



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT
OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO VERONA ON THE OCCASION
OF THE FOURTH NATIONAL ECCLESIAL CONVENTION

***ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE CONVENTION***

*Verona Exhibition Centre
Thursday, 19 October 2006*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am pleased to be with you today, in this beautiful and historical city of Verona, in order to take an active part in the Fourth National Convention of the Church in Italy. I offer to all and to each one of you my cordial greeting in the Lord.

I thank Cardinal Camillo Ruini, President of the Bishops' Conference, and Dr Giovanna Ghirlanda, representative of the Diocese of Verona, for the kind words of welcome they addressed to me on behalf of all of you and for the summary given to me on the Convention's progress.

I thank Cardinal Dionigi Tettamanzi, President of the Preparatory Committee, and all who have worked for its realization. I wholeheartedly thank each of you who represent here, in pleasant harmony, the various components of the Church in Italy: Bishop Flavio Roberto Carraro of Verona, who is hosting us; the Bishops present, the priests and deacons, the religious men and women, and you lay faithful, men and women, who give voice to the many realities of the Catholic laity in Italy.

This Fourth National Convention is a new step on the path of implementing the Vatican II directives, which the Italian Church has undertaken since the years immediately following the

great Council.

First of all, it is a path of communion with God the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, and therefore of communion among us in the unity of the one Body of Christ (cf. I Jn 1: 3; I Cor 12: 12-13). It is a path directed towards evangelization, to keep the faith alive and strong in the Italian People. It is therefore a tenacious testimony of love for Italy and of active solicitude for the good of her children.

This journey of the Church in Italy has run in strict and constant union with the Successor of Peter: I am happy to recall with you the Servant of God, Paul VI, who called the First Convention in now distant 1976, and John Paul II, with his fundamental Interventions that we all remember at the Conventions of Loreto and Palermo, which have strengthened the confidence of the Italian Church to work so that faith in Jesus Christ continues to offer, also to the men and women of our time, the sense and the orientation of [human] existence and so has had "a leading role and an effective drawing power" in the Nation's journey towards its future (cf. *Discourse at the Meeting with the Italian Church in Loreto*, 11 April 1985; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 6 May, p. 5)

Risen Lord: centre of life

In the same spirit I have come to Verona today to pray to the Lord with you, to share, even though briefly, in your work of these days, and to propose my Reflection to you on what appears of the first importance for the Christian presence in Italy.

You have made a very appropriate choice, putting the Risen Jesus Christ at the centre of the Convention's attention, and of all the life and witness of the Church in Italy. The Resurrection of Christ is a fact that occurred in history, of which the Apostles were witnesses and certainly not its inventors. At the same time, it was not simply a return to our earthly life. Instead, it is the greatest "mutation" that ever occurred, the decisive "jump" towards a profoundly new dimension of life, the entry into a decidedly different order that regards above all Jesus of Nazareth, but with him also us, the whole human family, history and the entire universe.

This is why the Resurrection of Christ is the centre of the preaching and the Christian witness from the beginning and until the end of time. Certainly, it is a great mystery, the mystery of our salvation, which finds its fulfilment in the Resurrection of the Incarnate Word and both anticipates and guarantees our hope. But the mark of this mystery is love, and only in the logic of love can it be brought close and somehow understood: Jesus Christ risen from the dead, because all of his being is perfectly and intimately united with God who is love, which is truly stronger than death.

He was one with indestructible Life and therefore he could give his own life, letting himself be killed, but he could not succumb to death definitively: at the Last Supper he concretely anticipated and accepted out of love his own death on the Cross, thus transforming it into the gift of himself,

that gift which gives us life, liberty and salvation.

His Resurrection, therefore, has been like an explosion of light, an explosion of love that melts the chains of sin and death. It inaugurated a new dimension of life and reality, from which the new world comes forth, that continuously penetrates our world, transforming it and drawing it to himself.

All of this concretely happens through the life and witness of the Church; rather, the Church herself constitutes the first fruits of this transformation, which is God's work and not ours. It comes to us through faith and the Sacrament of Baptism, which is really death and resurrection, rebirth, transformation to a new life. It is what St Paul reveals in the Letter to the Galatians: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (2: 20). Hence, the essential identity of my life is changed through Baptism, and I continue to exist only in this changed state.

