



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO MEMBERS OF THE ITALIAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 58th GENERAL ASSEMBLY***

Synod Hall

Thursday, 29 May 2008

Dear Italian Brother Bishops,

This is the fourth time I have the joy of meeting you at your General Assembly to reflect with you on the mission of the Church in Italy and on the life of this beloved Nation. I greet your President, Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco, and I warmly thank him for the kind words he addressed to me in the name of you all. I greet the three Vice-Presidents and the Secretary General. I greet each one of you, with that affection whose source is seeing ourselves members of the one mystical Body of Christ and participants together in the same mission.

First of all I wish to congratulate you on having put at the centre of your work the reflection on how to promote the encounter of youth with the Gospel and therefore, in concrete, on the fundamental questions of evangelization and education of the new generations. In Italy, as in many other countries, what we can define as a true and proper "educational emergency" is strongly felt. When, in fact, in a society and in a culture marked by a pervasive relativism and not rarely by aggressiveness, fundamental certainties, the values and the hopes that give life meaning seem to weaken, the temptation is easily spread among parents as well as teachers to renounce their own duty, and even preceded by the risk of not clearly understanding their own role and mission. Thus children, adolescents and youth, although surrounded by much attention and sheltered perhaps excessively from the trials and difficulties of life, end up feeling left alone before the great questions that inevitably arise within them, as when they face the expectations and challenges that they feel looming over their future. For we Bishops, for our priests, catechists and for the entire Christian community, the educational emergency takes on very precise features: the transmission of the faith to the new generations. Here too, in a certain sense especially here, we must take into account the obstacles posed by relativism, by a culture that puts God in parentheses and that

discourages every really committed choice and especially definitive choices, to privilege instead, in the various milieus of life, the affirmation of self and immediate satisfactions.

To face these difficulties the Holy Spirit has already raised up in the Church many charisms and evangelizing dynamism particularly alive and present in Italian Catholicism. It is the duty of we Bishops to joyfully welcome these new inputs, to support them, to favour their maturation, to guide and direct them so that they always remain within the great stream of faith and ecclesial communion.

Moreover, we must give the many forms and occasions of encounter and presence that we still have with the world of youth: parishes, after school recreation, schools, Catholic schools in particular, and in many other places of socialization, a more distinct evangelizing profile. Above all, obviously, personal relationships and especially sacramental Confession and spiritual direction are important. Each of these occasions is a possibility that is given to us to help our adolescents and young people perceive the Face of that God who is man's true friend. The great events then, like our experience last September in Loreto and what we will experience in July in Sydney, where many Italian youth will also be present, are communitarian, public and festive expressions of that expectation, of that love for and trust in Christ and the Church that remain rooted in the mind of young people. Therefore, these encounters gather the fruit of our daily pastoral activity and at the same time they help people to deeply breathe in the Church's universality and the fraternity that must unite all nations.

Even in the widest social context, precisely the current educational emergency increases the demand for an education that truly is such: therefore, concretely speaking, educators who know how to be credible witnesses of these realities and of these values upon which it is possible to build both one's personal existence and a common and shared project of life. This request, that rises from the body of society and that involves adolescents and young people no less than the parents and the other educators, already in and of itself constitutes the premise and the start of a journey to rediscover and re-initiate, in forms adapted to the current time, to put the full and integral formation of the human person at the centre again. In this context how can one fail to say a word in favour of these specific places of formation which are the schools? In a democratic State, that is distinguished for its promotion of free initiative in every field, the exclusion of adequate support for the ecclesial institutions' commitment in the scholastic field does not seem justifiable. Indeed, it is legitimate to ask oneself whether the quality of teaching might not benefit from a lively comparison with the newly established formative centres, (with respect for the valid ministerial programmes for all), and the multifaceted popular forces, (concerned to interpret the educational choices of each single family). It makes one think that a similar comparison would not fail to produce beneficial effects.

