



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF JOH PAUL II
TO THE FOURTH CONFERENCE
OF THE CHURCHES IN SICILY**

To my Venerable Brother Cardinal Salvatore De Giorgio
Archbishop of Palermo President of the Sicilian Episcopal Conference

1. With great joy I spiritually join you, and the Cardinals, Bishops, priests, men and women religious, and the laity who are taking part in Acireale in the Fourth Conference of the Churches in Sicily. May each and every one of you receive my fraternal embrace and most cordial greeting: "May the grace and peace of God our Father and of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all".

This important meeting, which has as its motto "*Leaven in History for the Kingdom*" and as its theme "*The Laity for the Mission of the Church in Sicily in the Third Millennium*", is being held just a few months after the conclusion of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. It forms one of the ripe fruits of the Jubilee, because the preparation and celebration of the Jubilee event were like a providential direct and immediate preparation for it. It also marks the fourth stage of the community journey of the Churches of Sicily; a spiritual and pastoral journey that began with the Second Vatican Council, from which it drew inspiration, motivations and objectives to be projected more consciously and deliberately towards the new millennium.

Actually, since the first Conference held in 1985, with its motto "*A Presence to Serve*" and in its theme "*The Churches of Sicily 20 Years after the Second Vatican Council*", the Sicilian Dioceses have begun a common ecclesial journey, that broadened, in the subsequent two Conferences, their missionary perspective. I would also like to mention here the three Conferences of the years 1982, 1988, 1998, run by priests for priests, which led to the constitution of the Mother of the Good Shepherd Regional Centre for the permanent formation of priests and deacons, with its headquarters in Palermo.

2. These numerous regional meetings, like those of the young people that were held in 1991, in

1998 and last October after the World Youth Day, testify to the pastoral vivacity and desire of the Churches of Sicily to proceed together. During the pastoral visits that I have been able to make to almost all of your Dioceses, dear brothers and sisters of Sicily, I was repeatedly able to demonstrate my attention to the problems and hopes of your land. I take this occasion to thank you for the fidelity with which you have undertaken to follow the directives of the Magisterium in the many pastoral initiatives that you have promoted, at local and regional levels, during these years.

And this Fourth Conference, which pauses to reflect on the role of the laity in the mission of the Church, also wishes to manifest its fidelity to the Magisterium of the Apostolic See. The Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente*, of 10 November 1994, has accompanied its preparation in the past years. The post-Jubilee Letter *Novo millennio ineunte*, of 6 January of this year, now directs its celebration under the sign of the invitation of Christ: "*Duc in altum!*", "Put out into the deep!".

"*Duc in altum!*", I repeat today to the Sicilian Dioceses, in their efforts to reflect on how best to achieve the missionary mandate of Christ. "Put out into the deep," dear brothers and sisters, in the awareness that the God of hope asks you to be the heralds of the Gospel in our time. But to fulfil this mission you must set out anew from Christ and treasure the rich ecclesial experience that has marked the last decades of the past century, especially since the Second Vatican Council. This is the task that your Conference wishes to highlight, emphasizing the vocation of the "*laity for the mission of the Church in Sicily in the third millennium*".

On the occasion of the Jubilee of the apostolate of the laity I wished to give the whole Church symbolically the Conciliar documents, recalling that, in spite of the passage of time, these texts have lost none of their value and timeliness. It is therefore most necessary that they be received and assimilated as important and normative texts of the Magisterium, to be read within the Tradition of the Church, which they confirm and apply to present circumstances. I especially encourage the laity to return to the Council, which is "the great grace bestowed on the Church in the 20th century".

May they be schooled in the Council, in the conviction that "there we can find a sure compass by which to take our bearings in the century now beginning" (*Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 57). I am pleased to learn that the work of the congress intends to offer the opportunity especially to study the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium* and the Decree *Apostolicam actuositatem*, while also adding a timely rereading of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*.

3. The Conference's primary objective is a deep renewal of ecclesial life and pastoral action in Sicily. May what I said at the Conference of the Italian Churches, which took place in Palermo in 1995, guide you: "Our time ... is not the time of the simple preservation of what exists, but of mission". I repeated these observations in the Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte*, detailing the primary condition for such a renewal: "All pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to

holiness" (n. 30), "this high standard of ordinary Christian living" (n. 31).

