



The Holy See

**LETTER OF POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO H.E. MSGR. GIULIO NICOLINI,
BISHOP OF CREMONA**

*To My Venerable Brother Giulio Nicolini
Bishop of Cremona*

1. On 13 November 1197 Homobonus Tucenghi, a cloth merchant in Cremona, ended his earthly life contemplating the Crucifix, while attending Mass in his city parish of St Giles, as was his daily custom.

Little more than a year later, on 12 January 1199, my Predecessor, Innocent III, inscribed him in the list of saints, in compliance with the petition Bishop Sicardo had made to him, when he came as a pilgrim to Rome with the parish priest Osberto and a group of citizens, and after having evaluated the numerous testimonies, some written, of the miracles attributed to the intercession of Homobonus.

Eight centuries later, the figure of St Homobonus continues to be constantly alive in the memory and in the heart of the Church and of the city of Cremona, which venerate him as their patron saint. He is the first and only layman of the faithful, not to belong either to the nobility or to a royal or princely family, to be canonized during the Middle Ages (cf. A. Vauchez, *I Laici nel Medioevo*, Milan 1989, p. 84; *La Santità nel Medioevo*, Bologna 1989, p. 340). "Father of the poor", "consoler of the afflicted", "assiduous in constant prayer", "man of peace and peacemaker", "a man good in name and deed", this saint, according to the words used by Pope Innocent III in the Bull of canonization *Quia pietas*, is still like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in our time.

2. Thus I learned with joy that you, Venerable Brother, have decided to dedicate to his memory the period between 13 November 1997 and 12 January 1999, calling it "*The year of St Homobonus*", to be celebrated with special spiritual, pastoral and cultural initiatives, as part of the journey of

preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, and in the spirit of communion created by the Synod that the Diocese recently celebrated.

Although distant in time, Homobonus does in fact figure as a saint for the Church and society of our time. Not only because holiness is only one, but because of the exemplary way this faithful layman worked and lived Gospel perfection. The striking parallels with the demands of the present time give the jubilee celebration a profound sense of "contemporaneity".

3. Testimonies of the time unanimously define Homobonus "pater pauperum", father of the poor. This definition, having remained in the history of Cremona, in a certain way sums up the merchant's deep spirituality and extraordinary life. From the time of his radical conversion to the Gospel, Homobonus became an artisan and apostle of charity. He made his home a place of welcome. He personally attended to the burial of the abandoned dead. He opened his heart and his purse to every category of needy person. He did his utmost to settle the controversies which broke out between factions and families in the city. He entirely devoted himself to the practice of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy and, at the same time, he safeguarded the integrity of the Catholic faith faced with heretical infiltrations, with the same fervour with which he participated daily in the Eucharist and devoted himself to prayer.

In pursuing the path of the Gospel Beatitudes, in the time of the Communes when money and market trends constituted the centre of city life, Homobonus combined justice and charity and made almsgiving a sign of sharing, with the spontaneity of one who from the assiduous contemplation of the Crucifix learned to testify to the value of life as a gift.

4. Faithful to these Gospel choices, he had to face and overcome obstacles from his family circle, because his wife did not share his choices, from the parish, which looked with suspicion at his austerity, and from his work environment, because of the competition and bad faith of some who tried to cheat the honest merchant.

Thus Homobonus' image emerges as that of a businessman engaged in the cloth trade and, while involved in the market dynamics of Italian and European cities, conferred spiritual dignity on his work: that spirituality which was the hallmark of all his activity.

In his life experience there was no connection between the various dimensions. In each one he found the "way" to express his desire for holiness: in the family nucleus, as an exemplary spouse and father; in the parish community, as a believer who lives the liturgy and is dedicated to catechesis, profoundly linked to the ministry of the priest; in the context of the city, in which he spread the appeal of goodness and peace.

5. Such a meritorious life could not fail to leave a profound and memorable mark. Admirable indeed is the persevering affection and devotion which Cremona has retained for this special

leading figure, who came from the working class.

It is significant that, in 1592, the Cathedral was dedicated to him and to St Mary's Assumption. And it is no less significant that it was precisely the members of the City Council, who chose him as patron of the city in 1643, amidst the jubilation, "the immense joy", the "tears of devotion" of the people. A layman saint, elected as patron of the laity themselves.

