



The Holy See

LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO ITALIAN BISHOPS

Dear Italian Bishops,

1. "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 1:7).

The present moment in history, marked by events of unique social significance, is also for Italian Catholics a powerful call to decision and commitment. Mindful of the formidable challenges which emerge from the "signs of the times", as Bishop of Rome I turn with deep affection to you, Bishops of the Churches in the peninsula and on the islands, Bishops of the North, the Centre and the South of Italy, in order to share my concerns and hopes and, in particular, *to witness to that legacy of human and Christian values* which is the most precious heritage of the Italian people. I recalled this legacy on the occasion of the Christmas message to the world, and it is our duty to pause and reflect upon it as we approach the end of the second millennium.

Witness to legacy of human and Christian values

It is, above all, *a legacy of faith* kindled here by apostolic preaching from the earliest years of the Christian era and soon confirmed by the blood shed by innumerable martyrs. The seed sown by Peter and Paul and their disciples sunk deep roots in the hearts of the peoples of this land, also promoting their civil advancement and arousing among them new and fruitful links of cohesion and co-operation.

Secondly, it is a *cultural legacy*, which has flourished from that common stock over the course of the centuries. What treasures of knowledge, insight and experience have followed, increasing also because of the faith. They have then been expressed in literature, art, humanitarian initiatives, legal institutions and in that whole living fabric of practices and customs that shapes the very soul of the people! It is a wealth which is looked on with admiration and, we might say, with envy from every corner of the world. Italians today cannot fail to be aware and proud of it.

Lastly, it is a *legacy of unity* which, even beyond its own specific political framework matured in the course of the 19th century, is deeply rooted in the hearts of the Italians who, through their language, historical events, their common faith and culture, have felt an integral part of a single people. This unity is measured not by years, but by long centuries of history.

2. The social and political situation which Italy is experiencing in this delicate phase of its history undoubtedly echoes the *historic changes* come about in Europe during that extraordinary year of 1989. The previous opposition between the two blocs, commonly referred to by the conventional names of East and West, was followed by a "sudden and extraordinary collapse of the communist system", whose causes "were undeniably economic, social and political in nature", but more deeply "ethical, anthropological and, in the end, spiritual" (cf. *Final Declaration* of the Special Assembly for Europe of the Synod of Bishops, n. 1; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 23 December 1991).

The altered geopolitical map of Europe thus seems to be in constant evolution, promising *great challenges and new scenarios* for the years ahead: in fact, while on the one hand the way towards European unity proceeds, on the other, it starkly poses the problem of relationships between nations, and not infrequently there are resurgences of aggravated nationalism, especially in the countries of Eastern Europe and the Balkans, as the sad situation of our present times painfully demonstrates.

Mobilize all strengths to build a new Europe

3. This is why, based upon an interpretation of the "signs of the times" in the light of the values of human and Christian solidarity, it seems to me more important and urgent than ever courageously to pursue the endeavour of *building the new Europe*, adhering steadfastly to those ideals which, in the recent past, have inspired and guided statesmen of great stature such as Alcide De Gasperi in Italy, Konrad Adenauer in Germany, Robert Schuman in France, making them the *fathers of contemporary Europe*. Is it not a telling fact that, among the principal champions of the unification of the continent, there were *men motivated by deep Christian faith*? Was it not from the Gospel values of freedom and solidarity that these men drew the inspiration for their courageous plan? This plan, among other things, rightly seemed to them to be realistic, despite the foreseeable difficulties, because of the keen awareness they had of the role played by Christianity in the formation and development of the cultures present in the different countries of the continent.

The political and spiritual legacy handed down by these great historical figures is therefore not only to be guarded and defended, but developed and strengthened. *A general mobilization of all forces* is needed, so that Europe may be able to advance in the search for its unity, looking at the same time "beyond its own frontiers and its own interest" (*Declaration*, n. 11). Thus it will be able to contribute to building a future of justice, solidarity and peace for each nation, breaking down ethnic and cultural barriers and preconceptions, and overcoming the existing divisions between

the East and West, between the North and South of the world.

4. Within this European and world context, my dear brother Bishops, it is right that we should ask the question: "What are Italy's opportunities and responsibilities?".

I am convinced that *Italy as a nation has a great deal to offer Europe as a whole*. The tendencies which today threaten to weaken Italy are negative for Europe itself and also arise *against the background of a denial of Christianity*. Such a perspective would create a Europe, and within it also an Italy, which would appear "*neutral*" at the level of values, but which in reality would collaborate in the spread of a post-Enlightenment model of life. This can also be seen in certain tendencies at work in the functioning of European institutions. Contrary to the vision of those who were the fathers of a united Europe, some forces, currently active in this community, seem rather to *reduce the sense of its life and activity to a purely economic and secularistic dimension*.

Italy, in accordance with its history, is entrusted in a special way with the task of *defending for the whole of Europe the religious and cultural heritage* linked to Rome by the Apostles Peter and Paul. Italian society should have a clear awareness of this specific task at the present historical moment, when the political assessment of the past, from the war years to today, is carried out.

Lay presence in social and political life is vital

5. *We cannot remain detached or indifferent to this assessment*, because, as Pastors inspired by a deep love for the true and integral good of man and society, we are called to "discern in the events, the needs and the longings which it shares with other men of our time, what may be genuine signs of the presence or of the purpose of God" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 11).

In particular, the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe has aroused in Italy too a new way of looking at political forces and their relationships. Thus we have heard opinions according to which, in the new political era, *a force of Christian inspiration would no longer be needed*. This, however is a mistaken appraisal, because the presence of Christian lay people in social and political life has not only been important in opposing the various forms of totalitarianism, starting with communism, but is still necessary in order to express at a social and political level the Christian tradition and culture of Italian society.