Dear Italian Brother Bishops, not only in the very important area of education, but in a certain sense in one's own complex situation, Italy needs to come out of a difficult period, in which its economic and social dynamism seems to be weakening, its trust in the future diminishing whereas

the sense of insecurity is growing due to the conditions of poverty of so many families, with the consequent tendency for each one to withdraw into itself. It is precisely the awareness of this context that with particular joy we perceive the signs of a new climate, more confident and more constructive. It is linked to the appearance of more serene relationships between political forces and institutions, in virtue of a more lively perception of the common responsibility of the Nation's future. And what gives comfort is that such a perception seems to be spreading in public feeling, in the territory and in social categories. In fact, the desire to continue the journey, to face and resolve together at least the most urgent and grave problems, to initiate a new season of economic, but also civil and moral growth, is spreading.

Evidently this climate needs to consolidate and it could easily fade if it fails to find confirmation in some concrete results. However, by itself it already represents a precious resource, that it is the duty of everyone, according to one's personal role and responsibilities, to safeguard and strengthen. As Bishops we cannot fail to give our specific contribution so that Italy may experience a season of progress and harmony, putting to good use those energies and impulses that emanate from its great Christian history. To this end we must first of all frankly say and witness to our ecclesial communities and to the entire Italian people that, even if there are many problems to face, the fundamental problem of man today remains the problem of God. No other human and social problem can truly be resolved if God does not become the centre of our life again. Only in this way, through the encounter with the living God, the source of that hope that changes us from within and that does not delude (cf. Rom 5: 5), is it possible to rediscover the strength and sure trust in life and to give consistency and vigour to our good projects.

I wish to repeat to you, dear Italian Bishops, what I said last 16 April to our confreres in the United States: "As preachers of the Gospel and leaders of the Catholic community, you are also called to participate in the exchange of ideas in the public arena, helping to shape cultural attitudes" (cf. *Address to Bishops*, 16 April 2008). In the framework of a healthy and aware laity, however, it is necessary to resist every tendency to consider religion, and in particular Christianity, as only a private matter. The prospects that are born from our faith can offer, instead, a fundamental contribution to the clarification and to the resolution of the major social and moral problems of Italy and Europe today. Therefore, you rightly dedicate much attention to the family founded on matrimony, to promote an appropriate pastoral care for the challenges that it must face today, to encourage the affirmation of a culture that is not hostile, but favours the family and life, as it also asks public institutions for consistent and organic policies that recognize the family's central role which it carries out in society, particularly for bringing up and educating children: Italy is in great need of policies of this type. Equally strong and constant must be our commitment to the dignity and protection of human life in every moment and condition, from conception and the embryonic phase to situations of sickness and suffering and until natural death. Nor can we close our eyes and withhold our voice before poverty, the hardships and social injustices that afflict so much of humanity and that require the generous commitment of all, a commitment that also enlarges the person who, although unaware, is also needy. Naturally, the readiness to go to their aid must be

shown with respect for the law, which provides for and ensures the orderly carrying out of social life, both within a State and with regard to those who come from abroad. It is not necessary to specify the argument further: you, together with your dear priests, know the concrete and real situations because you live them with the people.

It is therefore, an extraordinary opportunity for the Church in Italy to be able to use the means of information that interpret daily in the public debate its happenings and concerns, of course in a free and autonomous way but in a spirit of sincere sharing. Therefore, I congratulate you on the 40th anniversary of the foundation of the *Avvenire* newspaper and I profoundly hope that it can reach an ever-growing number of readers. I rejoice at the publication of the new translation of the Bible, and for the copy that you have kindly given to me, and I hope that there will also be a pocket-size edition. It fits well into the preparation of the next Synod of Bishops that will reflect on "The Word of God in the life and mission of the Church".

Dearest Italian Brother Bishops, I assure you of my closeness, with a constant remembrance in prayer, and with great affection I impart the Apostolic Blessing to each one of you and your Churches and to the entire beloved Italian Nation.

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