



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II

FOR THE 43RD ITALIAN CATHOLIC SOCIAL WEEK *"Behold, I make all things new" (Rv 21: 5).1.*

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate, dear Brothers and Sisters, these are the words of Sacred Scripture which I suggested to the Italian Church four years ago at the Ecclesial Convention in Palermo in order to instil new hope in the Christian community and in all civil society. At that time the desire to revive in believers "the Gospel of love for a new society in Italy" gave rise to the intention to walk "through history with the gift of love". Today, responding to the wishes of the Italian Episcopal Conference, I am pleased to address you, participants in the 43rd Social Week of Italian Catholics, with this Message, which draws strength from another passage in the Book of Revelation: "The city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light" (Rv 21: 23). This statement directly refers to the heavenly Jerusalem. The believer, however, knows that the "earthly city" will also be able to carry out its true renewal to the extent that it receives light from the "city of God". On the eve of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, I would like to impart great trust in Christ, the Lord of history, to you and to everyone who is called to plan and to foster society's progress. It is in him that we can "fully understand man, the world and Italy today" (*Address to the Third Ecclesial Convention of the Church in Italy*, Palermo, 23 November 1995, n. 1). "This nation, which has a famous and, in a certain sense, unique legacy of faith, has for some time been swept by cultural trends that undermine the very foundations of this Christian heritage.... However, perceiving the depths of the challenge does not mean allowing oneself to be dominated by fear" (ibid., n. 2). The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council encouraged society's leaders, instilling in them all the daring of the Spirit: "The Church praises and esteems those who devote themselves to the public good for the service of men and take upon themselves the burdens of public office" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 75).2. First of all, I express my appreciation of the decision made by the Episcopal Conference and the Scientific Organization Committee to hold this Social Week in the city of Naples, an eloquent "symbol" of southern Italy. In this regard I remember what I said four years ago in Palermo: the people of the South will take charge of their own recovery if they are supported by the solidarity of the whole nation. Referring again to that Ecclesial Convention, I would also like to repeat that "there is no renewal, even social, which does not start with contemplation. The meeting with God in prayer imbues the course of history with a mysterious force which touches hearts and leads them to conversion and renewal, and precisely in this regard it becomes a powerful historical force in the transformation of social structures" (*Address to the Third Ecclesial Convention of the Church in Italy*, Palermo, n. 11). Italy's European vocation, precisely because of its Christian inspiration, "can make a fundamental contribution to the building of a Europe of the spirit", which "can transform a political and economic aggregate into a real common home for all Europeans, by helping to form an exemplary family of nations" (*Address to the Ambassador of Italy*, 13 September 1999). The priority of the evangelization of culture, a privileged area where faith meets human life and history, is connected with the pre-eminence of the spiritual dimension. That is why I encourage you to continue confidently implementing the systematic cultural project that the Italian Church has undertaken.3. After a

demanding period of discernment, which involved leading Italian experts, the theme of this event was expressed in a question: "*What kind of civil society should Italy have in the future?*". This is a stimulating and urgent theme, already foreseen in some way at the Ecclesial Convention of Loreto: "Christians repropose a participation which is service and is born of love and concern *for civil society* ... with the willingness to share in human history" (*Nota CEI dopo Loreto*, n. 3: *Enchiridion CEI*, 3, 1506). Wherever the State recognizes the existence of all cultural and organizational resources as distinct from the political and economic sphere, whose original planning capacity aims at encouraging harmonious coexistence, the way is opened to an effective pursuit of the common good. Similarly, wherever there is a systematic appreciation of those associations of citizens who freely mobilize themselves in initiatives of mutual support and cooperation, the foundations for harmonious and fruitful coexistence are laid. The acceptance of the ethical principles which are at the root of civil coexistence and, in particular, a sincere respect for the principle of subsidiarity are the conditions for all citizens to develop a new public spirit and civic conscience. It is comforting to note how *in civil society a deep leaven is present* which stems from the work of many family associations concerned to make the decisive importance of the family felt in social and political choices. The efforts of many groups and movements, which in various ways are committed to promoting the rights and duties of citizens, also contribute to this leaven. Also worthy of praise are those initiatives concerned with safeguarding creation, with improving the quality of life, with volunteer work in every form of service, with cultural and business formation and with the progress of democratic participation in the region. These are grass-roots movements which support the growing dynamism of the "social economy" (also called the "third sector"), constituting a vast and varied array of voluntary social associations. These phenomena can easily be described as a type of "*treasure*" of civil society, because they constitute the privileged place for fostering values and revitalizing them.⁴ The "key" which should open the door of political society to civil society is the *principle of subsidiarity*. My predecessor, Pius XI, far-sightedly defined it as "a very important principle of social philosophy", showing that "just as it is unlawful to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own efforts and initiative, in order to entrust it to the community, it is likewise wrong to entrust to a greater and higher society what lesser or subordinate communities can accomplish"; in fact, "the natural objective of any intervention by society itself is that of helping in a supplementary way the members of the social body, and not to destroy and absorb them" (Encyclical *Quadragesimo anno*, n. 80). If the supreme authority of the State respects and fully utilizes the activity of lesser institutions, "it will be able more freely, powerfully and effectively to accomplish the roles that belong to it alone, because only it can accomplish them" (ibid., n. 81). The validity of the principle of subsidiarity has always been confirmed by the papal Magisterium. The Second Vatican Council hoped that all citizens would have "effective opportunities to play an active part in the establishment of the juridical foundations of the political community, in the administration of public affairs, in determining the aims and the terms of reference of public bodies" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 75). For this reason, "the rights of all individuals, families and organizations and their practical implementation must be acknowledged, protected and fostered, together with the public duties binding on all citizens" (ibid.). The Council's admonition is explicit: "Governments should take care not to put obstacles in the way of family, cultural or social groups, or of organizations and intermediate institutions, nor to hinder their lawful and constructive activity; rather, they should eagerly seek to promote such orderly activity" (ibid.). On various occasions I too have recalled these principles, especially in the Encyclical *Centesimus annus*, emphasizing that the State must create favourable conditions for the free exercise of economic activity and that a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need, and help to coordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good (cf. nn. 15; 48).⁵ The *Great Jubilee* of the Year 2000 is a strong incentive for the Social Week to reflect on the contribution to be made to the expectations of the Italian people and to the Church's own mission of evangelizing the

