



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II FOR THE 33rd INTERNATIONAL LITERACY DAY*

*To Mr Federico Mayor Saragoza
Director General of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization*

1. On the occasion of the 33rd International Literacy Day organized by UNESCO, I would like to pay homage to the men and women who down the ages have helped their brothers and sisters to acquire the basic elements of knowledge: particularly worthy of recognition are the teachers on all the continents who are devoted to training young people and adults with perseverance and effectiveness. I would also like to mention the mission carried out by many lay people and religious, pioneers of popular instruction, who have been witnesses to Christ in the fulfilment of their duties, as they awaken minds and consciences.

2. We should acknowledge the important role played in recent decades by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in conjunction with other international bodies; it has increased its efforts to deal with the serious situation of illiteracy in the world. By giving each human being access to a general education, UNESCO thus offers him the possibility of leading a dignified life, of taking charge of his own future and of assuming his share of responsibility in society. The fight against illiteracy is necessary for the development of individuals and peoples, who thereby receive tools for reflection and analysis and can more easily defend themselves against sectarian, integralist or totalitarian ideas. It is therefore highly desirable that the action taken, which requires an increasingly intense coordination of national and international efforts, be successfully pursued.

3. At the dawn of the third millennium, I therefore invite all peoples to join forces to combat illiteracy, which is a serious handicap for a significant part of humanity, especially women and girls. In fact, until recently women accounted for two thirds of the illiterate, and 70 per cent of the

children who are not sent to school are girls. In this area it is also important to do away with inequalities, which is one of the goals of UNESCO's convention: "To assure full and equal access to education for all, the free pursuit of objective truth and the free exchange of ideas and knowledge" (Preamble of the *Convention*). This effort to fight illiteracy presupposes the engagement of the teaching body, whose role should be recognized and appreciated, so that those who exercise this activity feel appreciated and supported in their outstanding profession of imparting knowledge, basic values and reasons for living.

Schools are called to be more and more welcoming to children, whatever their origin or social status, paying particular attention to the poor, victims of violence and war, refugees and displaced persons. They must be increasingly concerned, through an adapted pedagogy and attention to local cultures, to develop talents and to awaken the students' consciences, as well as to care for those young people who are unsuited to the school system.

4. For her part, in carrying out the mission entrusted to her by Christ, the Church hopes to continue her role in the education of young people and adults, along with men and women of good will. The Catholic school is a choice instrument for giving children not only instruction, but also a religious and catechetical formation which will help them deepen their faith and to discover Christ, who wants to help people reach their full stature as adults. In a society in search of meaning, the Catholic school is called to disseminate the Christian message clearly and vigorously, while respecting those who do not share its beliefs and yet hope to benefit from its teaching methods. Keen to make its contribution to the relationship between the Gospel and cultures, the Catholic school places knowledge in the horizon of faith, so that it will become a wisdom of life and lead people to the true happiness which God alone can grant.

5. At the dawn of a new era, I am delighted with the work achieved by UNESCO in cooperation with all the member States. I call upon God to support with his blessings you, the Director General, and all the people who serve humanity by sharing in the mission of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Castel Gandolfo, 28 August 1999.

JOHN PAUL II

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