



The Holy See

**LETTER OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOP OF ACQUI ON THE OCCASION
OF THE MILLENNIUM OF THE BIRTH
OF ST GUIDO, PATRON OF ACQUI**

*To my Venerable Brother
Bishop Pier Giorgio Micchiardi of Acqui*

1. I learned with great pleasure that this Diocese is intending to celebrate the Millennium of the birth of Bishop St Guido, its principal Patron Saint, during this year, 2004. For this happy occasion, whose crowning point will be the celebration on 5 September next, I wanted to give to you, Venerable Brother, to the priests, to the men and women religious and to the entire diocesan Community, a special testimony of my spiritual participation. Cardinal Angelo Sodano, Secretary of State, will witness to it, taking part in your celebrations, and will personally convey my sentiments of deep closeness to you all.

St Guido of Acquesana was born in 1004, a difficult but at the same time important period in the history of the Church and of Europe. That he was a generous witness to Christ is clear centuries later from his life and work, which have come down to us intact. A wonderful mystery of the Communion of Saints! Over and above the great differences between one era and another, it is the same faith, the same Baptism, the grace of the same Spirit that have marked the experience of the People of God.

The Bishop, whom Acqui has venerated for centuries as its heavenly Protector, shines with the perennial eloquence of the very same holiness that I wanted to re-propose to the Church as the best route after the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000.

2. Venerable Brother, this diocesan community has always considered St Guido as its own special "father and patron". Seven centuries after that of the first Bishop, St Maggiorino, St Guido's episcopate marked a turning point in the history of the City and Diocese of Acqui. He was Bishop

from 1034 to 1070 and he left an impression that was to last down the centuries. The extraordinary celebrations on his 1,000th anniversary are an opportunity especially for the new generations to rediscover him as a historical figure. His commemoration becomes an incentive to us all to wonder what message we receive from him today, and indeed, through him, from Christ the Lord, the one Pastor of the Church.

In the Decree announcing the millennium celebrations, Venerable Brother, bringing to the fore its providential value for the needs of the Church today, you highlighted an important and timely aspect that emerges from St Guido's life and work: his commitment to founding and maintaining the rural parish chapels scattered across the territory, making them so many references points for the religious and sacramental life of the faithful in a period in which the pastoral network was experiencing difficulty and instability due to invasion, war and famine. St Guido's decision to do this expressed his apostolic solicitude and his concern that the Word of life and the Sacraments of salvation be made accessible to the whole population, so that the faithful might have suitable places in which to grow in prayer, in catechetical instruction and in fraternal solidarity.

All this fits in with the renewed attention to parishes that the Bishops of Italy have been promoting in recent years as a response to the spiritual and pastoral challenges of today. I therefore express my appreciation of and encouragement for the directions that you pointed out, in the Decree cited, to the various members of the parish communities, so that they may increasingly become the living Church in human homes and an active memory of Christ's presence in the world.

3. In addition to increasing the number of rural chapels, St Guido was zealous in looking after the spiritual and cultural formation of the clergy. This is also a heritage that needs to be revived and made the most of in the present circumstances. In fact, the decrease in the number of priests obliges us to give prime importance first of all to working for a renewed vocations apostolate aimed at disposing young hearts to welcome the call that God will certainly not fail to address to them also in our time. A careful preparation of candidates to the priesthood that will assure them a satisfactory human, intellectual and spiritual training in response to the complex demands of today's world is also needed.

Lastly, the clergy who are already at work in "the Lord's vineyard" should not lack support: priests must defeat the prevalent secular mindset today through their commitment to the spiritual life, study and meditation on the Word of God and the Magisterium of the Church, as well as through a constant and appropriate theological and cultural renewal.

At the same time, the holy Patron invites you to integrate the strictly formative dimensions with those of priestly brotherhood and missionary commitment: in the context of the diocesan clergy, the latter should not be separate but complementary, in accordance with models of spirituality and styles of priesthood that are largely inspired by the "charism" of your holy Patron in the individual particular Churches.

4. Belonging to a specific Diocese involves the gift and at the same time the commitment to "resemble" in some way the Saints who have historically left a mark on it. It is therefore legitimate to expect of the faithful of Acqui and especially of their Pastors that their lifestyle present some trait of the spiritual and pastoral features of their Patron Saint. I am thinking, for example, of the preference given to spiritual rather than material values that impelled St Guido as a young man to prefer study to administering the family property. I am thinking of his detachment and generosity in the use of financial assets that induced him, once he had become Bishop, to give all of his possessions to the Church of Acqui. I am thinking of the wonderful harmony between fidelity to the deposit of the faith and the spirit of renewal that he always showed in his pastoral action.

May the face of the Church of Acqui shine once again with the holiness of her Patron! Just as the Cathedral dedicated to the Blessed Mother, for which he spared no effort or expense to complete with untold generosity, is an eloquent monument to his love for God and for souls, so may the Community of living stones succeed in putting into effect the perennial message of this exemplary witness of Christ and zealous Pastor of the flock entrusted to his care.

With these hopes and an assurance of a special prayer to the Lord through the intercession of Mary Most Holy, I express my hope that the celebration of the millennium of St Guido may bear abundant and lasting spiritual fruit, as I very willingly send to you, venerable Brother, and to the entire Diocesan Community, the implored Apostolic Blessing.

From Castel Gandolfo, 30 July 2004

JOHN PAUL II