

April 15, 2008

The Honorable George W. Bush
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Bush,

The Vatican State is becoming more and more powerful and dominant in the political decisions of our country, Italy. We write you, Mr. President, because in the eight years of your presidency you have met with dissidents and important antiauthoritarian people such as Nathan Sharansky, Kang Chol-Hwan and most recently the Dali Lama. President Bush, in these years you have tried to distinguish your administration from other administrations by concentrating your efforts on religious freedom as an essential first step toward gaining political and civil freedoms. We certainly do not want to compare ourselves to Sharansky, Chol-Hwan or to the Dali Lama since those situations are much more dramatic in many ways; fortunately for us, as those fighting for religious freedom in Italy, we have not experienced a pogrom, we are not condemned to die of hunger nor are we forced to build governments in exile to avoid ending up in concentration camps, or to use the politically correct term “rehabilitation” or “reeducation”. But freedom of worship, which you have strongly defended where it doesn’t exist or in places where it is oppressed by despotic or authoritative regimes, even in Italy is seriously put in danger by a dominating and ruling religion that tends to annul other religions through a series of antidemocratic privileges, a special status with regard to the law, and a political class entirely subjugated to it, with very few exceptions.

In short, in our country, not only nonbelievers, but also those who believe differently and all those who are nonconformists, are neglected, undervalued, and almost not acknowledged. During your visit abroad, especially in China, you have intervened on more than one occasion to defend religious freedom. For this reason we would like to pose a few questions to you, in light of the visit that you will soon have with Pope Benedict XVI. We would like to invite you to reflect upon several issues related to the Vatican and the relationship, strongly unconstitutional in nature, which it enjoys with the Republic of Italy; but we would also like to draw your attention to issues related to the country of which you are President--a country that we esteem, but whose relationship with a foreign state, the Vatican, which at the same time is the seat of a religious confession, the Roman Catholic Church, we as Italians have great difficulty in understanding.

Moreover, all this is happening at a very delicate moment in history in which different forms of extremism are growing and taking revenge against pragmatism.

1. How is it possible that a constitutionally-based government that prides itself on separation of powers has diplomatic relations with the last ruling Absolute Monarchy in Europe, whose leader, the Pope, possesses absolute legislative, judicial and executive powers?
2. How is it justified by the American Constitution, which clearly prohibits the establishment of a state-sponsored religion, that the American government can have diplomatic relations with a religious institution? What would prohibit the American government from establishing diplomatic relations with the Orthodox Church, a Muslim Caliphate, or the Dalai Lama? Or with the Southern Baptist Convention, which has works in over 153 countries?

3. According to a recent White House press release, you, Mr. President, and the pope are to continue discussions begun during your trip to the Vatican in June 2007 “on the importance of faith and reason in reaching shared goals”. White House spokesman Stanzel said the goals include “advancing peace throughout the Middle East and other troubled regions, promoting interfaith understanding and strengthening human rights and freedom”. As President of the United States, you have taken an oath of office before all the American people to “uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States”. What goals does the American government share with the Vatican in the above-mentioned areas, based on the American Constitution, and how would you yourself see faith and reason advancing peace in the Middle East, promoting interfaith understanding, and strengthening human rights and freedom? On what basis can the Vatican argue for the promotion of human rights and freedom when it is ruled according to an Absolute Monarchy? Why does the American government need to be involved in the promotion of interfaith understanding? Is this not better left to religious institutions themselves, something the American Constitution fully supports?
4. On what Constitutional basis did the Justice Department of the Bush Administration defend Pope Benedict XVI’s right to protection from prosecution on American soil on the basis of diplomatic immunity? For the American government, is the Pope a Head of State or leader of a church? Would American courts recognize both of these roles, to be used whenever convenient, in order to escape prosecution under American law? Does any other religious leader enjoy this privilege under American Law?
5. Mr. President, the Vatican State violates Article 7 of the Italian constitution, whereas the former continually interferes in the affairs of the Italian State, above all in the political. The Vatican does not respect the principle of Italian state sovereignty. Very often a large percentage of the Italian press, both national and local, when aware of crimes committed by members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, decides to censure itself and not report news that is uncomfortable for the Roman Catholic Church. The press often “corrects” information about the Church in order to avoid too much scandal. (For example, for the majority of pedophilia cases committed by priests, unlike what happens in the US, in Italy the preferred solution for a vast portion of the press is a conspiracy of silence.) Mr. President, are you aware that the Vatican (a foreign state), dominates the television news of the three Italian State (RAI) networks? According to an independent Italian group, the Centro d’Ascolto Radiotelevisivo, during the period from April 19, 2005 (the date of Pope Benedict XVI’s election) to January 14, 2008, the Vatican (by this is meant the Pope and other official Church spokesmen) enjoyed more time than the President of the Italian Republic and the Prime Minister on TG1 (television news of the flagship network and the one most watched in Italy, with 26 hours and 35 minutes); more time than the President and the Prime Minister on TG2 (with 20 hours and 28 minutes); and more time than the President of the Republic on TG3 (with 19 hours and 32 minutes). This does not include the private media outlets, which report much higher numbers for the Vatican when measuring the presence of the highest government officials of the Italian state with respect to those of the Vatican State (a foreign state), its Head of State and the highest officials of the Church hierarchy. Are you aware, Mr. President, that Roman Catholic Church spokesmen appeared on 275 out of 365 days on TG1 (206 days on the daytime news edition, 227 days in the evening edition, and 158 days on both)? Are you aware that this is television news on a public network that is supposed to respect the principle of pluralism and that instead, between 2004 and 2007, taking into consideration the time that the television news of the three public networks granted to religious representatives, reserved 97% for the Roman Catholic Church?¹
6. With regard to economic questions, the lack of clarity and bad information have the upper hand. Not only on the inside of the Vatican state does the Institute for Religious Works (IOR) have an office

