



The Holy See

CONFERMENT OF THE "PAUL VI AWARD" TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE ITALIAN REPUBLIC,
SERGIO MATTARELLA

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

Clementine Hall
Monday, 29 May 2023

[[Multimedia](#)]

Mr. President of the Republic,
Distinguished civil and religious Authorities,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear brothers and sisters!

I welcome you and greet you warmly, glad of your presence. I am pleased to award to President Sergio Mattarella the Paul VI International Prize, which has been awarded to him by the Institute of the same name, to whom I wish to express my gratitude for the valuable work it carries out in preserving the memory of Pope Montini: his writings and his speeches are an inexhaustible mine of thought, and bear witness to the intense spiritual life from which his action as a great Shepherd of the Church stemmed. Thank you, therefore, to the members and collaborators of the Institute, and thank you to those who have come from the diocese of Brescia!

Vatican Council II, for which we must be grateful to Saint Paul VI, emphasized the role of the lay faithful, highlighting their *secular character*. Indeed, the laity, by virtue of baptism, has a genuine mission, to be carried out "in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations [and]... in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life" (*Lumen gentium*, 31). And prominent among these occupations is politics, which is the "highest form of charity" (Pius XI, Address to the leaders of the Catholic University Federation, 18 December 1927). But - we may ask ourselves - how to make political action a form of charity and, on the other hand, how to live

charity, that is love in the highest sense, within political dynamics?

I believe that the answer lies in one word: *service*. Saint Paul VI said that those who exercise public power must consider themselves “as the servants of their fellow countrymen, with the selflessness and integrity befitting their high office” (Address to the representatives of the European Union of Christian Democrats, 8 April 1972). And he ruled: “The duty of service is inherent in authority; and the greater the duty, the higher that authority” (General Audience, 9 October 1968). Yet we know well how difficult this is and how the widespread temptation, at all times, even in the best political systems, is to serve authority rather than to serve through authority. How easy it is to climb onto the pedestal and how difficult it is to lower oneself into the service of others!

Christ himself spoke of the difficulty of serving and dedicating oneself to others, admitting, with a realism veiled with sadness, that “those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them”. But immediately he says to his followers, “But it shall not be so among you” – but it shall not be so among you – “but whoever would be great among you must be your servant” (*Mk 10: 42-43*). From then on, for the Christian, greatness is synonymous with service. I like to say that “he who does not live to serve, does not serve to live”. And I believe that today the conferral of the Paul VI Prize to President Mattarella is indeed a good occasion to celebrate the value and the dignity of service, the highest style of living, which puts others ahead of one’s own expectations.

That this is true of you, Mr. President, is witnessed by the Italian people, this people that does not forget your renunciation of well-deserved retirement in the name of the service required of you by the State. A week ago, you wished to pay homage, on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of his death, to the great Italian and Christian Alessandro Manzoni, who was capable of weaving with words the precious fabric of social, religious and fraternal values of the Italian people. Paul VI called him a “universal genius”, an “inexhaustible treasury of moral wisdom”, a “master of life” (*Regina Caeli*, 20 May 1973). I too keep in my heart so many of his characters. I think of the tailor, who tells of the good industriousness of those who conceive of life as time given to the individual to increase the good of others, to “be industrious; do what we can, and then be content” (*The Betrothed*, Chapter XXIV). And with this work he succeeded in expressing one of the wisest lines: “I have never known the Lord commence a miracle without accomplishing it”. Because service creates joy, and it brings good first and foremost to the one who serves. To quote Manzoni again: “One should think more of doing good, than of doing well: and so one would also end up doing better” (Chapter XXVIII).

But service risks remaining a somewhat abstract ideal without a second word that it can never be separated from: *responsibility*. As the word itself indicates, it is the ability to offer responses, drawing on one’s own effort, without waiting for others to give them. How many times, Mr. President, primarily by example rather than with words, have you recalled this! In this too, one

cannot but not a fruitful affinity with Giovanni Battista Montini, who ever since he was a young priest, was an “educator of responsibility”. As Pope, then, he wrote that words are of little use “unless they are accompanied for each individual by a livelier awareness of personal responsibility” (Apostolic Letter *Octogesima adveniens*, 48, 14 May 1978). Because, he explained, “It is too easy to throw back on others responsibility for injustice, if at the same time one does not realize how each one shares in it personally, and how personal conversion is needed first” (*ibid.*). They are words that seem very topical today, when it is almost automatic to blame others, while passion for the whole weakens and common effort risks being eclipsed by the needs of the individual; where, in a climate of uncertainty, distrust is easily transformed into indifference. Responsibility, on the other hand, as so many citizens of Emilia Romagna have shown us in recent days, calls on all people to go against the grain with respect to the climate of defeatism and complaint, to feel the needs of others as their own and to rediscover themselves as irreplaceable parts of the unique social and human fabric to which we all belong.

And still with respect to responsibility, I think of that essential component of common living that is the commitment to legality. It requires struggle and example, determination and memory, the memory of those who sacrificed their lives for justice; I am thinking of your brother Piersanti, Mr. President, and the victims of the Capaci mafia massacre, whose 31st anniversary was commemorated a few days ago. Saint Paul VI noted that in democratic societies there is no lack of institutions, pacts and statutes, but “the free and honest observance of legality is often lacking” and that there “collective selfishness arises” (Angelus, 31 August 1975). In this area too, Mr. President, with your words and example, corroborated by what you have experienced, you are a consistent teacher of responsibility.

Saint Paul VI felt the importance of the responsibility of each person for the world of all, for a world that has become global. He did so by speaking of peace – how urgent it is today! He did so by exhorting people to fight without resigning themselves to the imbalances of worldwide injustice, because the social question is a moral question and because an action of solidarity after the world wars is truly such only if it is global (cf. Encyclical Letter *Populorum progressio*, 26 March 1967, 1). More than fifty years ago, he warned of the urgency of facing up to the climate challenges, in the face of the threat of an environment that – he wrote – would become intolerable to man as a consequence of man’s own destructive activity which, by tyrannizing creation, would end up no longer in control of it. And he specified: “The Christian must turn to these new perceptions in order to take on responsibility, together with the rest of men, for a destiny which from now on is shared by all.” (*Octogesima adveniens*, 21).

Yes, the sense of responsibility and the spirit of service were for Saint Paul VI at the basis of the construction of social life. He left us the demanding heritage of building up *communities of solidarity*. It was his dream, which collided with various nightmares that became reality – I think of the terrible affair of Aldo Moro; it was the burning desire that he carried in his heart and that he expressed in terms of sharing and living as communities”, animated by the commitment to

“building up active and lived solidarity” (*ibid.*, 47). These are not utopias, but prophecies; prophecies that exhort us to live lofty ideals. Because that is what young people need today. And I am glad, Mr. President, to make myself an instrument of gratitude on behalf of all those, young and old, who see in you a teacher, a simple teacher, but above all a consistent and courteous witness of service and responsibility. Pope Montini would be pleased; his words, as well-known as they are true, I would like to repeat: “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 41). Thank you.

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