My own self is taken away and I am filled with a new and greater subject, in which my "I" is still there but transformed, purified, "open" through the insertion into the Other, who acquires new space in my existence. Thus, we become "one in Christ" (Gal 3: 28), a unique new subject, and our "I" is freed from its isolation.

"I, but no longer I": this is the formula of Christian existence established in Baptism, the formula of the resurrection in time, the formula of the Christian "novelty" called to transform the world.

Here lies our Paschal joy. Our vocation and our Christian duty consist in cooperating so that they reach effective fulfilment in the daily reality of our life, what the Holy Spirit accomplishes in us with Baptism. In fact, we are called to become new women and men, to be able to be true witnesses of the Risen One and thus bearers of Christian joy and hope in the world, concretely in that community of men and women in which we live.

Church of Italy's service

So, from this fundamental message of the Resurrection present in us and in our daily work, I come to the theme of the Church in Italy's service to the Nation, to Europe and to the world.

The Italy of today presents itself to us as a profoundly needy Land and at the same time a very favourable place for such a witness.

It is profoundly needy because it participates in the culture that predominates in the West and seeks to present itself as universal and self-sufficient, generating a new custom of life. From this a new wave of illuminism and laicism is derived, by which only what is experiential and calculable would be rationally valid, while on the level of praxis, individual freedom is held as a fundamental value to which all others must be subject.

Therefore, God remains excluded from culture and from public life, and faith in him becomes more difficult, also because we live in a world that almost always appears to be of our making, in which, so to speak, God no longer appears directly but seems to have become superfluous, even out of place.

In strict relationship with all of this, a radical reduction of man has taken place, considered a simple product of nature and as such not really free, and in himself susceptible to be treated like any other animal. Thus, an authentic overturning of the point of departure of this culture has come about, which started as a claim of the centrality of man and his freedom.

Along the same lines, ethics is brought within the confines of relativism and utilitarianism with the exclusion of every moral principle that is valid and in itself binding.

It is not difficult to see how this type of culture represents a radical and profound break not only with Christianity but more in general with the religious and moral traditions of humanity. It is therefore not able to establish a true dialogue with other cultures, in which the religious dimension is strongly present, besides not being able to respond to the fundamental questions on the sense and direction of our life.

Therefore, this culture is marked by a deep privation, but also by a great and poorly hidden need of hope.

As I mentioned, however, Italy at the same time constitutes a Land favourable for Christian witness. Here, in fact, the Church is a lively reality - and we see it! -, which conserves a capillary presence in the midst of people of every age and level.

Christian traditions often continue to be rooted and to produce fruit, while a great effort of evangelization and catechesis is taking place, addressed particularly to the new generations, but now even more so to families. Besides, with growing clarity the insufficiency of a rationality closed in on itself and an over individualistic ethic is felt: in practice, the grave risk of detaching itself from the Christian roots of our society is sensed.

This sensation, diffused in the Italian People, is expressly and strongly formulated by many important cultural figures, also among those who do not share, or at least who do not practice, our faith.

The Church and Catholic Italians are called, therefore, to welcome this great opportunity, and above all to be aware of it. Consequently, our attitude must never be renunciatory or closed in on ourselves. Instead, we must keep alive, and if possible increase, our dynamism, trustingly open to new relationships, without wasting any energy that can contribute to the cultural and moral growth of Italy.

It is up to us, in fact, not with our poor resources but with the strength that comes from the Holy Spirit, to give positive and convincing responses to the longings and questions of our people.

If we can do it, the Church in Italy will render a great service not only to this Nation, but also to Europe and to the world, because the trap of secularism is present everywhere and the need for a faith lived in relation to the challenges of our time is likewise universal.

Showing the "yes" of faith

Dear brothers and sisters, now we must ask ourselves: how, and on what foundations, can we accomplish such a task? In this Convention you have rightly held it indispensable to give concrete, practicable content to Christian witness, examining how it can be carried out and developed in each of the great areas of human experience.

We will therefore be helped by not losing sight in our pastoral activity of the link between faith and daily life, between the Gospel proposition and the preoccupations and aspirations that most people have at heart.

Thus, in these days you have reflected on the affective life and on the family, on work and on holidays, on education and the culture, on situations of poverty and illness, on the duties and responsibilities of social and political life.

Above all, I would like to emphasize for my part how, through this multiform witness, that great "yes" must emerge which God, through Jesus Christ, has said to man and to his life, to human love, to our freedom and our intelligence; how, therefore, faith in the God with a human face brings joy to the world.

