



The Holy See

**LETTER OF JOHN PAUL II
TO CARD. CAMILLO RUINI ON THE OCCASION
OF THE 44TH ITALIAN CATHOLIC SOCIAL WEEK**

*To my Venerable Brother
Cardinal Camillo Ruini
President of the Italian Bishops' Conference*

1. In the 20th century the Ecclesial Community made a great effort to interpret social realities in the light of the Gospel and to make an increasingly timely and systematic contribution to solving the social question that has now assumed a global dimension (cf. Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 52). A symbolic expression of this commitment is the long journey of the *Social Weeks of Italian Catholics*. This year, the journey that began in Pistoia in 1907 has reached Bologna where the 44th "Week" will address the theme: "*Democracy: new scenes, new powers*".

I am pleased to address my cordial greeting to you, Your Eminence, and to the organizers and participants. I am proposing certain reflections with the intention of helping to keep alive the lofty inspiration of faith and the generous and far-sighted concern to build a just, supportive and peaceful society.

2. The theme chosen for this year's edition is a logical development of the theme you discussed at your previous meeting in Naples in 1999: "*What kind of civil society should Italy have in the future?*". As I was able to observe on that occasion, "the acceptance of the ethical principles which are at the root of civil coexistence and, in particular, a sincere respect for the principle of subsidiarity are the conditions for all citizens to develop a new public spirit and civic conscience" (*Message for 43rd Italian Catholic Social Week*, 10 November 1999, n. 3; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 12 January 2000, p. 8). In this regard, it is well known that the Second Vatican Council expressed the hope that all citizens might have "effective opportunities to play an active

part in the establishment of the juridical foundations of the political community, in the administration of public affairs, in determining the aims and the terms of reference of public bodies, and in the election of political leaders" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 75).

Pope Paul VI of venerable memory previously noted in his Apostolic Letter *Octogesima Adveniens* that access to the political dimension was an actual requirement of the human being. "In order to counterbalance increasing technocracy", he wrote, "modern forms of democracy must be devised, not only making it possible for each one to become informed and to express himself, but also by involving him in a shared responsibility" (n. 47).

3. In the Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, I had the opportunity to evaluate positively and to support the establishment of democracy: "The Church values the democratic system inasmuch as it ensures the participation of citizens in making political choices, guarantees to the governed the possibility both of electing and holding accountable those who govern them, and of replacing them through peaceful means when appropriate" (n. 46).

In the light of the Church's social doctrine, however, democracy is closely connected with the state of rights and a holistic conception of the person. Authentic democracy "requires that the necessary conditions be present for the advancement both of the individual through education and formation in true ideals, and of the 'subjectivity' of society through the creation of structures for participation and shared responsibility" (*ibid.*).

4. In Italy, democracy and political freedom now seem to be happily consolidated and to have penetrated the collective conscience, thanks in particular to their determined and prolonged exercise, with the crucial contribution of Catholics since the end of the Second World War.

Everyone can see, however, the risks and threats to an authentic democratic order that can derive from certain philosophical currents, anthropological views or political concepts not exempt from ideological preconceptions. For example, there is still a tendency to consider *relativism* as the mental approach that most closely corresponds to political forms of democracy, as if knowledge of the *truth* and adherence to it were a hindrance. Actually, people are often afraid of the truth because they do not know it. Truth, therefore, as Christ has revealed it, is a guarantee of full and authentic freedom for the human person.

If political action is not confronted by a *superior ethical body*, illuminated in turn by an *integral vision of the human person and of society*, it ends by being subjected to ends that are inappropriate if not illicit. On the other hand, the truth is the best *antidote to ideological fanaticism* in scientific, political and even religious circles. Indeed, the Gospel message offers the centrality of the person as an anchorage above ideology and to which all may refer. Without being rooted in the truth in this way, the human person and society are exposed to the open or thinly-disguised violence of passions and conditioning (cf. Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, n. 46).

5. You are thus called, as Christians and experts in the social disciplines, to play a role of mediation and dialogue *between concrete ideals and realities*. It is a role that sometimes requires you to be "pioneers", for you have to point out new paths and new solutions to deal more justly with the burning problems of the contemporary world.

Reflection on the democratic system today cannot be limited merely to considering political orders or institutions but must broaden our personal horizons to the problems posed by the development of science and technology, to those introduced into economy and finance by the spread of globalization, to the new rules to regulate international organizations, to the questions that have arisen from the growing and rapid development of the world of communications, in order to work out a model of democracy that is authentic and complete.

6. *Catholics are therefore invited not only to work to make civil society more alive and dynamic through promotion of the family, associations, volunteer work and so forth, opposing undue restrictions and conditions put in the way by the political or economic authority; they must also reconsider the importance of commitment to public and institutional roles in those circles in which important collective decisions are taken and in the political context, understood in the most noble sense of the word, as today is hoped for by many. Indeed, it cannot be forgotten that part of the vocation of the lay faithful is knowing and practising the social teaching of the Church, hence, also of participating in the political life of the country in accordance with the methods and means of the democratic system. Some are called, furthermore, to render a special service to the civil community by directly assuming institutional roles in the political arena.*

The Ecclesial Community has fervent expectations of the "Week" of Bologna. I therefore hope that it will lead to useful contributions for the beloved Italian Nation, and as I assure you of my special remembrance in prayer, I wholeheartedly impart a special Apostolic Blessing to the Scientific Organizing Committee, to the Relators and to all the participants.

From the Vatican, 4 October 2004

JOHN PAUL II