



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PARTICIPANTS
IN THE ANNUAL UNITALSI CONGRESS**

Saturday, 20 February 1999

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. I am pleased to extend an affectionate welcome to all of you who have come to Rome to attend the annual UNITALSI Congress. I extend a particular greeting to your President, Archbishop Alessandro Plotti of Pisa, and I thank him for the cordial words expressing your sentiments of devotion and affection. I also thank him for presenting the objectives of this annual meeting, along with the ideals and goals of your association. Together with him I greet the national chaplain, as well as the directors and those involved in the activities your organization promotes.

I would like to express my satisfaction with your charitable and thoughtful work, which you carry out with discretion and generosity to the benefit of those who are suffering in mind and body. You offer them a special sign of your love by giving them the opportunity to have the profound experience of a pilgrimage to various shrines and places sacred to the Blessed Virgin, and by supporting them in faith and hope when their life is tried by suffering.

The organized assistance network set up in the various Dioceses of Italy testifies to the generosity of the many priests, doctors, nurses, charity workers, stretcher-bearers, guides and volunteers who, by expressing the image of the Good Samaritan in today's world, care for the sick in a material and spiritual way.

2. Dear brothers and sisters, your annual convention is dedicated to reflecting on the "UNITALSI spirit" in relation to the changes and challenges of today's rapidly developing and changing society. They call for a wise search for adequate answers which, by drawing constant nourishment from the Gospel ideal of love, can direct the Union's national activities and imbue them with new enthusiasm. However, the challenges of today's society and your efforts to make timely improvements in your structures must not lead you to abandon the needs and spirit which led to the birth and wonderful development of UNITALSI.

Structures and organizations may change but they cannot alter the spirit and charism of UNITALSI's service. Above all, charity must remain its radiant and vital heart, without which your work would lose its meaning (cf. 1 Cor 13). Fraternal and caring love, nourished daily by prayer, is expressed in making the sick the focus of every effort: it is they who reflect the face of Christ crucified, and in their sufferings we can see the mysterious sign of the Father for the salvation of the world.

3. As the entire Church approaches the Great Jubilee, you are called to accompany the pilgrimage of those who, suffering in body and spirit, are a message of redemption and salvation in the world. On the great journey of God's people, pilgrims of pain and suffering are an allegory of humanity in its search for Christ, "the true light that enlightens every man" (Jn 1:9). As "humble servants of the sick" (cf. *Statutes*), you are entrusted with the task of supporting them in their difficulties and helping them to transform their sufferings into the mysterious presence of salvation.

I hope that what the Spirit suggests in the course of this meeting will give effective direction to your concern and instil a renewed commitment to the service of charity, in which every Christian is called to reveal God's fatherly love.

May you be guided and accompanied by Mary, a devoted pilgrim to Elizabeth's home, where her loving care enabled her cousin to discover the Father's plan.

With these wishes, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you all.