



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF POPE JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE 51st GENERAL ASSEMBLY  
OF THE ITALIAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCE**

*Tuesday, 20 May 2003*

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,*

1. "*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*" (Eph 1: 2). I am pleased to greet you with the Apostle Paul's words. I greet your President, Cardinal Camillo Ruini, and thank him for the words he has addressed to me in the name of you all. I greet the other Italian Cardinals, the Vice-Presidents of your Conference and the General Secretary. I greet each of you with fraternal affection and I would like to express to you my closeness in prayer, my appreciation, and the solidarity with which I accompany your work as Pastors of the beloved Italian nation.

2. As the main theme of your 51st General Assembly you have chosen: *Christian initiation*. It is a particularly appropriate choice, because the formation of Christians and the transmission of the faith to the new generations are of crucial importance. This is intensified by today's social and cultural context in which many factors combine to make the commitment to become authentic disciples of the Lord even more difficult and, as it were, "against the tide", while the speed and extent of the changes are widening the gap between the generations and sometimes seriously hindering communication between them.

It is therefore right, as you said in your Pastoral Guidelines for this decade, to assume as a criterion for renewal "the option to make pastoral care correspond to the *model of Christian initiation*" (*Communicating the Gospel in a Changing World*, n. 59).

3. In a situation that requires a strong commitment to the new evangelization, programmes for Christian initiation must allow *ample room for the proclamation of the faith* and must adapt its

fundamental motives to people's age and education.

It is consequently of utmost importance to start the *Christian education of children* at a young age, so that they may vitally assimilate it from their first years: families should be made aware of their noble mission and helped to carry it out, also by making up for any gaps they may leave. Indeed, no baptized child should be left without nourishment for the growth of the seed that Baptism has sown within him.

For their part, priests, catechists and formation teachers are called to cultivate their one-on-one conversation with children, adolescents and young people and not to conceal the great importance of God's call and the demanding commitment of the response to it, while at the same time, enabling them to enjoy the merciful closeness of the Lord Jesus and the motherly care of the Church.

4. I know and share the great concern with which you follow *the progress of Italian society*, anxious above all to foster the nation's internal coherence. You rightly stress the importance of *the family* for the moral and social health of the nation. Promising signs of a renewed attention to the family are coming from both the world of culture and those responsible for public life.

Your Assembly is also paying attention to the reform of the *Italian school system* and the new prospects opening up for *teaching the Catholic religion*. Catholic religion teachers and Catholic schools are entitled to full participation in the educational and formative role of schools, which are still waiting to see their role and educational contribution properly recognized in a context of effective parity.

Together with you, Brother Bishops, I would like to express special closeness to all *unemployed persons and their families* who are in conditions of hardship. Despite the improvements, there are still, especially in certain southern regions, areas in which young people, women and sometimes even fathers of families are unemployed with harmful consequences to themselves and to the country. Italy needs greater confidence and initiative if it is to offer better and more encouraging prospects to everyone.

5. We have just celebrated *the 40th anniversary of the Encyclical "Pacem in Terris"*. This great legacy left by Bl. John XXIII points out to us and to all the peoples of the world the way to build an order of truth and justice, of love and freedom, and therefore, of true peace.

Of the many regions of the world deprived of the fundamental good of peace for far too long, we must unfortunately list the *Holy Land*. I would like to express to you, Italian Bishops, my deep appreciation of your project to send a representative there, immediately after the Easter season, to bring a sign of concrete solidarity especially to the communities of Christians who live there in conditions of serious difficulty.

6. At the Mass of *the Lord's Supper* on Holy Thursday, I signed the Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. I first of all entrust to you Bishops and to your priests the intention with which I wrote it, so that we may be the first to enter ever more deeply, *through the Eucharist*, into the Mystery of Easter, in which is brought about our salvation and that of the world.

Dear Italian Bishops, I assure you of my daily prayer for yourselves and for the communities whose Pastors you are. May the Virgin Mary, to whom the faithful turn with special confidence in this "Year of the Rosary", intercede so that in all the People of God faith may be strengthened and communion and the courage for mission increased.

My Blessing to you, one and all!