poor. Indeed, it is clear that "a commitment to justice and peace in a world like ours, marked by so many conflicts and intolerable social and economic inequalities, is a necessary condition for the preparation and celebration of the Jubilee" (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 51). As an application of this, in the Bull of Indiction of the Holy Year *Incarnationis mysterium* I wrote that one of the Holy Year's goals is to help create "an economic model which serves everyone" (n. 12). I have frequently addressed the theme of *globalization*, an important sign of our times. In the Encyclical *Centesimus annus*, I invited all leaders to promote "effective international agencies which will oversee and direct the economy to the common good" (n. 58). I recently called for the drafting of "ethical or professional codes" and "juridical instruments" for dealing with "critical situations", in order to eliminate the ancient tragedy in which always "the weakest are the first to pay" (*Address to the "Centesimus Annus Pro Pontifice" Foundation*, 11 September 1999, n. 2). By their vocation Christians are called to identify viable ways of fulfilling this duty of social justice, which can be shared by all who put the human person and the common good at the centre of every political project. In the *financial and administrative sector* it is also necessary "never to violate the dignity of man and, for this reason, to build structures and systems that will foster justice and solidarity for the good of all" (*ibid.*, n. 3). Again, "globalization will have many positive effects if it can be sustained by a strong sense of the absoluteness and dignity of all human persons and of the principle that earthly goods are meant for everyone" (*ibid.*, n. 4). Therefore, "it is very opportune to support and encourage those projects of 'ethical finance', 'microcredit' and 'fair and equitable trade' which are within everyone's reach and possess a positive and even pedagogical value for global co-responsibility" (*ibid.*).⁶ The heart of society is *the family*. Based on marriage, it is a stable community, a sanctuary of love and life, the essential cell of the social body. The health of society depends on the family's "health". It is the task of all public leaders to work together for the good of the family. For the civil authorities this is a sacred duty, which entails safeguarding the lofty mission of parents. Defence of *human dignity from conception*, a fundamental principle of natural law, "expects from the State's positive legislation that full recognition based on an awareness that there is an undisputed value in motherhood for the individual and for society as a whole" (*Address to the Ambassador of Italy*, 13 September 1999). Society's future especially depends on *young people*. "It is in the education of the younger generation that the religious experience of the Italian nation can boast a creative originality of scholastic institutions, to a great extent aimed at the less well-off, which deserves respect and support through effective legal and financial parity between State and non-State schools.... In the name of my special concern for the young generation, I feel compelled to ask all the members of Italian society to make a joint effort to overcome these obstacles and delays in order to provide the new generation with that work which frees the personality and enriches civil society" (*ibid.*). Unfortunately, the scourge of unemployment has reached a state of inhumanity in the world of youth and waits for recovery from an intelligent and tenacious act of justice. The Church, from her origins and, in the contemporary era, through the Encyclical *Rerum novarum*, has proclaimed and practised *a preferential option for the poor*, considering it a "special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity" (*Centesimus annus*, n. 11; cf. *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n. 42). I follow with concern the data showing that the gap between rich and poor is also widening in Italy, and the state of poverty extending and diversifying. These facts suggest complex phenomena which are in part extraneous to this country. We cannot be resigned to this reality, but must respond with a renewed commitment to solidarity and justice, by searching for new ways to combine the demands of the economy with social needs.⁷ Dear friends! *Living faith* spurs us to build the common good in society. The supernatural certainty that "nothing is impossible for God" becomes the human confidence that justice in the world is possible. The *Eucharist* is the inexhaustible source of energy for Christians in social and political service as well. The Bread of heaven is a gift from God for body and soul. The Gospel is a light that illumines human society with divine love. "*Blessed*" today and always "*are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness*" (*Mt 5: 6*), even if their generous commitment brings them persecution (cf. *Mt 5: 10*). The Christian politician must constantly act in

the light of this knowledge, seeking to revive in himself that spirit of service which, together with the necessary competence and efficiency, can make his activity transparent and consistent (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, n. 42). As he well knows, "a charity that loves and serves the person can never be separated from justice.... The lay faithful must bear witness to those human and Gospel values that are intimately connected with political activity itself, such as liberty and justice, solidarity, faithful and unselfish dedication for the good of all, a simple lifestyle, and a preferential love for the poor and the least" (ibid.). In Italy, my "second homeland", I cannot but hope that civil society will always be inspired by Christian tradition and culture. Charity practised with justice can produce in the community the harmonious concord which St Augustine considers the highest response of Christ's Gospel to the aspirations of humanity: "What is a community of citizens if not a multitude of persons united by the bond of concord?... In a State, concord is what musicians call harmony: civic concord cannot exist without justice" (*Epist.* 138, 2, 10; cf. *Civ. Dei*, 2, 21 1). This is my wish, united with prayer, for the beloved Italian nation, as I cordially send all of you who serve it in Christ's name a special Apostolic Blessing. *From the Vatican, 10 November 1999.*