



The Holy See

SIXTEENTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE ITALIAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

*15 May 1979 Revered and Beloved Confreres of the Italian Episcopate!*1. "Let not your hearts be troubled" (Jn 14:1). Christ utters these words when he has to leave this world, for he says: "I go... I will come again" (cf. Jn 14:2-3). He utters them, aware that "the ruler of this world is coming" (Jn 14:30), while he himself will have to face the ordeal of the Cross. Far more than his disciples he is aware of what will happen to him, of the course events will take in the next few days, and of how the history of the Church and of the world will proceed. Yet he utters these *words which contain an appeal for courage*: "Let not your hearts be troubled". And almost in contrast with all of which he was deeply conscious, he precedes this appeal with a greeting of peace, with the assurance of peace: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." (Jn 14:27). As can be seen, we are in this magnificent paschal setting, nearly always in the Upper Room: there where the Church, on Holy Thursday, received the Eucharist, and where, at Pentecost, she was to receive the Spirit of truth. We are at the beginnings of the Church.2. At the same time, we already enter her history. As in a kaleidoscope, there pass before us the events which bear witness how the words uttered by Jesus Christ in the Upper Room are put into practice in the lives of the first generation of Christians, which is the apostolic generation. In today's liturgy, in fact, we find ourselves in the tracks of the first missionary journey of St Paul who, persecuted by the Jews and threatened with death, proclaims the Gospel. At Lystra, after stoning him, they dragged him out of the city and left him alone when they thought he was dead. But Paul gets up and returns to the city, later going to Iconium and Antioch. Everywhere he organizes the Church, "appointing elders for them in every church" (Acts 14:23). He considers the ordeals he has to face as a normal thing, since in no other way, but only *through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God* (cf. Acts 14:22). In these words we hear, as it were, an echo of the words that the Lord addressed to the disciples on the way to Emmaus: "Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" (Lk 24: 26). In this way the early *Church grows* from all these experiences: it grows by means of the faith that springs from the proclamation of the Gospel made by the Apostles and sustained by prayer and fasting; it grows through the power of God's own grace. And those who construct it bear witness to it.3. The duty of all of us, who today are celebrating the Eucharist together here, in the Sistine Chapel, is to serve in order that the Church may grow in our age,

grow in these difficult Times New Roman of ours; that it may grow also in the midst of adversities and threats; that it will be able to assume the fruit of the new experiences of this Italian land, of this People which, for two thousand years, has been so closely linked with the history of the Gospel, and St Peter's See; this People whose history is entirely imbued, in an exceptional way, with the spiritual influence of Christianity. It is not necessary, in fact, to explain what is the position of Rome and, therefore, of Italy in the context of the whole Catholic Church. It is a question of a privilege, not due to attributions of human origin, far less to usurpation of power, but corresponding to a mysterious plan of the Lord, for it was he who drove his apostles Peter and Paul towards the shores of Italy and along the way to Rome to bring the proclamation of the Gospel and to confirm it with the sacrifice of their lives. For this reason, at the important moment of our common service, I meet you today, venerable and dear Brothers of the individual Churches of Italy, in an official way, after the numerous meetings I have had here and there with many of you in the last few months. I owe you in the first place a greeting, which is inspired both by sentiments of respect and friendship for each of you and by the far higher reasons of faith and charity. And — I beg you, beloved Brothers — kindly take this greeting of mine to the faithful of each of the Churches entrusted to you. *You are Bishops of the Church of God which is in Italy*: or rather — because of the well-known geographical, historical, and theological reasons which, providentially intermingled, put Rome at the centre of Italy and at the same time of the Catholic world — it is necessary to say: *We are the Bishops of this Church; together, you and I, are*. And in me, called to Rome "nullis meis meritis, sed sola dignatione misericordiae Domini", that calls for a special consciousness of being the Vicar of Christ and Pastor of the universal Church *precisely because* I am Peter's successor in this blessed Roman See; and I say, further, the consequent responsibility of having to think and operate — in line, certainly, with the "sollicitudo omnium ecclesiarum" of which St Paul spoke (2 Cor 11:28) — with very special attention and care for the increase of the spiritual and religious life of this holy City. And from here, by natural connection or expansion, this special solicitude extends to the other Churches which are near the Church of Rome: the ancient suburbicarian sees, then the Churches of the Region of Latium, then those comprised in the ancient "Patrimonium S. Petri", and gradually to all those in the whole of Italy. It is precisely pastoral duty which obliges me to promote the cause of evangelization and to stimulate ecclesial life in the whole Peninsula, with the contribution of full dedication and constant and humble commitment.⁴ *A Bishop with you and like you of the Church in Italy*, I cannot ignore the particular problems that arise in our days, in the concrete framework of the social, cultural, and civil circumstances in which the whole country lives. I will tell you, in this connection, that in March last I was able to read the well-thought-out "introduction", which your President, Cardinal Antonio Poma, delivered to the Permanent Council of the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI) specifically in view of this Sixteenth General Assembly. It should be kept in mind, he said, that "the ministry of evangelization is carried out and reaches maturity at a given time and in a particular area, which we must know and evaluate". I have examined, too, the draft of the pastoral document on "Seminaries and Priestly Vocations" which you will discuss in these days. I am aware that this document constitutes the programme for the year 1979-80 and, pointing out that it bears the same date as my recent [*Letter to Priests*](#), I emphasize with pleasure that it agrees with what is for me a motive for most devoted care. Without

