



The Holy See

***INCONTRO DI GIOVANNI PAOLO II
CON S. E. IL SIGNOR FRANCESCO COSSIGA,
PRESIDENTE DELLA REPUBBLICA ITALIANA****

Venerdì, 4 ottobre 1985

1. I am very grateful to you for the visit with which you honour me today. It takes place in the context of the tradition of good relations between the State and the Church in Italy which has been confirmed by the recent revision of the Lateran Pacts. Mr. President, you have wished to reserve for me your first official visit outside the confines of the Italian State: it is a kindness that I have greatly appreciated and for which I thank you. You are here today in the name of the people of Italy, whose legitimate representatives last June appointed you to the highest office of the State by a large majority. In congratulating you, on this occasion as well, for the high dignity conferred upon you I wish, through you, to extend special greetings and best wishes to all the Italian citizens whom you worthily represent. My seven-year residence in Rome and the pastoral journeys I have been able to make to the various regions of Italy – as you know, within a few days I intend to visit the illustrious island that is your birthplace – have given me the opportunity to know with ever greater depth and to love with growing intensity, this land which is particularly beloved by God.

I therefore express, with deep affection, the hope that Italy may always maintain a clear awareness of the incomparable human and Christian patrimony that has made her name admired among the peoples of the world. May she be able to see in the civil and religious traditions from which her history is woven an ever fresh source of new energies for further advances along the path of civilization and peace.

2. In formulating this wish, my thoughts spontaneously turn to the luminous figure of that son of Italy whom the calendar today recalls: St Francis of Assisi! These thoughts become best wishes for you, Mr. President, who bear this saint's name, and then they broaden out, embracing all Italians. It would be difficult to find another figure who so richly and harmoniously embodies the characteristics of the Italian genius.

At a time when the establishment of independent city states was arousing ferments of social, economic and political renewal which shook the old feudal world to its very foundations, Francis was able to rise up above the warring factions, preaching the Gospel of peace and love in full fidelity to the Church of which he felt himself to be a son, and in total adherence to the people of whom he knew himself to be a part.

3. I wish to refer to this fascinating figure of Assisi, Mr. President, because I see in him the sure interpreter and the valid champion of those spiritual values that constitute the true soul and the lasting richness of the Italian people.

Certainly there has been a notable change in the context of social relations and, in particular, of those between religious and civil aspirations, between Church and State, from the time of St Francis. Today one rightly underlines the autonomy of the State, in which all citizens should be able fully to recognize themselves as represented, regardless of their different religious and ideological convictions. Today, with equal force and renewed awareness the liberty of the Church is affirmed, that liberty which the Second Vatican Council characterizes as «the fundamental principle governing relations between the Church and public authorities and the whole civil order»(Dignitatis Humanae, 13).

However today no less than yesterday, the political community and the Church, even though «autonomous and independent of each other in their own fields» must both feel themselves to be «devoted to the personal vocation of man, though under different titles (Gaudium et Spes, 76). On the Church's part, it is fully convinced that «by preaching the truths of the Gospel and clarifying all sectors of human activity through its teaching and the witness of its members, the Church respects and encourages the political freedom and responsibility of the citizens» (ibid.).

If, then, the Church lays claim to her own liberty, it is not in failure to recognize the legitimate competencies of civil authority, which indeed she duly recognizes and respects. In affirming her own liberty the Church does not intend to seek privileges, but only to be able to serve freely the good of the nation, as I emphasized on the occasion of the Loreto Conference recalling the contribution that the Church, can and must make, in the country of Italy, to the building up of the «community of mankind», fulfilling an unrenounceable aspect of her mission» (in: L'Osservatore Romano, 12 April 1985, p. 5). The Church's only concern is to safeguard the possibility of referring, in full autonomy from every earthly interest, to Christ and to man: these in fact, are the two «poles» between which all of her action in the world and throughout history move.

But precisely because of this constant reference to man in his concrete existence the Church knows that her path cannot help but cross those of other human interests, especially that of the State. It is thus in view of man and of the service to be rendered to his full well-being that the Church offers and requests collaboration: with just respect, obviously, for reciprocal independence and the diversity of roles.

4. One field in which such collaboration seems to present particularly promising prospects is that of voluntary work. For the Christian, this opening up of oneself to those in need, freely giving of one's time and energies, has very clear and eloquent gospel motivations. The example of Christ, who came «not to be served but to serve» (Mt 10:28), has spoken to the hearts of believers of every age, and has obtained such responses from them as to arouse the admiration even of those who did not share their faith. The witness of Francis of Assisi, turning our thoughts once again to him, is situated precisely along this line of service «voluntarily» rendered to one's brothers and sisters, beyond any prospect of human recompense.

The present conditions of social life, the new forms of poverty, the emerging needs in vast sectors of the population which in the past were satisfied in other ways; these factors seem to make this form of contribution on the part of citizens particularly useful for the structures of the State as well. It thus seems very important that the public administration take note of the willingness shown at the individual and group level, that it reinforce the effort, that it promote its coordination with the initiatives already underway, in order to foster its harmonious convergence where the needs are most urgent. This supposes an effective respect for the autonomous creativity of the forces involved, because only in freedom can the values characteristic of voluntary work be cultivated.

I am deeply convinced, Mr. President, that the rich blossoming of initiatives promoted by volunteer efforts in Italy is one of the most encouraging signs for the future of the Church and of the nation. On my part, I am happy to guarantee the full collaboration of the forces animated by Christian leaven with whatever the civil structures opportunely provide for, especially in the sector of social services. It is to be hoped that the growing actualization of this style of Christian and civic presence in the vast social field will work towards a growing maturation in public opinion of a sense of sharing and of solidarity regarding the many problems that cannot be delegated, because they pertain to everyone. In this way voluntary work, as a gratuitous experience in welcoming others and giving of oneself, presents itself as a stimulus for change, often anticipating - through love - in the present life of outcasts and the weak that of which justice will assure them only in the still unspecified future.

5. I have mentioned, Mr. President, one specific field of collaboration between the Church and the State. Time does not permit me to focus attention on other sectors in which collaboration shows itself to be no less useful and urgent. Many of these - though certainly not all - are for that matter indicated, with worthwhile directives towards action, in the Agreement of 18 February 1984, which modifies the Lateran Concordat and attributes a significant role to the Italian Episcopal Conference. May it suffice to point out here that today's meeting itself constitutes an important manifestation of the desire which has guided, and continues to guide, the authorities of the State and of the Church in constantly seeking suitable forms of cooperation in everything concerned with human promotion and the good of the country. My hope - and I am certain that in this I interpret your own wishes as well - is that the coming years bring reassuring confirmations of this cooperation. The Italian people will draw only sure advantages from it. In fidelity to the rich spiritual

patrimony that distinguishes Italy this people will in fact find the inspiration and direction needed to resolve, in unity and harmony, the human problems of the present, and to travel confidently along the path of its future, which I ask God to make prosperous and serene.

This is my express hope for all the citizens of this beloved nation, and especially for you, Mr. President, who amidst unanimous praise have initiated your mission in the service of the dear Italian people.

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