The perspective of holiness is a perspective that I am sure the Churches of Sicily share with special fervour, because from the beginnings of Christianity to the 20th century they have generated wonderful figures of martyrs and saints - priests, religious and laity, men and women - who have known how to receive the "gift" of the call to a life of grace in order to translate it into a "commitment" in the ordinary conditions of daily living. You will surely remember them for the edification and example of all.

It is in the vocation to holiness, understood as the perfection of charity, that the dignity of the lay faithful is revealed in all its fullness: "Holiness is the greatest testimony of the dignity conferred on a disciple of Christ" (*Christifideles laici*, n. 16). The lay believer, disciple of Christ, becomes holy "in the world" and "for the world"; he takes part in temporal realities, in earthly activities, in ordinary professional and social life so that he can order them according to God, thus becoming in history and in time leaven for the kingdom and for eternity.

4. "*Leaven in history for the kingdom*". This is the motto of the Conference, which translates and interprets "*a presence to serve*". This is the specific mission of lay believers in a social context, marked occasionally by a secularism that tends to separate believers from Christ and from the Gospel, jeopardizing human coexistence, which becomes increasingly fragile and uncertain.

The risk that I indicated in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici* is also true for Sicily: "Christian faith as well, while maintaining some of the externals of its tradition and rituals, tends to be separated from those moments of human existence, which have the most significance, such as birth, suffering and death. In such cases, the questions and formidable enigmas posed by these situations, if remaining without responses, expose contemporary people to an inconsolable delusion or to the temptation of eliminating the truly humanizing dimension of life implicit in these problems" (n. 34). For this reason "only a re-evangelization can assure the growth of a clear and deep faith, and serve to make these traditions a force for authentic freedom" (ibid.). And it is true that in Sicily too "a mending of the Christian fabric of society is urgently needed.... But for this to come about what is needed is first *to remake the Christian fabric of the ecclesial community itself*" (ibid.).

5. This is the double task, of great pastoral importance, that awaits the laity in the Church today. There will be mature Christian communities, if there are mature lay persons in them, able to make their mark effectively as evangelical leaven in society, working in it with a renewed and courageous missionary drive. "All the laity ... have the exalted duty of working for the ever greater spread of the divine plan of salvation to all men, of every epoch and all over the earth" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 33).

How can we not feel the relevancy and urgency of this warning of the Council? May the Gospel

impress a more solid hope on our beloved Sicily, which welcomed the Gospel from the first century of Christianity and which today has even more need of Christ to free itself from the evils that afflict it. There are evils that are unceasingly criticized by the Bishops of the local Churches, beginning with the worst one of the Mafia, which I myself have repeatedly felt the need to stigmatize. Only by defeating these negative forces will it be possible to implement fully the great potentials for good and the many human values that characterize the industrious people of Sicily.

6. The lay faithful must not limit their actions to remaining within the Christian community, so to speak, inside the walls of the "temple". After having drawn the light of the Word and the strength of the Sacraments, they must announce and testify Christ, the only Redeemer of man, in the society to which they belong. Like "salt" and "light" they are called to operate prophetically in the family and in the school, in the sphere of culture and social communications, in the economy and in the world of work, in politics and in art, in the field of health and where there is sickness and suffering, in sport and tourism, beside the marginalized and the many immigrants. Nor should their courageous initiative be missing in the places where the destinies of the life and dignity of the person, of the family and of society itself, are decided.

Actually, if every member of the Church shares in her secular dimension, the laity do so in their "own manner of realization and function" which, according to the Council is "properly and particularly" theirs. This manner is designated with the expression "secular character", as "the place in which they receive their call from God" and therefore as a privileged place of their mission, in the logic of the Incarnation and "in light of the act of God the creator and redeemer" (*Christifideles laici*, n. 15).

