



The Holy See

*Message of His Holiness Paul VI
to Mr. Amadou Mahtar M'Bow, Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of the 10th International Literacy Day**

On sending to you, last year, our message on the occasion of the 1975 World Literacy Day, we repeated to you the satisfaction with which the Holy See had welcomed the initiative of such a "Day", which reaches its tenth celebration this year.

During these ten years, we have followed with interest UNESCO's activity in its struggle against the scourge of illiteracy. We have encouraged the specific programmes it has undertaken, for example, on behalf of the young, on women and of migrants. On various occasions, too, we affirmed the warm support of the Holy See for these meritorious initiatives and we reminded Catholics insistently how important it was for them to intensify their efforts in favour of literacy campaigns, in faithfulness to a long tradition of cultural assistance, the contribution of which has been and remains considerable.

A tenth anniversary suggests drawing up a balance sheet. Is it not opportune to try to make a thorough and serene evaluation of the aims attained, in order to draw from them new impetus for new commitments? Illiteracy, in fact, a scourge which is far from being circumscribed, still causes an increase every year in the millions of men, including a great many young people, who are cut off from the vital stream of complete development and who, for that reason, are unable to hold their rightful place in society. So we think that the struggle against illiteracy should be intensified in a renewed spirit of cooperation, even, in a certain sense, a new one, which will unite the individual, the family and local community, public and private infrastructures, governments, and, beyond them, the whole international community.

That is why it seems to us that efforts are called for in two directions. It is necessary, on the one hand, to drive home to illiterates more and more the justification of the action undertaken. On the other hand, it is expedient to make public opinion, both national and international, more and more aware of its real responsibilities in this work of cooperation. What perseverance in action can be

hoped for if the latter be not based on personal conviction? In a number of cases, it would be opportune, therefore, to undertake, among the beneficiaries of literacy movements, a campaign to convince them deeply that the efforts asked of them serve their own progress. They must also be persuaded that, to the right of receiving from the responsible organism all possible assistance to help them to shake off the heavy yoke of illiteracy, there corresponds the duty of continuing perseveringly their effort towards spiritual, moral and cultural enrichment; that the improvement of their living conditions must entail a proportionate effort to contribute to improving the quality of life for the whole community and its social progress.

There are, however, deplorable situations which prove to be very difficult to change. As the result of age, the weight of habit, or a certain fear to involve oneself in change, a certain number of the members of a community do not feel the necessary energy to emerge from their situation. Campaigns of collective information should appeal to them, too, in order to convince them at least not to hinder the development of instruction, and even to inspire in them the desire to help those who can benefit from it. We are thinking here particularly of the young, who must leave illiteracy behind them, and women, who are frequently victims of actual situations or habits. It is to be hoped that efforts already made to assure them, even the poorest, of the right to education, will be continued and strengthened. One must think, in fact, that women in particular can become, thanks to their educative action among their children, very effective agents for the promotion of literacy.

How could we fail to point out also the importance of the "day" and of information campaigns as regards public opinion? It is important to make known in a more and more complete and detailed way the scope of the problem of illiteracy and its consequences. It is essential, furthermore, to raise consciousness of the unity of mankind in order to perceive clearly the precise duties imposed by solidarity, not only within the local or national community, but also on the universal plane, beyond the frontiers between countries or continents. A public opinion formed in this way will be able to convince itself of its duty of cooperation, in spite of the sacrifices imposed. It will even support new initiatives taken by public authorities to solve this problem better, both on the domestic plane and in the field of collaboration between the privileged countries and those that need help.

Presenting these few thoughts to you, we express to you our fervent wishes for the full success of the tenth World Literacy Day and of the new efforts to combat illiteracy. This task is one of those that reflect greatest credit on the Organization of which you are at present the Director-General and which unites, with the dedication and experience of your various collaborators, the agreement and unanimous support of all men of goodwill.

The Vatican, 28 August 1976.

PAULUS PP. VI

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Paths to Peace p.134-135.

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