that the aforesaid principle set a very difficult task on the Pope, who does not come from the circle of the Italian Episcopate, and, at the same time, wishing to act in a way that was not contrary to this norm, I considered it opportune—in view of the necessity of making provision for the nomination of the new President—to have recourse to the Presidents of the Regional Conferences, asking them to express their opinions to ensure Cardinal Poma's succession. At the conclusion of these contacts, I decided to call upon Archbishop Anastasio Alberto Ballestrero of Turin, proposing to him to accept the office of President of the C.E.I., since he had been indicated by the majority of the Prelates consulted. Since Archbishop Ballestrero has accepted the nomination, I wish now to communicate to all of

you present here that from today he is, for the period of three years—as laid down by the Statute—the President of that C.E.I. I would like to express to him, therefore, my hearty congratulations and my brotherly wishes, certain that I am interpreting the feelings of all. In the spirit of the Gospel word, which I wished to recall already during the recent concelebration, I renew to you a pressing invitation to trust and courage, in the certainty of the indefectible assistance of God, in whose name I willingly bless you, together with your faithful. © Copyright 1979 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

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