Indeed, Christianity is open to all in cultures and society that is just, true and pure, to that which gladdens, consoles and strengthens our existence. St Paul in the Letter to the Philippians wrote: "Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (4: 8).

So, the disciples of Christ recognize and gladly welcome the authentic values of the culture of our time, such as scientific knowledge and technological advancement, human rights, religious freedom, democracy. They do not overlook or undervalue, however, that dangerous fragility of human nature which is a threat for man's advancement in every historical context; in particular, they do not neglect the interior tensions and contradictions of our age.

Therefore, the work of evangelization is never a simple adaptation to culture, but it is always also a purification, a courageous break that leads to maturation and healing, an openness that brings to

birth that "new creation" (II Cor 5: 17: Gal 6: 15) which is the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

As I wrote in the Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, at the origin of the Christian being - and therefore at the origin of our witness as believers - there is no ethical decision or great idea, but the encounter with the Person of Jesus Christ, "which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction" (n. 1).

The fruitfulness of this encounter is also manifest in a peculiar and creative manner in the actual human and cultural context, above all in relation to reason which has given life to modern science and to the related technologies. A fundamental characteristic of the latter is, in fact, the systematic employment of mathematical instruments to be able to work with nature to harness its immense energies for our service.

Mathematics, as such, is a creation of our intelligence: the correspondence between its structures and the real structures of the universe - which is the presupposition of all modern scientific and technological developments, already expressly formulated by Galileo Galilei with the famous affirmation that the book of nature is written in mathematical language - arouses our admiration and raises a big question.

It implies, in fact, that the universe itself is structured in an intelligent manner, such that a profound correspondence exists between our subjective reason and the objective reason in nature.

It then becomes inevitable to ask oneself if there might not be a single original intelligence that is the common font of them both.

Thus, precisely the reflection on the development of science brings us towards the creator *Logos*. The tendency to give irrationality, chance and necessity the primacy is overturned, also to lead our intelligence and our freedom back to it. Upon these bases it again becomes possible to enlarge the area of our rationality, to reopen it to the larger questions of the truth and the good, to link theology, philosophy and science between them in full respect for the methods proper to them and of their reciprocal autonomy, but also in the awareness of the intrinsic unity that holds them together.

This is the task that is before us, a fascinating adventure that is worth our effort, to give a new thrust to the culture of our time and to restore the Christian faith to full citizenship in it.

The "cultural project" of the Church in Italy, with this object in view, is without doubt a happy intuition and can make a very important contribution.

The human person: reason, intelligence, love

The human person is not, on the other hand, only reason and intelligence, although they are

constitutive elements. He bears within himself, written in the most profound depths of his being, the need for love, to be loved and in turn to love. Therefore, he questions himself and often feels lost before the harshness of life, the evil that exists in the world and that appears so strong and at the same time radically devoid of sense.

Particularly in our age, notwithstanding all the progress made, evil has certainly not been overcome. Indeed, its power seems reinforced and all the attempts to hide it are quickly unveiled, as both daily experience and great historical events demonstrate.

The recurring questions therefore return: can there be a safe space in our life for authentic love, and in the final analysis, whether the world is truly the work of God's wisdom. Here, much more than any human reason, the upsetting novelty of Biblical revelation comes to our aid: the Creator of Heaven and earth, the one God who is the source of every being, the sole Creator *Logos*, this creative reason knows how to love man personally, or rather, loves him passionately and wants to be loved in his turn. This creative reason, who at the same time loves, therefore gives life to a history of love with Israel, his people, and in this affair, in the face of the betrayal of the people, his love shows itself rich in inexhaustible fidelity and mercy. It is a love that forgives beyond all limits.

In Jesus Christ such an attitude reaches an extreme, unheard-of and dramatic level: in him, in fact, God makes himself one of us, our brother in humanity, and what is more, sacrifices his life for us.

Through death on the Cross, apparently the greatest evil in history, is brought about "that turning of God against himself in which he gives himself in order to raise man up and save him. This is love in its most radical form" (*Deus Caritas Est*, n. 12), in which is made manifest what "God is love" means (I Jn 4: 8), and one also understands how authentic love must be defined (cf. *ibid.*, nn. 9-10, 12).

