



## The Holy See

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**LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI  
TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE ITALIAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCE  
ON THE OCCASION OF THE CENTENARY  
OF THE ITALIAN CATHOLIC SOCIAL WEEK**

*To my Venerable Brother  
Archbishop Angelo Bagnasco  
President of the Italian Bishops' Conference*

This year is the centenary of the first *Italian Catholic Social Week*, which was held in Pistoia from 23 to 28 September 1907 particularly at the initiative of Prof. Giuseppe Toniolo. He was a splendid lay Catholic, scientist and social apostle, protagonist of the Catholic Movement at the end of the 19th century and the dawn of the 20th. On this important jubilee, I willingly send my cordial greeting to you, Venerable Brother, to Bishop Arrigo Miglio of Ivrea, President of the Scientific Committee and organizer of the Social Weeks, to the collaborators and to all the participants in the 45th *Week* that will be held in Pistoia and Pisa from the 18th to the 21st of this month. Although the theme chosen - "*The common good today: a commitment that comes from afar*" - has already been treated during previous *Weeks*, it has kept its timeliness intact. Indeed, it is appropriate that it be studied and explained precisely now in order to avoid a generic and at times improper use of the term "common good".

The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, with reference to the teaching of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 26), specifies that "the common good does not consist in the simple sum of the particular goods of each subject of a social entity. Belonging to everyone and to each person, it is and remains "common" because it is indivisible and because only together is it possible to attain it, increase it and safeguard its effectiveness, with regard also to the future" (n. 164). Francisco Suárez, a theologian, had already earlier identified a *bonum commune omnium nationum*, which means: "a common good of the human race". Therefore, in the past and especially today in the epoch of globalization, the common good has been and should be considered and promoted also in the context of international relations. It

clearly appears that precisely for the social foundation of human existence, the good of each person is naturally connected with the good of all humanity. The beloved Servant of God John Paul II noted in this regard in the Encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* that: "It is above all a question of interdependence, sensed as a system determining relationships in the contemporary world, in its economic, cultural, political and religious elements, and accepted as a moral category" (n. 38). And he added: "When interdependence becomes recognized in this way, the correlative response as a moral and social attitude, as a 'virtue', is solidarity. "This then is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. "On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all" (*ibid.*).

In the Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, I wanted to recall that "the formation of just structures is not directly the duty of the Church, but belongs to the world of politics, the sphere of the autonomous use of reason" (n. 29). I then noted that: "The Church has an indirect duty here, in that she is called to contribute to the purification of reason and to the reawakening of those moral forces without which just structures are neither established nor prove effective in the long run" (*ibid.*). What better occasion than this to reaffirm that working for a just order in society is a direct task proper to the lay faithful? As citizens of the State, it is their duty to take part in public life in the first person and, with respect for the legitimate autonomies, to cooperate in forming social life correctly, together with all other citizens, in accordance with the competencies of each one and under his or her own autonomous responsibility. In my Intervention at the National Ecclesial Convention of Verona last year, I reaffirmed that the immediate duty to act in the political sphere to build a just order in Italian society is not the Church's task as such, but rather, that of the lay faithful. They must dedicate themselves with generosity and courage to this duty of great importance, illuminated by faith and by the Church's Magisterium and animated by the charity of Christ (*Address at the Fourth Italian National Ecclesial Convention*, 19 October 2006; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 25 October, p. 8). For this reason the Social Weeks for Italian Catholics were wisely instituted, and this providential initiative will also be able to make a crucial contribution to the formation and animation of Christianly inspired citizens in the future.

The daily news demonstrates that contemporary society is facing many ethical and social emergencies that could undermine its stability and seriously jeopardize its future. Particularly relevant is the current anthropological question which embraces respect for human life and the attention to be paid to the needs of the family founded on the marriage of a man and a woman. As has been affirmed several times, it is not a matter of solely "Catholic" values and principles but of defending and protecting common human values, such as justice, peace and the safeguarding of creation.

What can then be said of the problems concerning work in relation to the family and young people? When lack of steady work does not permit young people to have a family of their own, society's authentic and full development is seriously jeopardized. Here I repeat the invitation I

addressed to Italian Catholics at the Ecclesial Convention in Verona, to be ready to welcome the great opportunity that these challenges offer and not to react with a defeatist withdrawal into themselves, but on the contrary, with a renewed dynamism, to trustingly open themselves to new relationships and not waste any energy that could contribute to Italy's cultural and moral growth.

Lastly, I cannot fail to mention a specific context that prompts Catholics also in Italy to question themselves: it is the context of the relationship between religion and politics. The substantial novelty brought by Jesus is that he opened the way to a more human and freer world, with full respect for the distinction and autonomy that exists between what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God (cf. Mt 22: 21). If, therefore, on the one hand, the Church recognizes that she is not and does not intend to be a political agent, on the other, she cannot avoid concerning herself with the good of the whole civil community in which she lives and works and to which she makes her own special contribution, shaping in the political and entrepreneurial classes a genuine spirit of truth and honesty geared to seeking the common good rather than personal advantage.

These are the particularly timely topics to which the upcoming Italian Catholic Social Week will give its attention. I assure my special remembrance in prayer to those who will be taking part in it and as I wish them fertile and fruitful work for the good of the Church and the entire Italian People, I warmly impart to all a special Apostolic Blessing.

*From the Vatican, 12 October 2007*

**JOHN PAUL II**

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