



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE ITALIAN FEDERATION OF SPIRITUAL EXERCISES (FIES)**

*Clementine Hall
Saturday, 9 February 2008*

*Your Eminence,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I am pleased to meet you at the conclusion of the National Assembly of the Italian Federation of Spiritual Exercises (FIES). I greet the President, Cardinal Salvatore De Giorgi, and I thank him for the kind words with which he conveyed your sentiments. I greet the Bishops, Delegates of the Regional Bishops' Conferences, Members of the Board and the National Council, the Regional and Diocesan Delegates, the Directors of some Retreat Centres and the leaders of Retreats for young people. The theme of your Assembly: "For an authentically Eucharistic Christian spirituality", you have taken from my invitation addressed to all the Church's Pastors at the conclusion of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* (cf. n. 94), which has been at the centre of the various presentations and study groups. This theme's choice shows how you take to heart and accept, in a spirit of faith, the Pope's Magisterium in order to integrate it into your study initiatives and to correctly translate it into pastoral praxis. For this same reason, in your work you have kept in mind the two Encyclicals *Deus Caritas Est* and *Spe Salvi*.

The FIES Statute clearly states that its goal is to "make known and promote Spiritual Exercises in all possible ways, and with respect to their canonical norms, understood as a strong experience of God, in a climate of listening to the Word of God, to foster conversion and an ever more complete giving to Christ and to the Church" (art. 2). This is why it "freely unites its adherents in Italy, who practise the Spiritual Exercises in the context of the pastoral work of the times of the Spirit" (*ibid.*). Your Federation therefore intends to increase spirituality as the foundation and soul of all pastoral

care. It is born and grows by treasuring the Exhortations on the necessity of prayer and the primacy of the spiritual life continually offered by my venerable Predecessors, the Servants of God [Paul VI](#), [John Paul I](#) and [John Paul II](#). Following in their footsteps, I too wished, in the Encyclical [Deus Caritas Est](#), "to reaffirm the importance of prayer in the face of the activism and the growing secularism of many Christians engaged in charitable works" (n. 37), and in [Spe Salvi](#) I placed prayer first among the "'settings' for learning and practising hope" (cf. nn. 32-34). Indeed, insistence on the necessity of prayer is always timely and urgent.

In Italy, while multiple spiritual initiatives providentially increase and spread primarily among youth, it seems instead that the number of those who participate in true courses of Spiritual Exercises decreases, and this can also be verified among priests and members of Institutes of Consecrated Life. It is thus worth remembering that "Retreats" are an experience of the spirit with proper and specific characteristics, well summarized in one of your definitions which I gladly recall: "A strong experience of God, awakened by listening to his Word, understood and welcomed in one's personal life, under the action of the Holy Spirit, which, in a climate of silence, prayer and by means of a spiritual guide, offer the capacity of discernment in order to purify the heart, convert one's life, follow Christ and fulfil one's own mission in the Church and in the world". Along with other forms of spiritual retreat it is good that participation in the Spiritual Exercises does not slacken, characterized by that climate of complete and profound silence which favours the personal and communitarian encounter with God and the contemplation of the Face of Christ. My Predecessors and I myself have returned to this point several times, and it can never be insisted upon enough.

In an age when the influence of secularization is always more powerful and, on the other hand, one senses a diffused need to encounter God, may the possibility to offer spaces for intense listening to his Word in silence and prayer always be available. Houses of Spiritual Exercises are especially privileged places for this spiritual experience, and they thus must be materially maintained and staffed by competent personnel. I encourage the Pastors of the various communities to be concerned with this so that Houses of Spiritual Exercises never lack responsible and well-formed workers, guides and leaders who are open and prepared, gifted with those doctrinal and spiritual qualities that make them true teachers of spirituality, experts and lovers of God's Word and faithful to the Church's Magisterium. A good course of Spiritual Exercises contributes to renewing in those who participate in it a joy of and taste for the Liturgy, in particular of the dignified celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours and above all, the Eucharist. It helps one rediscover the importance of the Sacrament of Penance, it opens the way to conversion and the gift of reconciliation, as well as to the value and meaning of Eucharistic Adoration. The full and authentic sense of the Holy Rosary and of the pious practice of the Way of the Cross can also be beneficially recovered during the Exercises.

Dear brothers and sisters, I thank you for the precious service that you render to the Church and for the commitment you extend so that in Italy the "network" of Spiritual Exercises is always more

widespread and qualified. On my part I assure you of a remembrance to the Lord, while, invoking the intercession of Mary Most Holy, I impart the Apostolic Blessing to all of you and to your collaborators.