



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO AJACCIO
ON THE OCCASION OF THE CONGRESS
“LA RELIGIOSITÉ POPULAIRE EN MÉDITERRANÉE”

CLOSING SESSION OF THE CONGRESS

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER

“Palais des Congrès et d’Exposition d’Ajaccio”
Sunday, 15 December 2024

[Multimedia]

Your Eminence,
Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,
Dear Priests and Religious,
Dear Sisters and Brothers,

I am pleased to meet you here in Ajaccio at the conclusion of this Congress on popular piety in the Mediterranean, which has brought together a number of scholars and bishops from France and other countries.

The lands bathed by the Mediterranean Sea have a long history and have been the cradle of many highly developed civilizations. The Greco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian civilizations come to mind as examples testifying to the cultural, religious and historical significance of this immense “lake” in the middle of three continents, this unique sea that is the Mediterranean.

We must not forget that in classical literature, both Greek and Latin, the Mediterranean was often the setting for the birth of myths, stories and legends. Philosophical thought and the arts, as well

as navigation techniques, enabled the civilizations of the *Mare nostrum* to develop an elevated culture, open up routes of communication, build infrastructures and aqueducts, and, even more, create legal systems and complex institutions whose basic principles endure and remain relevant today.

Between the Mediterranean and the Near East, a unique religious experience was born, bound to the God of Israel, who revealed himself to humanity and began a continuous dialogue with his people. This dialogue culminated in the singular presence of Jesus, the Son of God. He has revealed the face of the Father, his and ours, in a definitive way, and brought to fulfilment the covenant between God and humanity.

More than two thousand years have passed since the Incarnation of the Son of God, and since then, numerous ages and cultures have come and gone. In some periods of history, the Christian faith shaped the lives of peoples and their political institutions, whereas today, especially in European countries, the question of God seems to be retreating as people become increasingly indifferent to his presence and his word. Even so, in analysing this scenario, we need to beware of hasty considerations and ideological judgements that, even in our day, would pit Christian culture and secular culture against one another. This is a mistake!

Instead, it is important to acknowledge a mutual openness between these two horizons. Believers are increasingly open to, and at peace with the possibility of practising their faith without imposing it, living it as a leaven within the world and in their communities. Non-believers or those who have distanced themselves from religious practice are not strangers to the search for truth, justice and solidarity. Often, even if they do not belong to any religion, they carry in their hearts a great thirst, a search for meaning, which leads them to ponder the mystery of life and to seek out core values for the common good.

In this context, we can appreciate the beauty and importance of popular piety (cf. Saint Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 48). It was Saint Paul VI who changed the name in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* from “religiosity” to popular “piety”. On the one hand, popular piety points back to the Incarnation as the foundation of the Christian faith, which always finds expression in a people’s culture, history and languages and is transmitted through the symbols, customs, rites and traditions of a living community. On the other hand, such piety also attracts and involves persons who are on the threshold of faith. Although they may not practice their faith regularly, popular piety enables them to experience their roots and affections, as well as to encounter ideals and values that they find useful for their own lives and for society.

By expressing faith through simple gestures and a symbolic language rooted in the culture of the people, popular piety reveals God’s presence in the living flesh of history, strengthens the relationship with the Church and often becomes an occasion for encounter, cultural exchange and celebration. It is curious: a piety that is not festive does not “have a good aroma”, it is not a piety

that comes from the people, it is too “distilled”. In this sense, its practices give life to the relationship with the Lord and to the content of the faith. In this regard, I would like to mention a reflection by Blaise Pascal. In a dialogue with a fictional interlocutor about how to come to faith, Pascal states that it is not enough to multiply the proofs of God’s existence or to make great intellectual efforts. Rather, one must look to those who have already made great progress on the path, because they began with small steps, by “taking holy water and having Masses said” (*Pensieri, Opere complete*, Milan, 2020, n. 681). It is about the small steps that take you forward. Popular piety is piety that is involved with culture, but not confused with culture. It takes small steps.

Nor should we forget that “popular piety enables us to see how the faith, once received, becomes embodied in a culture and is constantly passed on”, and as a result, “it is an active evangelizing power which we must not underestimate: to do so would be to fail to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 123; 126). The Holy Spirit works through the holy People of God, by leading them forward in daily discernments. We think of Deacon Philip, a poor man, who one day was led [by the Spirit] onto a road and then heard a pagan, a servant of Queen Candace of Ethiopia, reading the prophet Isaiah and not understanding. He approached and asked, “Do you understand?” The pagan replied “No”. So Philip announced the Gospel to him. That pagan, who had received faith at that time, went to where there was water and asked, “Philip, can you baptize me now, here in this water?” Philip did not say, “No, he has to take a course, he has to bring the godparents, both of them have to be married in the Church, or he has to do this....” No, he baptized him. Baptism is the gift of faith that Jesus gives us.