Precisely because he truly loves us, God respects and saves our freedom. He does not counter the power of evil and sin with a greater power, but - as our beloved Pope John Paul II told us in the Encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*, and later in the book *Memory and Identity*, his true spiritual testament - he prefers to put a limit on his patience and his mercy, that limit which is, in fact, the suffering of God's Son. In this way our suffering is also transformed from within, appears in the dimension of love and contains a promise of salvation.

Dear brothers and sisters, all this John Paul II not only thought, and even not only believed with an abstract faith: he understood it and lived it with a faith matured in suffering. Upon this road, as Church, we are called to follow him, in the way and in the measure that God sets for each one of us.

Rightly, the Cross causes us fear, as it provoked fear and anguish in Jesus Christ (cf. Mk 14: 33-36); but it is not a negation of life, of which in order to be happy it is necessary to rid oneself.

It is rather the extreme "yes" of God to man, the supreme expression of his love and the source of full and perfect life. It therefore contains the most convincing invitation to follow Christ on the way of gift of self.

Here, I would like to address a special affectionate thought to the suffering members of the Body of the Lord. In Italy, as in every part of the world, they complete what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ in their own flesh (cf. Col 1: 24), and so they contribute in the most effective manner to everyone's salvation. They are the most convincing witnesses of the joy that comes from God and that gives strength to accept the cross in love and in perseverance.

We know well that this choice of faith and of following Christ is never easy. Instead, it is always opposed and controversial. The Church remains, therefore, a "sign of contradiction" in the footsteps of her Master (cf. Lk 2: 34), even in our time.

But we do not lose heart because of this. On the contrary, we must always be ready to give a response (*apo-logia*) to whoever asks us the reason (*logos*) for our hope, as the First Letter of St Peter (3: 15) invites us, which you have chosen very opportunely as a biblical guide for the itinerary of this Convention. We must answer "with gentleness and reverence", with a "clear conscience" (3: 15-16), with that gentle power that comes from union with Christ.

We must do it full time, on the level of thought and action, of personal behaviour and public witness. The strong unity that was present in the Church of the first centuries between a faith that befriends intelligence and a life praxis characterized by reciprocal love and caring attention to the poor and suffering, made the great missionary expansion of Christianity in the Hellenistic-Roman world possible. So it also happened later, in the different cultural contexts and historical situations.

This continues to be the high road for evangelization. May the Lord guide us to live this unity between truth and love in the conditions proper to our time, for the evangelization of Italy and of the world today. And so I come to an important and fundamental point: education.

Education

Basically, in order for the experience of Christian faith and love to be welcomed and lived and transmitted from one generation to the next, there is the fundamental and decisive question of the education of the person. The formation of his mind must be a concern, without neglecting his freedom and capacity to love. This is why recourse to the help of Grace is necessary.

Only in this way can that risk for the fate of the human family be effectively opposed, which is represented by the imbalance between the very rapid growth of our technological power and the more laborious growth of our moral resources.

A true education must awaken the courage to make definitive decisions, which today are considered a mortifying bind to our freedom. In reality, they are indispensable for growth and in order to achieve something great in life, in particular, to cause love to mature in all its beauty: therefore, to give consistency and meaning to freedom itself.

From this solicitude for the human person and his formation comes our "no" to weak and deviant forms of love and to the counterfeiting of freedom, seen also in the reduction of reason to only what is calculable or manipulatable. In truth, these "nos" are rather "yeses" to authentic love, to the reality of man as he has been created by God.

I want to express here my wholehearted appreciation for the great formative and educative work that the single Churches never tire of carrying out in Italy by their pastoral attention to the new generations and to families; thank you for this attention!

Among the multiple forms of this commitment, I cannot but think of Catholic schools in particular, because in their regard there still exists, in some measure, antiquated prejudices which cause damaging delays, and are no longer justifiable, in recognizing their function and in permitting their concrete work.

Witnesses of charity

Jesus told us that whatever we would have done to the least of the brethren we would have done it to him (cf. Mt 25: 40). Therefore, the authenticity of our adherence to Christ is verified especially in the concrete love and solicitude for the weakest and poorest, those most threatened and in serious difficulty.

The Church in Italy has a great tradition of closeness, help and solidarity towards the needy, the sick, the marginalized, which finds its highest expression in a wonderful succession of "Saints of charity". This tradition still continues today, and it deals with the many new forms of moral and material poverty through *Caritas*, volunteer organizations, the often hidden works of many parishes, religious communities, associations and groups, individual people moved by love of Christ and neighbour.

