



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II
ON THE OCCASION OF THE SIXTH INTERNATIONAL
MEETING IN ROME OF BISHOPS AND PRIESTS,
FRIENDS OF THE SANT'EGIDIO COMMUNITY**

*To my Venerable Brother
Bishop Vincenzo Paglia
of Terni-Narni-Amelia*

1. While the sixth International Meeting of Bishops and Priests, Friends of Sant'Egidio Community, is drawing to a close, I would like to convey my cordial greeting to you and to every participant.

You have come to Rome from various countries to experience moments of reflection and prayer together in an atmosphere of brotherhood, enriched by the presence of the leaders of other Churches and Ecclesial Communities. You are bound to one another by your connection with the Sant'Egidio Community, an association that for 36 years has been carrying out an appreciated service of evangelization and charity in the city of Rome and in other places in Europe, Africa, Latin America and Asia. Its innumerable activities are particularly valuable at this time in history when we are conscious of the urgent need to proclaim and to witness to the *Gospel of love* to every people, overcoming the difficulties, obstacles and misunderstandings that today are dramatically present.

Your reflection in these days, therefore, has most appropriately focused on the theme, "*The Gospel of love*", recognizing in it the message of hope that must be conveyed especially to the poor, who are ever more numerous despite the widespread affluence that exists in various countries.

2. My venerable Predecessor, Bl. John XXIII, liked to say that the Church belongs to everyone but especially to the poor, echoing as it were the Gospel Beatitude: "*Blessed are you poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God*" (Lk 6: 20). The Kingdom of God belongs to the poor who, as several Fathers of the Church point out, can intercede for us before God. St Gregory the Great, for example,

commenting on the parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus, writes: "Every day we can find Lazarus if we seek him, and every day we come across him even without seeking him. The poor who importune us at inappropriate times could intercede for us on the Day of Judgment.... Consider whether it is right to refuse them, since those importuning us may be our future protectors. So do not miss opportunities to act with mercy!" (*Hom. in Evangelia*, 40, 10: PL 76, 1309).

If, in the Book of Sirach, we read: "*The prayer of a poor man goes from his lips to the ears of God, and his judgment comes speedily*" (21: 5), the Gospel states clearly that on the Day of Judgment, the Lord of the universe will say to those on his right hand: "*I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to me*" (Mt 25: 35-36).

3. We fervently pray to be granted that Gospel wisdom which makes us understand the bond of love that links the poor to Jesus and to his disciples! Indeed, the divine Teacher uses the term "brother" to indicate the disciples and the poor, embracing them, as it were, in a single circle of love. Yes! For the disciple of Christ, the poor are brothers and sisters to be welcomed and loved, not strangers to whom we pay a few minutes of attention when necessary. The poor, then, are also our "masters"; they make us understand what we all are before God: beggars of love and salvation.

Venerable Brother, may love for the poor continue to be the badge that distinguishes the Sant'Egidio Community and those who desire to share its spirit. May every one be able to make himself "neighbour" to those in need and thus experience the truth of the words in the Bible: "*It is more blessed to give than to receive*" (Acts 20: 35).

As I assure you of my prayers, I invoke upon each and every one the motherly protection of Mary, and I send you all a special Apostolic Blessing that I willingly extend to those whom each one of you meets in your daily pastoral ministry.

From the Vatican, 7 February 2004

JOHN PAUL II