We must be careful so that popular piety is not used or exploited by groups that seek self-aggrandizement by fuelling polemics, narrow-mindedness, divisions and exclusivist attitudes. None of this corresponds to the Christian spirit of popular piety, and everyone, especially the Church’s Pastors, is called to be vigilant, to exercise discernment and to be constantly attentive to popular forms of religiosity.

When popular piety is successful in communicating the Christian faith and the cultural values of a given people, uniting hearts and building community, it bears great fruit that has an effect on society as a whole, including relations between political, social and institutions and the Church. Faith cannot remain a private affair. We have to be careful about this, I would say privatization of faith is a heretical development. A fact that is restricted in the sanctuary of the individual’s conscience, but if it intends to be fully true to itself, authentic faith involves a call for commitment and witness, promotion of human development, social progress and care for creation, all in the name of charity. For this very reason, down the centuries, the profession of the Christian faith and models of community life inspired by the Gospel and the sacraments have given rise to countless works of solidarity, including the establishment of institutions such as hospitals, schools, care centres – there are many in France! – that have enabled the faithful to assist the needy and to contribute to the advancement of the common good. Popular piety, processions and rogations, the

charitable activities of Confraternities, the communal prayer of the Holy Rosary and other forms of devotion can nurture “constructive citizenship” on the part of Christians.

Sometimes some intellectuals, some theologians do not understand this. I remember when I once went for a week to northern Argentina, to Salta, where there is the feast of Señor de los Milagros, the Lord of Miracles. The whole province converges on the Shrine, and all the people go to confession, from the mayor downwards because they have this piety inside. I used to go to confession all the time, and it was a tiring work because all the people confess. One day, on the way out, I found a priest I knew and I said, “Oh, you are here, how are you?” He replied “Good!” As we were going out, at that moment a lady approached with some holy cards in her hand and she said to the priest, a good theologian, “Father, will you bless them?” The priest, with great theology, says to her, “But, madam, have you been to Mass?”. She replied “Yes, Father”. He said, “Do you know that at the end of Mass, everything is blessed?” She replied, “Yes, Father”. He continued, “Do you know that God’s blessing comes down upon you?”. She replied “Yes, Father.” At that moment another priest called him, “Oh, how are you?” The lady who had repeated so many times “yes, Father” turned to the other one and said, “Father, will you bless them for me?” There is a desire for help, a healthy desire for help that seeks the Lord’s blessing and does not accept generalizations.

At the same time, on the common ground of boldly carrying out good works, of asking for blessings, that believers can also find themselves cooperating with secular, civil and political institutions in the service of each person, beginning with the poor, for an integral human growth and the care of this “*Île de beauté*”.

Hence the need to develop a concept of secularity (*laïcité*) that is not static and fixed, but evolving and dynamic, capable of adapting to different and unforeseen situations, and of promoting constant cooperation between civil and ecclesial authorities for the benefit of the whole community, each within the limits of its own competences and areas of activity. As [Benedict XVI](#) stated, a healthy secularity “frees religion from the encumbrance of politics, and allows politics to be enriched by the contribution of religion, while maintaining the necessary distance, clear distinction and indispensable collaboration between the two spheres... This kind of healthy secularity ensures that political activity does not manipulate religion, while the practice of religion remains free from a politics of self-interest, which at times is barely compatible with, if not downright contrary to, religious belief. For this reason, a healthy secularity, embodying unity in distinction, is necessary and even vital for both spheres” ([Ecclesia in Medio Oriente](#), 29). [Benedict XVI](#) pointed out a healthy secularism, but alongside a religiosity. Both fields are respected.

In this way, more effective forms of collaboration can develop, without prejudice or opposition, in a dialogue that is open, frank and fruitful.

Dear sisters and brothers, popular piety, which is deeply rooted here in Corsica – it is not

superstition – highlights the values of faith and at the same time expresses the distinctiveness, the history and the culture of this people. A constant dialogue between the religious and secular spheres, between the Church and the civil and political institutions, can take place in this interweaving, without confusion, of both. You have taken this path for a long time, it is your unique tradition, and you are an admirable example in Europe. Keep moving forward! I would also like to encourage young people to become even more actively involved in social, cultural and political life, inspired by solid ideals and a passion for the common good. I likewise urge the Church's Pastors and faithful, politicians and those in public life, to remain ever close to the people, listening to their needs, sharing their sufferings and voicing their hopes, for genuine authority grows only through closeness to others. Pastors must have these closenesses: to God, to other pastors, to priests, and to peoples. These are the true pastors. But the pastor who does not have this closeness, even to history and culture, is simply "Monsieur l'Abbé." He is not a pastor. We have to distinguish between these two ways of doing pastoral work.

It is my hope that this Congress on popular piety will help you to rediscover the roots of your faith and bear fruit in renewed commitment, in the Church and in civil society, at the service of the Gospel and the common good of all citizens.

May Mary, Mother of the Church, accompany you and help you on your journey. Thank you very much.