Nor should we marvel that the cult of St Homobonus has spread to many Italian Dioceses and even beyond the national boundaries. Homobonus is a saint that speaks to hearts. And it is good to note that hearts are sensitive to his loving appeal. This is shown in the constant rush to visit his mortal remains, especially, but not only, on his liturgical feast day, and the intense devotion that the people have for him, mindful of the graces received and trusting in the intercession of the beloved "heavenly merchant".

6. In the jubilee year, his voice in some essential aspects assumes tones, as I noted at the beginning, of "contemporaneity".

The times are no longer those of 800 years ago. We cannot attribute the character of a "promotion of the lay status", in the modern sense of this concept, to the canonization of Homobonus, which matured in the context and procedures of the Middle Ages.

It is however true that it is in this very light that we interpret the spiritual adventure that marked the centuries-old history of Cremona. And it is in this light that we rediscover the message, still new, of its famous patron. He is the faithful layman who, as a layman, earned the gift of sainthood.

His life assumes an exemplary value as a call to conversion without any restrictions whatsoever, and therefore to sanctity that is not reserved for some, but proposed to everyone without distinction.

The Second Vatican Council makes holiness a constitutive element of membership of the Church when it states that "all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 40); and it points out that "by this holiness a more human manner of life is fostered also in earthly society" (*ibid.*). This is exactly what we need in the climate of unremitting transition that we are experiencing: we need it for developing the present positive premises and for responding to the serious challenges deriving from the profound crises of civilization and culture, which influence the collective *ethos*.

7. The call to holiness involves and enhances the life and activity of the laity as the Council also teaches and as I confirmed in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*.

In the context of the above-mentioned document, St Homobonus' example and life appear to me

to be of particular relevance for the Church and for the society of Cremona, in the present day. To undertake a new evangelization, in fact, "a mending of the Christian fabric of society is urgently needed in all parts of the world. However, for this to come about, what is needed is first to remake the Christian fabric of the ecclesial community itself" (*Christifideles laici*, n. 34).

The lay faithful must become fully involved in this task, with the special charisms of the "secular character". The new situations, both ecclesial and social, economic, political and cultural, most especially require their specific participation (ibid., n. 15, p. 4).

8. It is a happy coincidence that the jubilee celebration of this "Saint of Charity" has fallen within the last decade of our century, which the ecclesial community in Italy has consecrated to the programme "Evangelization and testimony of love".

Again, as I wrote in *Christifideles laici*, charity in its various forms, from almsgiving to works of mercy, "gives life and sustains the works of solidarity that look to the total needs of the human being" (n. 41). The same charity is and will always be necessary, both for individuals and for communities. And "such charity is made increasingly necessary the more the institutions become complex in their organization and claim to manage every area at hand. In the end such projects lose their effectiveness as a result of an impersonal functionalism, an overgrown bureaucracy, unjust private interests and an all-too-easy and generalized disengagement from a sense of duty" (ibid., p. 13).

The sensitivity of Homobonus urges us in a special way to be open to the entire horizon of charity in its various expressions, apart from material ones: the charity of culture, political charity, social charity, for the common good. Such an eloquent example can effectively contribute to brightening the current political and social climate, promoting a style of harmony, of mutual trust, of committed involvement.

9. I am particularly pleased that the celebration of the "*Year of St Homobonus*" is to cover the whole of 1998, the second year of the preparatory phase for the Great Jubilee, dedicated especially to the Holy Spirit.

May the endearing figure of the ancient merchant accompany the providential event from heaven. Invoked with your profound and traditional devotion and with an ever more conscious faith, may he obtain for all the baptized loyalty to the gifts of the Spirit, received especially in the sacrament of Confirmation. May he obtain for the lay faithful a more mature awareness that their participation in the life of the Church "is so necessary that without it the apostolate of the pastors will frequently be unable to obtain its full effect" (*Apostolicam actuositatem*, n. 10). For all the members of the Church in Cremona may he obtain from the Lord the fervour requested of the new evangelizers, called in the post-synodal period to be true witnesses to faith, hope and love.

With these fervent wishes, as I recall my Pastoral Visit to Cremona in June 1992, and the subsequent meeting with those who came to Rome on pilgrimage in November of last year, as a seal to the diocesan synod, I sincerely impart to you, Venerable Brother, to the priests, deacons, consecrated persons, to the lay faithful, to every family, every parish and the whole city my affectionate Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 24 June 1997.

IOANNES PAULUS PP. II

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