



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II
TO BISHOP GASTONE SIMONI
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 350TH ANNIVERSARY
OF THE CREATION OF THE DIOCESE OF PRATO (ITALY)**

To my Venerable Brother

*Bishop Gastone Simoni of Prato*¹. The notable increase in the population and in the economic and social development of the city of Prato, with the consequent spiritual needs of the Christian community centred around the Collegiate Church of St Stephen, persuaded Innocent X, my Venerable Predecessor in the middle of the 17th century, to respond to the entreaties of the faithful by promulgating the Bull *Redemptoris Nostri*. Thus, on 22 September 1653, he established the Diocese of Prato, linking it *aeque principaliter, in persona episcopi*, to the Church of Pistoia. On the 350th anniversary of this joyful event, I willingly join this Diocese in raising praise and gratitude to God. I extend a cordial greeting to you, venerable Brother, and to your beloved predecessor, Bishop Pietro Fiordelli, the first residential Bishop of the diocesan Church of Prato, which Pope Pius XII, of venerable memory, separated from the Diocese of Pistoia with the Apostolic Constitution *Clerus Populusque* of 25 January 1954. The commemoration of these two important phases in the life of your Diocese is also enriched by the commemoration of yet another ecclesial event, the 500th anniversary of the foundation of the monastery of the Dominican Sisters of St Vincent and St Catherine De' Ricci. I very gladly join in the joy of all the inhabitants of this region, and express the hope that with confidence and hard work they will build a society that is more and more supportive, on the basis of the ancient spiritual traditions that constitute its most precious heritage.² On 19 March 1986, during my Visit to the city of Prato, I had the opportunity of observing how the "city and the Church" in your Diocese have been closely in step down the ages, and this has benefited the whole population. Indeed, it was thanks to the presence of an active Christian community that the people of Prato, fostering a sincere devotion to St Stephen the proto-martyr and especially to the Blessed Virgin in the cult of the Sacred Girdle, have seen various fruits of holiness mature among them. How can we fail to remember, for example, St Catherine De' Ricci, a great Dominican mystic of the 16th century who lived in that very convent whose 500th anniversary is being celebrated? Contemplating the mysteries of Christ, the heavenly Bridegroom, the signs of whose Passion were impressed on her body, she strove to adhere totally to the Gospel, practising all the Christian virtues with spiritual heroism. Her memory, together with that of the other Saints and Blesseds who have enriched the Church of Prato, has continued to be both an example for the entire diocesan community and an incentive to people who seek the truth, as well as to those excessively concerned with worldly things who are unable to raise their gaze to heaven.³ "City and Church developed in unison". This is what I said during my Visit to Prato mentioned above, pointing out the age-old collaboration between the religious and civil Authorities. I learned with joy that, in view of this special Jubilee year, the understanding between the ecclesial and civil

Authorities has been further strengthened by the creation of a committee that includes members of the Diocese and of the Municipality and Province of Prato. I warmly hope that this will enable people to appreciate to the full the re-evocation of the events that have marked the history of this region. May the progress made so far give a special impetus to the new generations who, strengthened by the values of tradition, will thus advance towards new goals of concord and civilization. In today's socio-cultural context, the affluence of material goods, the obsessive focus on the person, the needs induced by a consumer society, may at times drown the inner voice of God, who constantly invites us to keep our personal covenant with him intact. Today there is a risk of reducing faith to a religious sentiment lived only in private, forgetting that being Christian means assuming the commitment to be apostles of Christ in the world. Adherence to his Gospel in our life opens us wide to our brothers and sisters and prompts us to "always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls [us] to account for the hope that is in [us]" (cf. I Pt 3: 15).⁴ May the Jubilee that begins today, 8 September, the feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and will conclude on 26 December 2004, the Feast of St Stephen, Patron of the City and of the Diocese, that will echo into the autumn of 2005, be for everyone a time of conversion, of the replenishment of faith, of a reactivation of the apostolate and of renewed ecclesial communion. May this anniversary be a providential opportunity to understand better that the vocation to holiness is open to one and all, and that the new generations also should be introduced to it with courage and patience. May the Lord help the people of Prato persevere on the path of genuine moral, civil and spiritual progress, and may the Virgin Mary, who has been venerated in the chapel dedicated to her in the cathedral church for more than six centuries, watch with motherly tenderness over all the inhabitants.

With these earnest wishes, I assure you of my remembrance in prayer, and I impart to you, dear Brother, to your Venerable Predecessor, to the priests and to the consecrated men and women as well as to all those who will be taking part in various ways in the Jubilee celebrations, an affectionate Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of heavenly favours. *From Castel Gandolfo, 8 September 2003, Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary.* **JOHN PAUL II**