7. The laity have the task of bringing the Gospel and the original and always timely contribution of the social doctrine of the Church to all areas of human existence. They must always be careful not to give in to the temptation of reducing Christian communities to being social agencies, and, at the same time, to reject decisively the no less insidious temptation to practise a too introspective spirituality. This would mix badly with the demands of charity as well as with the logic of the Incarnation and, finally, even with the eschatological tension of Christianity. If, in fact, the eschatological tension makes us conscious of the action of Providence in history, it does not free us in any way from the duty to work actively in the world in order to establish in it every authentically human value. In this regard the teaching of the Second Vatican Council remains as relevant as ever: "There is no question ... of the Christian message inhibiting men from building up the world or making them disinterested in the good of their fellows: on the contrary it is an incentive to do these very things" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 34).

8. This will be possible if "the lay faithful will know how to overcome in themselves the separation of the Gospel from life, to take up again in their daily activities in family, work and society, an integrated approach to life that is fully brought about by the inspiration and strength of the Gospel" (*Christifideles laici*, n. 34). A conviction about the need for a permanent and integral formation of

the different aspects of the human person is necessary for this, to help them to live as "witnesses to Christ in all circumstances and at the very heart of the community of mankind", since "one of the gravest errors of our time is the dichotomy between the faith which many profess and the practice of their daily lives" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 43).

This requires that they act with the strongest sense of ecclesial communion, constantly nourished by the "spirituality of communion", which must be at the base of every pastoral programme, if we want to be "faithful to God's plan and respond to the world's deepest yearnings" (*Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 43).

It is the Church in her mystery of communion that is the subject of pastoral care and mission, and all - clergy, men and women religious and laity - are called to acknowledge and respect this community subjectivity. I wrote in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici* that "the lay faithful together with the clergy and women and men religious, make up the one People of God and the Body of Christ" (n. 28), so that they must constantly cultivate the purpose of the Diocese, in which the parish is like a cell, always ready at the invitation of their Bishop to join their forces to the initiatives of the Diocese.

This is true especially for the numerous lay gatherings, associations, groups, communities, movements that in Sicily, thanks to the Lord, are particularly active. It is well to remember that they are never an end in themselves. The aim that constantly animates them can only be "the responsible participation of all of them in the Church's mission of carrying forth the Gospel of Christ, the source of hope for humanity and the renewal of society" (*Christifideles laici*, n. 29).

9. In addition to its being an example and stimulus for a more serene and harmonious human co-existence, an ever stronger communion within the individual communities and among the various Dioceses of Sicily also represents an opportune condition for actively promoting the journey towards the full unity of all believers in Christ. The full and visible communion of Christians, especially through the ecumenism of holiness, prayer and love in truth, is the task of every ecclesial community, with which the prayer and yearning of our only Saviour unceasingly resounds: "*Ut unum sint*". Every possible effort must be made to hasten the complete achievement of the unity of believers in Christ. In this sense great significance must be attached to the prayer meeting towards the end of the Conference with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew I, to whom I send my respectful greeting and an embrace of peace in Jesus Christ, our common Teacher and Lord.

Next to the ecumenical effort, how can we forget the great challenge of interreligious and intercultural dialogue? It is a commitment that greatly involves your region, at the heart of the Mediterranean, which over the centuries has become a crossroads of different peoples, cultures, civilizations and religions. Without falling into religious indifferentism, may you take care, dear brothers and sisters, to offer the witness of hope that must live in the heart of every believer, in the

conviction that the joyous announcement of the Gospel, the message of salvation destined for all peoples and cultures, does not constitute an offence to the identity of our neighbour.

I know in this regard that you have begun some opportune initiatives: continue with courage and care, always sustained by the strong support of Christ and constant recourse to prayer.

10. Proceed with hope! This is the invitation that I affectionately address to you, dear brothers and sisters. Receive, venerable Churches in Sicily, this fraternal exhortation of mine. At the beginning of this new millennium, all of us believers must quicken our pace. May Mary, the Mother of Hope, whom you Sicilians venerate and invoke as your "Hodegetria", guide you and accompany you. I entrust the projects, proposals and progress of the ecclesial Conference and its hoped-for apostolic and missionary fruits to the Blessed Virgin and to Joseph her Spouse, on this day solemnly dedicated to him.

In invoking the protection of the numerous saints of your Dioceses on your work, I willingly impart to you, Your Eminence, and to all the participants in the Conference, the Apostolic Blessing, pledge of abundant heavenly favours.

From the Vatican, 19 March 2001.