



# The Holy See

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## **ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE ITALIAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCE**

*Thursday 17 May 2001*

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,*

1. "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (I Cor 1,3). It is special for me to greet you with these words of the Apostle Paul. I greet and thank Cardinal Camillo Ruini, your President, for his address to me and in particular for the birthday wishes, together with the other Italian Cardinals, the Vice-Presidents and the new General Secretary.

On this happy occasion of your general Assembly, I wish to express to you, and through you to the entire Italian Ecclesial Community, my sincere gratitude for the *exceptional contribution you made to the successful outcome of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000*, which was an extraordinary season of grace for the whole Church. I especially intend to thank you for the generous efforts for the 15th World Youth Day: more than two million young people, of whom a large number were Italian, came to Rome in those unforgettable days, a testimony of how lively the faith is and of how deeply ecclesial belonging is felt among the new generations. The young people from other nations, they too arriving in huge numbers, experienced the capacity of the Italian Dioceses for hospitality nourished by love.

2. The central themes of your Assembly are the *pastoral directives* which you plan to offer the Church in Italy *for the decade just begun*. You have very opportunely linked these directives closely and organically to the Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio ineunte*, which I signed at the end of the Holy Year. In it I indicated the fundamental and essential points of reference for the life and pastoral ministry of the Church, impelling the faithful to fix their gaze on the face of Christ. From this contemplation it is possible to draw a renewed enthusiasm in following the Teacher and the inspiring energy for that far-reaching work of evangelization and inculturation of the faith,

necessary and urgent in a world marked by radical challenges and profound changes.

Brothers in the Episcopate, I thank God with you for the spiritual and pastoral dynamism that characterizes the Church in Italy, for the witness of fidelity and apostolic zeal offered by priests, who are so close to the individuals and families entrusted to their pastoral care, for the generosity with which many men and women religious live their specific vocation in contemplation, in evangelization, in education, in service to the sick and the marginalized. And how can we forget those Christian lay people, often gathered in associations and movements, who are developing a growing awareness of their baptismal vocation, taking on their own share of responsibility for the edification of the Church? With constant effort they strive to give life to authentic Christian families and to offer a convincing witness at work and pursuing studies, in social, economic and political activities.

However, the tendency to live "as if God did not exist" is widespread also in Italy, and is often emphasized and disseminated by the media, with serious risks for personal and collective moral formation. It is part of the Pastor's mission to teach right doctrine clearly in matters of faith and morals and to sustain and encourage all those initiatives which can be held out as a valid alternative to these tendencies. You know, Brothers in the Episcopate, that the Pope is at your side in the witness you bear to the truth and to the love of Christ. He is at your side in your efforts to foster and spread a Christian-inspired culture and lifestyle, also through the mass media.

3. The Pope shares with you *an affectionate concern for the common good of this beloved nation* that, after having passed through a decade of strong contrasts and changes, needs stability and concord to be able to express its great potential in the best way.

A crucial factor for the present and future destiny of Italy is without a doubt *the family*: on it, then, your attention is rightly fixed, as is also apparent from the important National Meeting of Families which you have scheduled for 20-21 October. If God so wills, I shall be delighted to participate in it. It is necessary to expand the pastoral care of families, not limiting it to the period of marriage preparation or the care of some specific group. It is indispensable that families themselves play the lead more and more in evangelization and social life, so that their genuine features are preserved and their role adequately recognized. I therefore renew the request for the protection of family rights based on matrimony, without confusing them with other forms of cohabitation. I sincerely hope that a coherent policy for families will be realized, which can sustain them in their essential duties, starting from procreation and the education of children.

The commitment to the family is inseparable from the commitment *to protecting human life*, from conception to its natural end. Today, with the development of biotechnology, the frontiers are widening, which requires our watchful presence and courageous proposals for the truth about man. Brothers in the Episcopate, the accusations made to us today of defending positions already outdated are destined, sooner or later, to give way to the recognition that the Church has known

how to look ahead and discern, in the light of Christ's Gospel, what is indispensable to true human progress.

4. *In turn, the education of the new generations* is our fundamental pastoral concern. Our parishes, meeting halls and associations render a valuable service in this respect, which should be supported and increased. Moreover, the task of schools is crucial. May the Church offer the most convinced collaboration, also through praiseworthy religion teachers, for the improvement of the entire Italian scholastic system. May she renew a strong appeal so that *effective scholastic parity* will at last be achieved, overcoming old concepts of State control in order to go forward in the light of the principle of subsidiarity and of appreciation, also in the scholastic context, of the multiple resources of civil society.

Then it is impossible to build the common good without an outlook of *concrete solidarity*, primarily expressed in developing new job possibilities, especially in those geographical areas, mostly in the South, that are still heavily afflicted by the evil of unemployment. Faced with ever more acute situations of poverty, which involve many families who were previously able to lead a normal life, our ecclesial communities are called to be directly involved, while pressing for more diligent and concrete attention from public institutions. This applies in particular to that difficult but dutiful work of *welcoming immigrants*, for which many outstanding testimonies are offered by Christian volunteer organizations.

5. Brothers in the Episcopate, while the *construction of the "common house" of European peoples* continues, even among various difficulties, I ask you and your Churches to be present in this undertaking of historic importance, with those riches of faith and culture that are proper to the Italian people. Thus, as is written in the Declaration that I published jointly with the Orthodox Archbishop of Athens and All Greece, "the Christian roots of Europe and its Christian soul may be preserved inviolate", without giving in to the tendency "to transform certain European countries into secular states without any reference to religion". In effect, this is a "retraction and a denial of their spiritual legacy".

I thank you, moreover, for your constant generosity *to the poorest countries* and to those where the Church has suffered persistent persecution. In particular, I deeply appreciated the initiative you took to reduce the foreign debt of some nations, thus favouring enlightened decisions on the part of the Italian State.

Brothers, I assure you of my daily prayer for you and for the communities entrusted to your pastoral service. Through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, Star of Evangelization, may they be strengthened in faith and grow in communion and in the courage of the mission. As a sign of my affection, that the Lord may grant you these gifts, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you and to all the Italian people.

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