



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE 53RD GENERAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE ITALIAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCE**

Thursday, 20 May 2004

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. "Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal 1: 3). With the Apostle Paul's words, I offer my affectionate greeting to each one of you and assure you of my closeness in prayer, so that the Lord may enlighten and sustain your daily work as Pastors at the service of the Church and of the beloved Italian Nation.

I greet in particular your President, Cardinal Camillo Ruini, and thank him for his words on behalf of all. I also greet the other Cardinals, the Vice-Presidents of your Conference and the Secretary General.

2. At this General Assembly of yours you have continued your reflection on the parish, to which you dedicated your Assembly last November in Assisi, with a view to reaching shared decisions on the necessary renewal in the perspective of the new evangelization of this fundamental ecclesial organism. Parishes, especially in Italy, guarantee the constant and caring closeness of the Church to the whole population for whose spiritual needs they provide; moreover, they often look after many other needs as well, to offer to each person the possibility of a journey of faith that takes them more deeply into the life of the Church and enables them to share in her apostolic mission.

In this regard, dear Brother Bishops, I know and share profoundly in your concern for vocations to the priesthood and the consecrated life. I would also like to extend a warm invitation on your behalf to young Italians to consider calmly and attentively the call the Lord may address to them and possibly to accept it, not with fear but with joy: a vocation is an extraordinary gift which opens up new horizons of life for the person called, and for many of his brothers and sisters.

I likewise invite the families of those with a calling, today all too often worried about the future of their children, to be open and trusting. I tell them: do not stop at short-term considerations. Know that the Lord does not let himself be outdone in generosity and that his every call is also a great blessing for the family of the person who is called.

3. Social communications has been another major topic of discussion at your Assembly, together with the presentation and examination of the Directory entitled: "*Communication and Mission*".

We are well aware of the penetrating influence that the media exercise today on mindsets and behaviour, personal and collective, proposing a vision of life that unfortunately often tends to corrode basic ethical values, especially those that concern the family.

The media, however, also lend themselves to being used for and with very different purposes and results, making an important contribution to the affirmation of positive models of life and also to the spread of the Gospel.

Therefore, the Pope is beside you, dear Italian Bishops, in the work you have been carrying out for many years, promoting and supporting the Catholic daily newspaper and the diocesan weeklies, and more recently you have ensured that there is a qualified Christian presence in the milieu of the radio and television. I warmly hope that all Italian Catholics may understand and agree about the importance of this commitment and thereby help to make the cultural atmosphere in which we all live more positive and more tranquil.

4. Terrorism, acts of war, violations of human rights that make the international situation so difficult and dangerous weigh heavily on our hearts, dear Brother Bishops. I continue to join in your prayers, especially for those who are still hostages in Iraq, for all who risk their life and for all who lose it while on duty.

I deeply appreciate the initiative you took more than a year ago to promote pilgrimages of peace to the Holy Land and I encourage it with all my heart. Many of you have actually been to those places and taken numerous pilgrims with you. This is also a strong sign of closeness and solidarity for the Christian communities that live there and are in great need of our help.

5. Dear Italian Bishops, I cordially share in the attention you devote to the life of this beloved Nation.

It is vital that the sincere search for the common good prevail over causes of disagreement and dissent so that Italy may function more smoothly and a new phase of development may begin, leading to the creation of a larger number of jobs, so necessary especially in certain southern regions.

A crucial theme for which we should redouble our efforts continues to be the family founded on marriage, the protection and acceptance of life and the primary responsibility of parents for their children's education. Today I repeat with you the words that were chosen as the theme for this year's Pro-Life Day: "There is no future without children!".

Truly necessary and urgent for the future of Italy are: an effort to combine social policies, the pastoral care of the Church and of all those who can influence public opinion, so that young couples may rediscover the joy of conceiving and raising children, taking part in a very special way in the Creator's work.

6. Dear Italian Bishops, I assure you of my daily prayers for you, for your Churches, for the entire national community, so that the Italian people may keep alive their great heritage of faith and culture and put it at the service of the united Europe that is being built.

With sentiments of deep affection I impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you, to your priests, to each diocese and to each Italian parish.