What is more, the Church in Italy shows extraordinary solidarity towards the immense multitudes of poor on the earth. Therefore, it is very important that all these witnesses of charity always keep their specific profile aloft and alight, nourishing itself on humility and trust in the Lord, keeping itself free from ideological suggestions and party sympathies, and above all measuring its own vision on the vision of Christ. The practical work is important, therefore, but the personal sharing with the needy and with the suffering of one's neighbour counts even more.

Thus, dear brothers and sisters, the Church's charity makes visible God's love in the world and so

makes our faith in the Incarnate, Crucified and Risen God convincing.

Civil and political responsibility of Catholics

Your Convention has rightly considered the theme of citizenship, that is, the question of the civil and political responsibility of Catholics. Christ has come to save the real, concrete man who lives in history and in the community, and so Christianity and the Church have had a public dimension and value from the beginning.

As I wrote in the Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (cf. nn. 28-29) on the relationship between religion and politics, Jesus Christ brought a substantial novelty, opening the way towards a more human, freer world through the reciprocal distinction and autonomy of the State and the Church, that is, between what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God (cf. Mt 22: 21).

The very religious freedom that we hold as a universal value, particularly necessary in the world today, has its historical roots here. The Church, therefore, is not and does not intend to be a political agent. At the same time she has a profound interest in the good of the political community, whose soul is justice, and offers it her specific contribution at a double level.

Indeed, Christian faith purifies reason and helps it to be better: as a result, with its social doctrine whose argument begins from what is conformed to the nature of every human being, the Church's contribution is to enable whatever is just to be effectively recognized and then also accomplished. To this end, moral and spiritual energies are clearly indispensable as they ensure that the demands of justice are put before personal interests, a social category or even a State. For the Church, here again, there is ample space to root these energies in the conscience, to nourish them and fortify them.

The immediate duty to act in the political sphere to build a just order in society is not the Church's task as such, but that of the lay faithful, who work as citizens under their own responsibility. This is a duty of great importance to which Italian lay Christians are called to dedicate themselves with generosity and courage, illuminated by faith and by the Magisterium of the Church and animated by the charity of Christ.

Special attention and extraordinary commitment are demanded today by those great challenges that endanger vast portions of the human family: war and terrorism, hunger and thirst, some terrible epidemics. But it is also necessary to face, with equal determination and clear policies the risks of political and legislative choices that contradict fundamental values and anthropological principles and ethics rooted in the nature of the human being, in particular, regarding the guardianship of human life in all its stages, from conception to natural death, and to the promotion of the family founded on marriage, avoiding the introduction in the public order of other forms of union that would contribute to destabilizing it, obscuring its particular character and its

irreplaceable role in society.

The open and courageous testimony that the Church and Italian Catholics have given and are giving in this regard is a precious service to Italy, useful and stimulating also for many other nations. This commitment and this witness are certainly part of that great "yes" that as believers in Christ we say to man loved by God.

To be united to Christ

Dear brothers and sisters, the duties and the responsibilities that this Ecclesial Convention is highlighting are certainly great and multiple. We are encouraged to keep ever in mind that we are not alone in carrying the burden. In fact, we support one another, and the Lord himself above all guides and sustains the fragile boat of the Church.

Hence, we return to the point of departure: our being united in him is decisive, and therefore among ourselves, to be with him to be able to go out in his Name (cf. Mk 3: 13-15).

Thus, our true strength is to nourish ourselves on his Word and his Body, to unite ourselves to his offering for us, as we will do in the [Eucharistic] celebration this afternoon, adore him present in the Eucharist: in fact, adoration must precede our every activity and programme, that it may render us truly free and that we may be given the criteria for our action.

May the Virgin Mary, so loved and venerated in every part of Italy, precede and guide us in our union with Christ. In her we meet, pure and undeformed, the true essence of the Church, and so through her, we learn to know and love the mystery of the Church that lives in history, we deeply feel a part of it, and in our turn we become "ecclesial souls", we learn to resist that "internal secularization" that threatens the Church of our time, a consequence of the secularization process that has profoundly marked European civilization.

Dear brothers and sisters, together we raise our humble but confident prayer to the Lord, that the Italian Catholic community, inserted in vital communion with the Church of every place and time and closely united to its own Bishops, may bring with renewed impetus to this beloved Nation, and to every corner of the earth, the joyful witness of the Risen Jesus, hope of Italy and of the world.