wishing now to anticipate conclusions that should spring from the reflection of your Assembly, I am anxious to express, by way, as it were, of personal adherence, my sincere satisfaction at this work. This sentiment is prompted by a series of points contained in it: for example, the consistency of the theme of sacred vocations and Seminaries with the subjects dealt with in preceding years, which all hinged on evangelization, and the last of which was entitled precisely "evangelization and ministries"; furthermore, the topical interest of the theme and its correspondence with the requirements of the present time, in which the drop that has taken place in the last fifteen years or so is making more acute the problem of the service that is specifically assigned to the ministerial priesthood within the People of God. Now, in the middle of our eucharistic assembly, we must look at the question of vocations in its exact ecclesiological and Christological dimension, and we must, above all, make it the object of more insistent invocation to "the Lord of the harvest." Every priestly vocation, as it springs from the voice of the Lord, is assigned to *service of the Church*, and it is therefore within the Church that the problem of *the desired revival of sacred vocations* must be inserted, studied, and solved. While keeping in mind socio-statistical investigations, we must convince ourselves that this problem is connected in the closest way with the whole of ordinary pastoral care. Vocation means a relationship, in the first place, with the life of the parish, the influence of which is of fundamental importance for it from the most different points of view: those of liturgical animation, the community spirit, the validity of Christian witness, the personal example of the parish priest and the priests who assist him. But there is a quite special relationship with family life: where there is an effective and enlightened *family apostolate*, just as it becomes normal to accept life as a gift from God so it is easier for God's voice to resound and to find a more generous hearing. There is another special relationship with the *apostolate of youth*, because there is no doubt that, if the young are followed, assisted, and educated in faith by priests who live their priesthood in a worthy way, it will not be difficult to pick out and discover those among them who are called, and to help them to walk along the way indicated by the Lord. You understand, beloved Brothers, how necessary *a great mobilization of apostolic forces* is in this connection, starting from the fundamental environments of Christian life: the parishes, families, youth associations and groups. As for the Christological aspect, it is likewise essential, in order to discern clearly the fitness and quality of those called, to look to Christ the eternal Priest and take from him, from his ministry, from his priesthood, the exact measure and draw the genuine lines of priestly service. And, above all, prayer remains indispensable: we must pray tirelessly, we must pray even today, even now, in such a way that, thanks to this concelebration of ours, there will grow in us not only awareness of the problem of vocations but also the certainty of unfailing divine assistance. Once more we wish to and must, pray fervently "the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest" (Mt 9:38; Lk 10: 2). It will be a prayer raised in Christ's name; it will, therefore, be granted and will help you greatly in the work of deep study and reflection which you are about to dedicate to such a serious and delicate subject.⁵ I also know of other particular subjects to which, Venerable Brothers, you will give your attention in these days. For them, too, I must express to you my approval and appreciation. I am thinking of the fine text of the "Catechism of the Young", regarding which I repeat publicly what I have already written to His Eminence the President, who presented me with a copy of it in advance: it is a text which is to be recommended for its pastoral