6. *A profound social and political renewal* is certainly necessary today. Alongside those who, aspiring to Christian values, have contributed to governing Italy for almost half a century, obtaining undeniable benefits for the country and its development, there are persons who have been unable to escape grave accusations as well: people, in particular, who have not always been able to withstand the strong pressures leading to excessive statism or seeking to promote personal interests over the common good. Some, moreover, are accused of having broken the State's laws.

These accusations, actually made against various political forces and also against active elements of civil society itself, have provoked judicial initiatives that are now profoundly modifying the political face of Italy.

Church's task is to encourage moral renewal

However, an honest and truthful appraisal of the post-war years cannot overlook everything that Catholics, along with other democratic forces, have done for the good of Italy. We cannot ignore all the significant achievements which have placed Italy among the seven most developed countries of the world, nor can we underestimate or forget the great merit of having preserved freedom and democracy. No less can we accept the idea that Christianity, and in particular the social teaching of the Church with its essential and necessary content, after a whole century from *Rerum novarum* to the Second Vatican Council and *Centesimus annus*, should have ceased to be, in the present situation, the foundation and driving force of the social and political involvement of Christians.

Christian lay people cannot therefore, at this decisive moment in history, *shirk their responsibility*. They must rather witness with courage to their trust in God, the Lord of history, and to their love for Italy, by their united and consistent presence and their honest and impartial service in the social and political field, remaining ever open to sincere cooperation with all the wholesome forces of the nation.

7. If the present situation demands social and political renewal, it is up to us Pastors firmly to call for the necessary principles that lead to the renewal of minds and hearts, and thus to *cultural, moral and religious renewal* (cf. *Veritatis splendor*, n. 98).

It is here that our pastoral mission lies: we must *call everyone to a specific examination of conscience*. This is a review not only of a political nature, but also cultural and ethical. It is necessary, then, to help everyone to *free this assessment* from utilitarian aspects and those related to economic trends, as indeed from the risks of manipulating public opinion.

I refer in particular to the *corporatist tendencies* and the *separatist threats* which seem to be emerging in the country. In Italy, actually, there has existed for a long time a certain tension between the rather rich North and the poorer South. Today this tension has become even greater. However, the corporatist tendencies and the separatist threats can be decisively overcome by an honest attitude of *love for the good of one's nation* and by acting with *renewed solidarity*. This solidarity must be lived not only within the country, but also in relation to Europe and the Third World. Love for one's own nation and solidarity with all humanity are not incompatible with an individual's ties with his region and his local community, where he was born, and the duties he has towards these. Solidarity, rather, pervades all the communities in which an individual lives: the family, in the first place, the regional and local community, the nation, the continent, the whole of

humanity: solidarity animates them, bringing them together according to the principle of subsidiarity, which accords to each of them the right level of autonomy.

We cannot, then, disregard the danger that this examination of conscience, fully legitimate and necessary for the rebirth of Italian society, may become *the occasion for a damaging manipulation of public opinion*. It is certainly right that those alleged to be guilty should be judged and, if truly guilty, be subject to the legal consequences. At the same time, however, we need to ask where the abuses end, and where a normal and healthy function of the institutions at the service of the common good begins. It is clear that a well-ordered society cannot place decisions about its destiny solely in the hands of the judicial authority. Legislative power and executive power, in fact, have their own specific roles and responsibilities.

The Church's task in this regard therefore seems to be *to encourage the moral renewal and profound solidarity* of Italians so as to ensure the conditions for reconciliation and the overcoming of divisions and strife.

The Church in Italy needs great prayer

8. Dear brothers in the Episcopate, our common concern for Italy *cannot be expressed solely in words*. If Italian society is to be profoundly renewed, purifying itself of mutual suspicion and looking with confidence to its future, then it is necessary that *all believers be mobilized through common prayer*. I know from personal experience how much this kind of prayer meant in the history of my own country. *Approaching the year 2000, the whole Church, and in particular the whole of Europe, needs great prayer*, which will pass, like converging waves, through the various Churches, nations, continents. Within this great prayer there is a particular place for Italy: the experience of these recent years also represents a specific sign of the need for such prayer. Prayer always means a kind of "confession", a recognition of God's presence in history and of his work for men and for peoples; at the same time, prayer promotes a closer union with him and a mutual drawing together of men.

As Bishops of the Churches in Italy we should soon proclaim this great prayer of the Italian people, in view of the coming year 2000 and with reference to the present situation, which calls for the mobilization of the spiritual and moral forces of all society. It is my belief, shared by eminent Italians including non-practising Catholics, like the late President Pertini, that *the Church in Italy can do much more* than is generally thought. It is a great social force which unites those living in Italy, from North to South: a force which has passed the test of time.

The Church is this force primarily through prayer and through unity in prayer. The time has come when this conviction can and must be made more concrete. The exhortation to such a prayer, its organized preparation and its deep motivation at this point in history will be an invitation for all Italians to reflect and to understand. Perhaps they will also be an example and an incentive for

other countries.

"Apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). The words of Jesus contain the most convincing invitation to prayer and also the strongest motivation for trust in the Saviour's presence among us. This presence itself is an inexhaustible source of hope and courage even in the confused and troubled situations in the history of individuals and nations.

Dear brothers Bishops, I place in your hands, with deep communion and trust, these thoughts and prayers. I do so solely for the love which I feel for the Italian nation, which from the beginning of my Pontificate has shown me such great goodwill, so much so that I feel able to speak of Italy as my second homeland. For this country I invoke the intercession of Mary, who bore for us the Redeemer, and the protection of Saints Francis and Catherine, as I sincerely bless you and all Italians.

From the Vatican, 6 January 1994, Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord.

JOHN PAUL II