



# The Holy See

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## **ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO THE NATIONAL UNION OF CHARITABLE AND WELFARE INSTITUTIONS (UNEBA)**

*Saturday, 7 April 1979 Mr President, and all you participants in the eighth Congress of the National Union of Charitable and Welfare Institutions,* A sentiment of deep satisfaction and consolation fills my heart on meeting you this morning for the first time. You are gathered in Rome to discuss the important problems that concern your Association. For nearly thirty years, it has been operating, as we know, in the field of charity, representing, safeguarding, and promoting the welfare initiatives of all Catholic-inspired bodies which are striving to meet the needs of all citizens in serious conditions of moral, material and social difficulty. Yours is a multiform, indispensable, providential work, which embraces all sectors of charity, which has no bounds, or has the immense and universal ones of human suffering. The importance, the effectiveness, and the great topical interest of your institution is well known. It acts in liaison with the Italian Episcopal Conference and avails itself of the collaboration of various Catholic organisms, present in the sector of social welfare. Even if public welfare services are gradually covering tasks carried out for centuries by the charity of the Church, and even if modern society is trying to meet certain social security and welfare requirements in an institutional and organic form, the welfare and charitable action of the Church has not at all lost its irreplaceable function in the modern world. Charity will always be necessary, as a stimulus and completion of justice itself; it will always remain for the Church the sign of its testimony and its credibility (cf. Jn 13:35). Be inwardly convinced of the necessity of your work, of the right and the duty you have to carry it out; a work that you will want to promote tirelessly, defending its meaning and urgency and its free exercise; improving its methods and services; committing yourselves also for a harmonious and unified effort, so that the various welfare institutions, without losing their own nature and autonomy, will be able to act in a spirit of sincere collaboration with one another and thus facilitate opportune and useful interventions of the public authorities and an adequate legislation. Recently the Church has several times expressed her own teaching in the field of social work, also in the light of what the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, in the decree "[Apostolicam Actuositatem](#)" on the apostolate of the laity, said about the charitable action of Christians. I consider it useful to recall to your attention some fundamental principles regarding this teaching. In the first place, it must be affirmed that the centre and unit of measurement of every system of social work is the human person, his dignity, his rights and duties; the human person, who will have to receive from society the aids necessary for his development and fulfilment. On the juridical plane, this statement takes concrete shape in the citizen's right to assistance, a right that no modern state system can fail expressly to recognize. It is opportune to specify that theoretical recognition of this right: is not sufficient, but it is necessary that it should be made actually operative by means of an adequate organization of social services, promoted and run by all those who are responsible for promoting the common good of society. In this connection, it is useful to point out that the

implementation of the common good in the field of welfare, as in any other sector of associated life, is the joint task of the public authorities, the intermediary bodies, free institutions and associations, families, and individuals. All together they must collaborate in guaranteeing the citizen what is necessary to emerge from the condition of need in which he finds himself, and in order the better to realize and develop his own human personality. In this way, and with the contribution of all, that healthy harmonization of public and private initiatives will be realized, ensuring all energies the necessary space of action. The opportune coordination of public and private welfare initiatives, so as to guarantee a harmonious system of social security, can be carried out today through the modern instrument of territorial, regional and national programming; provided the latter is really democratic, in the sense that all those interested, social, public and private operators, as well as the beneficiaries themselves, can make their free contribution, in the higher perspective of the common good. In particular, as regards the Church, the possibility of promoting welfare initiatives is an element, and not a secondary one, of religious freedom; since works of charity, in their multiple forms, are a fundamental and original requirement of Christian faith, as is testified by the millenary history of Christianity, which is also the history of charity. In fact, the abovementioned conciliar decree on the apostolate of the laity says: "While every activity of the apostolate should find in charity its origin and driving force, certain works are of their nature a most eloquent expression of this charity; and Christ has willed that these should be signs of his messianic mission" (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, n. 8). On the basis of this teaching, the same Ecumenical Council affirms in the same document that "the holy Church... in all ages, is recognized by this characteristic mark of charity. While rejoicing at initiatives taken elsewhere, it claims charitable works as its own mission and right" (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, n. 8). In the light of these principles I wish to encourage the well-deserving action that your Union has been carrying on for about thirty years in support of all the free welfare and charitable institutions, among which those promoted by the charitable impetus of Christians constitute a very considerable part in Italy. Operating in this way, you not only increase, on the civil plane, a wider pluralism of those free institutions which constitute the connective tissue of a really democratic society in which is realized the responsible participation of citizens with regard to the attainment of the common good, but at the same time you further the rights of man and of his freedoms, and particularly of religious freedom. In our times the latter takes on particular value and significance, since it qualifies the very political system of a society. I earnestly exhort you, therefore, not to grow weary, not to let yourselves be discouraged by difficulties, but to progress and advance with the same dedication, with the same courage, and with increased love for Christ and his Church. With this confidence, I affectionately bless you, the institutions you represent, the persons who work in them and the beneficiaries, imploring the comfort of heavenly assistance for all. © Copyright 1979 Libreria Editrice Vaticana