wisdom and pedagogical experience. And I know of the other volume which, with equal commitment, is being prepared for adults. But with regard to the predominant theme, I wish to point out the fundamental *value of catechesis* for the revival of vocations. If ordinary pastoral care finds in catechesis one of its highest forms and one of its most suitable means, it follows that catechesis, as well as meeting the general purpose of evangelization, can also be directed to the specific purpose of vocations. I must, therefore, repeat what I have already said of pastoral care: it is necessary to give great development to the *catechesis of youth*, as well as to *the catechesis of the family*. The latter subject is directly linked with the theme already chosen for the next Synod of Bishops. I know that the CEI is already looking to this assembly which will meet next year, and has started the necessary preliminary researches in order to be able to offer the work of the Synod the contribution, always precious, of the Church in Italy. This, too, gives me sincere pleasure, in the conviction that the subject of the family and its tasks in the modern world is really one of prime importance. There is, further, the circumstance of the Twentieth National Eucharistic Congress; announcing it, I will say that it has been decided to celebrate it, in 1983, to place it at a suitable interval from the International Congress of the same name, which — as you know — will be held at Lourdes in 1981. To these and other, though minor, initiatives, there go immediately my interest, my approval and solidarity.⁶ With these thoughts and with these problems, we enter, venerated and dear Brothers, upon the *annual assembly of the Pastors* of the Church which is in Italy from the Alps to Sicily. And we listen to what the Lord says to us, as he said to the Apostles gathered in the Upper Room. We recall that his were words of peace: "Let not your hearts be troubled..." (Jn 14:1); You heard what I said to you — I am going now and later I shall return (cf. Jn 14:2-3). The same affirmation will be repeated by him before the Ascension: "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt 28:20). We accept these words with great faith. Christ is really with us and calls us to peace and fortitude. The human heart can be troubled in different ways. It can be troubled by fear which paralyses interior forces, but it can also be troubled by that fear which springs from concern for a great good, for a great cause; from creative fear, I would say, which is manifested as a deep sense of responsibility. The Second Vatican Council which proposed to us such a true image of the modern world, at the same time called the whole Church to a deeper sense of responsibility for the Gospel, for the history of human salvation. This pastoral responsibility for brothers, for our fellow-countrymen, weighs on each of us. It weighs in a particular way on the successor of St Peter, to whom Christ said "strengthen your brethren" (Lk 22:32); and I take it up with regard to the beloved "Church which is in Italy", in the bond of *collegial union* with you, Venerable and dear Brothers! Let us recall that the Church is a Community of the People of God. Our pastoral responsibility for the Church is carried out essentially through the fact that we make all those that God has entrusted to us aware of their own responsibility, and educate them to this responsibility for the Church, and take up this responsibility in fellowship with them. This is the task that confronts the Italian Episcopate, as it confronts, moreover, all the Episcopates in the world. It is necessary to make the whole People of God aware of their responsibility and to share it with everyone; it is necessary to drive home to each one his own rights and duties in all fields of Christian life, individual, family, social and civil; it is necessary to unearth, so to speak, all the great resources of energy that lie in the souls of modern Christians and, indirectly, in all men of good

will. The Latin word "confirma" (Lk 22:32) *means* "strengthen", "make stronger"; but it also means the following: *help (brethren) to find again the sources of this energy*, which are found in the two thousand years of Christianity on this earth: the energy, I say, that the whole modern world likewise needs. And this "confirma" rests for all of us, venerable and dear Brothers, on the evangelical *confide* and *confidite* (cf. Mt 9:2; Jn 16:33). It is necessary to have trust in Christ, it is necessary to trust Christ who conquered by means of the Cross. We must have trust! And let us pray to his Holy Mother, to teach us to have this trust always, without any limit. Amen.

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