



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE ITALIAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE**

Thursday, 22 May 1997

“On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, ‘if any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, “out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water”?’ Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive” (Jn 7:37-39).

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. You have chosen to celebrate your plenary assembly on the days immediately following Pentecost: may the Holy Spirit, whose descent upon the Church at her birth we have just celebrated, illumine and guide your meeting and your work.

It is a joy for me to be with you and to share your pastoral anxieties and concerns. I greet and thank your President, Cardinal Camillo Ruini, and all the other Italian Cardinals; I also greet the Vice-Presidents, with particular gratitude to Archbishop Giuseppe Agostino, who has ended his service, and cordial wishes to Archbishop Giuseppe Costanzo, appointed to take on his role as Vice-President. Lastly, I greet the General Secretary and each one of you, venerable Brothers in the Episcopate, and I wish you all the fruits of the Spirit in your commitment to your individual Dioceses and to the Episcopal Conference.

2. Your assembly gave ample space to the great theme of meeting Jesus Christ *through the Bible*. In *Tertio millennio adveniente* I stressed how important it is that in this year of preparation for the Great Jubilee, dedicated to Jesus Christ, the one Saviour of the world, yesterday, today and for ever (cf. Heb 13:8), Christians “should turn with renewed interest to the Bible, ‘whether it be through the liturgy, rich in the divine word, or through devotional reading, or through instructions

suitable for the purpose and other aids” (n. 40).

Despite the great impetus that the Second Vatican Council gave to biblical studies and the biblical apostolate in Christian communities, there are still too many of the faithful *who are deprived of a vital contact with Sacred Scripture* and do not adequately nourish their faith with the riches of God’s word contained in the revealed texts. Further effort is therefore needed to give them wider access to the Bible. “Ignorance of Sacred Scripture means ignorance of Christ”, as St Jerome said, since the whole Bible speaks of him (cf. Lk 24:27).

For a real contact with Sacred Scripture, reference to the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* is crucial. We find in it the doctrinal principles and the most appropriate pastoral means for ensuring that the experience of the *Sacred Book retains its intrinsic quality of listening to the Word of God*, that it is an exegetically correct approach, that it becomes a source of spiritual life, enlivens and invigorates all pastoral activity, guides and supports ecumenical dialogue and shows the great human and cultural riches that flow from the Bible and have yielded marvellous fruits of civilization in Italy and in many other nations.

By virtue of this link between faith and culture, the Bible is offered as *a basic text for the formation of the new generations*, in the catechesis of Christian initiation and in the teaching of the Catholic religion given in schools.

The demanding task of the new evangelization thus involves presenting the Bible once again to the whole People of God through liturgical proclamation, preaching and catechesis, the practice of *lectio divina* and other ways well described in your recent *Pastoral Note*, “La Bibbia nella vita della Chiesa”. Parish and religious communities, lay movements and associations, families and young people can thus experience the loving condescension of God the Father, who through Sacred Scripture reaches out to every person, revealing the nature of his Only-begotten Son and his plan of salvation for humanity.

So that Scripture may be understood and accepted by the faithful in the full depths of its truth and as the supreme rule of our faith, guidance must obviously be provided that will avoid superficial, emotional or even manipulative interpretations which are not enlightened by wise discernment and listening in the Spirit. This is our specific responsibility as Pastors, aided by priests and catechists: the true and genuine interpretation and transmission of the sacred texts can only take place within the Church, in the light of living Tradition and under the guidance of the Magisterium (cf. *Dei Verbum*, n. 10).

3. Devoting particular attention to meeting Jesus Christ through the Bible, you have meant, dear Brothers, to give an impetus to the preparation for this special *Holy Year*, in which we will celebrate the 2,000th anniversary of the Incarnation of the Word of God. I know the commitment with which each of you in your own particular Church and together in the Episcopal Conference

are preparing for this great event. I am pleased with it and congratulate you.

A salient moment on this journey of preparation for the Jubilee will be the *National Eucharistic Congress*, scheduled to take place in Bologna at the end of September on the same theme as that of this preparatory year: “Jesus Christ, the one Saviour of the world, yesterday, today and for ever”. I will be pleased to be able to meet you in Bologna and I thank Cardinal Giacomo Biffi for the zeal with which he is preparing this great manifestation of faith in the Eucharistic Christ and of membership in the Church.

4. Dear Brothers, the memory of the *Palermo Convention* is still fresh upon my heart. All the Dioceses of Italy gathered together to invigorate the life of the nation with the Gospel of love. Since the convention you have already worked hard to put into practice the decisions made there regarding the primacy of the spiritual life, commitment to the new evangelization, the relationship between faith and culture, the family, young people, preferential love for the poor and the Christian inspiration of political and social life.

In particular the cultural plan oriented in a Christian direction identifies a basic objective to strive for with concerted sensitivity and energy: that of a faith *expressed in works*, so that Jesus Christ may also inspire and sustain the temporal commitment of believers for the future of the Italian people, as already happened in the past. In this perspective, I would like to encourage the efforts you are making for a more incisive and organic Christian presence in the *world of social communications*, knowing well that decisive challenges are at stake in this area.

5. I share with you, dear brothers, your concern and also your worry for *the future of the Italian nation*. For its unity, for its great Christian heritage and for the consequent role it must be able to play in Europe.

The Italian people are rich in energy, capable of facing and overcoming even the most difficult problems, but these energies must be able to be expressed in freedom and solidarity, leaving room and indeed giving an impetus to the “subjectivity of society” (*Centesimus annus*, n. 13), whose strength lies in the many bodies and intermediate groupings, *especially in the family*, which is the basic cell of society as well as of the Church.

In view of the many attacks which the family suffers today even in Italy, where it also has a particularly important social function, I want to tell you, my Brother Bishops, that I am at your side, both in your pastoral action on behalf of families, and in the commitment to which all Catholics and people of goodwill are called in order to safeguard on the legislative level the rights of the family based on marriage, and to request the adoption of new provisions and initiatives regarding employment, construction and tax laws, so that the family and motherhood are not unjustly penalized.

I know, dear Brothers, that the attention you give *to schools* is just as great: both for schools in general, which must first of all be supported in their primary task of educating and forming the person, and especially for non-State schools. Here I renew, together with you, the request “that parity for non-State schools, which offer a valid public service appreciated and desired by many families, will finally be put into practice” (*Address to the Roman Institute of Villa Flaminia*, 23 February 1997; *L’Osservatore Romano* English edition, 5 March 1997, p. 6). In this field too, the legislation of many member countries of the European Union can be an example.

6. Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate! Let us place in the heart of Mary, our gentle Mother, the plans which have been made during these days of prayer, fraternal exchange and common reflection.

United with Mary, the martyrs and the saints who have written this nation’s history, let us look with trust to the tasks awaiting us.

God bless each one of you and your Churches. May God bless the Italian people, strengthen them in the faith of their fathers, give them light of mind and openness of heart to build the civilization of love on the threshold of the third millennium.

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