(the only in the world), and a fiscal paradise “more impenetrable to inspections than the Cayman Islands, more private than the Swiss banks”²; not only do well-known mafia families have their bank accounts in this same IOR³; not only with more than \$407,000 of internal income per capita, the Vatican state was defined by Marina Marinetti as “the richest state in the world”⁴; not only in 2002 did the FED, the only international authority to have proceeded with an inquiry on Vatican finances on American territory, reveal that in the United States, the Vatican State holds \$298,000,000 in bonds, \$195,000,000 in stocks, \$102,000,000 in long term bonds, plus joint ventures with US partners for \$273,000,000⁵; not only does the Italian State contribute 4,000,000,000 Euro for ecclesiastical structures every year; not only does the Opera Romana Pellegrinaggi (Rome Pilgrimage Institution) have a turnover of 5,000,000,000 Euro per year⁶ (four times greater than that of Alpitour, the largest Italian tour operator), but as if all this were not enough, are you aware of the fact Mr. President, that in 1984 a new system of financing the Catholic church was approved in Italy? It consists of two types of payments: 1) the free offerings of the faithful; 2) the 8 per 1000 of Irpef (Italian income tax on physical persons) of Italian taxpayers paid to the Italian Bishops Conference (CEI, Conferenze episcopale Italiana). Only successive legislative modifications, thanks to the pressure by other churches, authorized other religious confessions to participate in the proportional allocation of the 8 per 1000 quota. Where does the largest problem arise? This system provides that for those who do not express any preference on their tax return, the payment of their “8 per 1000” is made on the basis of the preferences expressed by those who chose a specific religious confession. Currently, about 64% of Italians do not express a choice on their income tax form, and nonetheless the “8 per 1000” is divided according to the choices expressed by the others. Given that 87% of those who express a choice choose the Catholic Church, 87% of the “8 per 1000” goes to the Catholic Church. All of this happens independently of the wishes of Italians. Successive Italian governments have not adequately informed the citizens about this reality. Even though the state is one of the entities to which the “8 per 1000” can be designated, the government acts in a way so that the CEI receives the largest of this sum. How? In simple terms, “by systematically refusing to advertise on its own behalf”⁷. The law, moreover, is clear with regard to how the State must spend the money that comes to it by means of the 8 per 1000 system, but not only violates the law by allotting 80% to institutions not provided for by the law, but another 10% is allotted to the Catholic Church by means of the refurbishment of ecclesiastical properties⁸. Therefore, the State not only finances religion, but discriminates against all other religious confessions, giving preference to only one. Even with the monies not specifically designated in the 8 per 1000 system, the “minority” churches are discriminated against. Maria Bonafede, Moderator of the Waldensian Church Synod, declared, “for ethical reasons we waived our right to the non-expressed quota, but in 2000, having seen the use the State made of it, we asked for our portion. We met with government leadership from the left and the right...They put us off every time. If our portion were granted to us today, we would not see it until 2010. The State gives the CEI (Conferenza episcopale italiana) its sum in advance, but to other religious groups it arrives three years later.”⁹ The Catholic Church and the State are the only entities which are able to do an advertising campaign for the 8 per 1000 quota. Other churches (one of them the Waldensian Protestant Church) have recently confirmed great difficulty in enjoying the same advertising possibilities as the Catholic Church for the 8 per 1000 system.

