



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE BISHOPS OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE OF ITALY

Thursday, 20 May 1999

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. "*Peace to all of you that are in Christ!*" (1 Pt 5:14). I would like to greet you with these words of the Apostle Peter at our meeting which, as usual, is taking place during your plenary assembly, but this year is particularly significant because it comes at the end of the visits *ad limina Apostolorum* you have been making these past months in groups from the various Regional Episcopal Conferences.

I am pleased now to see you together and to make an overall assessment of what I have been able to hear at these meetings about the hopes and concerns we have shared informally. I greet and thank Cardinal Camillo Ruini, your President, for his words together with the other Italian Cardinals. I greet the Vice-Presidents, the General Secretary and each of you, beloved and venerable Brothers in the Episcopate. May the Lord reward you for your generosity and perseverance in caring for the Churches entrusted to you and for the concern you show for the whole ecclesial body.

2. The impression I received from our talks during the *ad limina* visits has been very positive, as are my experiences whenever I visit your Dioceses. Let us thank God, dear Brothers, for the spiritual and pastoral vitality of the Church in Italy and for the fidelity with which her members, from priests to religious and lay people, try to live their own specific vocation.

Certainly, there are difficulties and dangers. In Italy, too, there is a tendency to reject God and Jesus Christ or to bracket them, as it were, in culture as well as in social life and personal conduct. On the moral level, likewise, there is a growing subjectivism, which often amounts in practice to a lack of any genuine ethical principle or criterion. As a result, selfishness, consumeristic fashions and a destructive climate of eroticism prevail.

But, precisely in view of these difficulties, the Church in Italy is becoming ever more clearly aware

of the mission and new evangelization to which she is called. Indeed, especially in recent years great and engaging missionary programmes have been started, including the City Mission, which involved the Diocese of Rome with great fruits. Moreover, the National Mission Convention, held last September in Bellaria, with its participation and enthusiasm confirmed how deeply rooted the mission *ad gentes* is in the hearts and tradition of the Italian ecclesial community.

It is now a question of continuing this double evangelizing commitment and making it more widespread and pervasive: so that the Christian and Catholic character of this beloved country will not be lost, but renewed and strengthened; so that in the regions of the world where the Gospel is just starting to be proclaimed the forthcoming millennium will be marked by a renewed offer of the salvation that comes from Christ.

3. The central theme of your assembly is vocations to the ordained ministry and the consecrated life: I am delighted with this choice, which corresponds well to the concerns many of you expressed to me during your *ad limina* visits. It deals with a fundamental element in the life and mission of the Church. Genuinely Christian families and fervent parish and youth communities are today still the natural setting where authentic vocations best arise and develop. The example of priests and consecrated persons who are happy with their own choice of life and are capable of serious formation work is the most effective stimulus to helping the interior call to grow and to become clear and conscious. In this area, the role of spiritual direction remains very important.

It is more and more necessary to have an organized diocesan vocations ministry, which harmoniously takes responsibility for the various vocations and provides persons, occasions and places that are likely to encourage and support vocational development. However, the legitimate concern to cope with the decreasing number of priests and consecrated persons should not let us forget, though, that what is most important are the authenticity of the vocations, the enthusiasm for following Christ and the ability to fulfil the tasks of the ministry.

4. Dear Italian Bishops, we are all apprehensive about the very sad situation of war and ethnic oppression which has been going on for some time in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. As I thank you for the unanimous prayers your Churches are offering in response to the appeal I made at the beginning of this May, I would like to express my deep appreciation of the great number of examples and initiatives of concrete solidarity being given by religious institutes, *Caritas* and volunteer organizations especially in the places where the refugees are arriving and in so many other parts of Italy.

With you I renew the appeal I made in Bucharest with Orthodox Patriarch Teoctist: "In the name of God, Father of all mankind, we insistently ask the parties involved in the conflict to lay down their arms once and for all, and we vigorously urge them to make prophetic gestures so that a new art of living in the Balkans, marked by respect for all, by brotherhood and by social harmony" will be possible. May the Lord, who alone converts hearts, make these words effective.

5. My gaze now looks on the beloved Italian nation, for which I share your concern as I always have, dear Brothers in the Episcopate. Indeed, it is part of our specific ministry to contribute the wisdom of the Gospel and the Church's social teaching to solving the often new and complex problems that today's societies are called to face. The different social and political classes and groups must be encouraged to pursue the common good and to find the most authentic motives for joint action that will reinvigorate the citizens' sense of belonging and their desire for participation.

In particular, it is the duty of the ecclesial communities, conscious of their specific responsibilities in the social, economic and political fields, to give priority attention to work and employment, which are the necessary way to restore security to families and courage and trust to the young in many regions of Italy. In the light of the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity, much can be done in this field by working for new economic growth and production within the framework of sincere collaboration at the national and international levels.

6. The Church in Italy is committed with prophetic courage to the importance of life and the family, above all by promoting a family apostolate that continues to broaden its horizons and, as far as possible, reaches family units in situations of difficulty or which are less involved in ecclesial life.

But rightly so, you also encourage families and their associations to assume social responsibility so that laws, social policies and administrative norms and decisions will safeguard the rights of the family based on marriage, in harmony with the Constitution (cf. art. 29), without confusing it with other forms of cohabitation, and so that suitable provisions will be made for supporting the family itself in its essential tasks, beginning with the procreation and education of children.

And what should we say about the praiseworthy efforts of those who, on the most sensitive issues of bioethics, are battling for legislation to protect the legitimate family and the human embryo? Everyone can see that there are choices here at stake which could seriously jeopardize the humanistic character of our civilization.

7. The formation of the young generation, to whom you particularly dedicated your assembly last November, and schools also have a privileged place in your concern as Pastors.

How can we not feel sad and worried in noting that, while an effort is being made to update and redesign the overall structure of Italian schools, no successful way to achieve real parity for all schools has been found? Is this not the most necessary and important provision for putting the Italian school system on a par with European schools? The great national assembly on Catholic schools that is being prepared and will take place in Rome at the end of October is all the more important for this reason too: I would like to assure you at this point of my participation.

In relation to all these topics of social and cultural significance, and more generally in relation to

the fundamental task of evangelization, I warmly encourage you again to continue the cultural project begun by the Church in Italy in recent years. I likewise urge you not to neglect the pressing need to enhance the Christian presence in the realm of social communications.

8. Dear Italian Bishops, the Great Jubilee is now very close at hand. I am delighted with the way your Dioceses are preparing for this providential event in which we will thank the heavenly Father together for the supreme gift of his Son, who became flesh for our salvation in the Virgin Mary's womb. Let us intensify our prayers that this special Holy Year will bring an increase of Christian faith, hope and love. May the Jubilee, through everyone's efforts, lead Christians to take further steps on the path of full union and spread in the world a new awareness of the need and possibility of peace.

The events that await us in the Year 2000, from the International Eucharistic Congress to the World Youth Day and to many other events of great significance, will be a new opportunity to experience together the joy of our communion.

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate, in a few days we will celebrate the Solemnity of Pentecost. In these hours may the invocation of the Holy Spirit arise more frequently from our lips and our hearts so that he will fill us and the whole Christian community with an abundance of his gifts.

Let us turn our humble and trusting plea to Mary, Queen of Peace, for an end to war and violence in the Balkans, on the African continent and in every part of the world.

May God's blessing be upon you and the people whom divine Providence has entrusted to your pastoral care.

May God protect Italy and keep it faithful to its great Christian heritage!