In 2005 the Waldensian Church, even though it has a minimal amount of funds at its disposal for advertising, was able to create a radio ad for the 8 per 1000 campaign, but SIPRA, the licensee for advertising on RAI (owner of the three public television and radio networks in Italy), in accord with Raitrade, refused the Waldensian Church’s radio ad. They asked the church to remove the phrases “Not even a Euro is used for activities related to Sunday worship services” and “Lots of schools. No churches.” Also in this case Maria Bonafede intervened, stating, “More or less what Sipra and Raitrade refuse to broadcast is a reference to the law of the state”¹⁰. The Waldensian Church, after

having filed a complaint about discrimination against a minority religion, refused to change the radio advertisement, explaining that the two controversial phrases communicate exactly how the Waldensian church operates with regard to the funds obtained through the 8 per 1000 system. They chose from the beginning to designate these funds exclusively to social, humanitarian, charitable and cultural purposes in Italy and abroad. (94% of the total is designated for charity work but for the Catholic Church only 20% is designated for this purpose)¹¹. It is necessary to add that while Waldensian, Jewish, Lutheran, Seventh-Day Adventist and Assembly of God present transparent and detailed statements about how the 8 per 1000 money is spent, the Catholic Church is very unforthcoming and nonspecific in the presentation of its spending, and does not, for example, report how much is spent in advertising.¹²

All this is possible thanks to a State that does not demand full transparency from the Roman Catholic Church. Mr. President, does this seem like religious freedom to you? And are you aware, Mr. President, how the nearly 1 billion Euro (2003 figures) that the CEI takes in annually (for many years now) from Italian taxpayers through the 8 per 1000 system, is spent? “Eighty percent is spent for religious purposes, for example, not just the support of Catholic clergy and funds for the church dioceses, but also included is the construction of new Catholic churches, the costs of the Sacra Rota (a Roman Catholic ecclesiastical court), and the activities of the CEI”.¹³ This happens even though the advertising spots done by the Roman Catholic Church in Italy for the 8 per 1000 system lead one to believe that the money is spent for charity works or against world hunger; in reality for this type of work only 20% is spent. In 2005 the ad for the 8 per 1000 campaign, entrusted to Saatchi and Saatchi at the cost of 9 million Euro, was focused on the tragedy of the Asian tsunami, but only 0.3% (CEI source) of the quota of that year was transferred to countries struck by the tidal wave. The same year, the UCEI (Union of Italian Jewish Communities), without any television advertising, sent 6% of its 8 per 1000 funds to Sri Lanka and Indonesia, even though there are no Jewish communities in these countries.¹⁴

We must also add that the Vatican State, by means of two of its entities (CEI and IOR), is the largest owner of real estate properties on Italian soil. (In Rome alone the Church possesses one-fourth of citizen real estate property by means of 2000 ecclesiastical agencies,¹⁵ while at the national level the total of real estate holdings of the Catholic Church is estimated to be 20-22% of all properties).¹⁶ Do you know, Mr. President, that in Rome in recent months two hundred families were evicted from apartments owned by the Vatican, so that the Vatican can transform these properties into luxury apartments and B&B's? These families must be added to the other four thousand households evicted that have nothing to do with the Church. What is the difference? An ordinance was enacted, number 261 of the year 2006, meant to suspend evictions of low-income families, families with disabled members, the terminally ill, and the over 65, in some cases until October 2007, and in other cases until August 2008. When the ordinance was introduced, it was not accepted because of criticism raised by the opposition. When the law was voted upon the ordinance did not contain any reference to properties of ecclesiastical agencies.¹⁷ In other words, all property owners had to suspend evictions except the Vatican, and this with other privileges that no other citizen could ever dream of having: exemption from ICI (local property tax on real estate paid by Italian citizens). The only exception to this tax payment is the real estate holdings of the Roman Catholic Church, an exemption that holds for all properties, religious and non-religious, and that was extended to other religious confessions only as an afterthought, after a protest by other religious organizations.

7. Mr. President, were you aware of the fact that all other religious confessions are virtually nonexistent in Italy? On all public television stations these various religious confessions have been reduced to the bare minimum airtime, and their designated airtime is highly limited and regulated. When a

group is permitted to have a program on a public television channel, it is usually once a week and very late at night, often after midnight, when very few have the possibility to watch. Representatives of minority churches are rarely invited on television talk shows; they are routinely ignored.

Furthermore, there are Catholic crucifixes hanging on walls of all public buildings in the “Bel Paese”. When someone recently tried to assert his right in his workplace to put next to the crucifix the symbols of his own religious confession, he was told that it was impossible to remove the representative symbol of the Roman Catholic Church. So he went as far as deciding not to work against this reality, but was in any case put on trial and condemned to a year in prison and was banned from public office for a year. This was the case of Luigi Tosti, an Italian judge who is Jewish and who, refusing to work with Roman Catholic religious symbols present in a courtroom where the principle of the lay state should be in force, was put on trial and convicted.¹⁸ President Bush, what is your opinion of this, especially in light of what Benedict XVI declared in the *lectio magistralis* of Regensburg, given on the 12th of September 2006, where the Pontiff rebuked above all the Protestant cousins? Will you respond in one way or another to Benedict XVI, and in this way defend the 51.3% of American citizens that the Pope has indirectly scolded? Will you speak out about the religious discrimination that happens to the Italian non-Catholic religious minorities, thanks to the pressure applied by the Vatican State?

We, the undersigned, convinced that the voice of the individual and the minority is still very important to the democratic process in America, thank you for your consideration of these very serious issues, and affirm our great admiration and respect for the United States of America and her Constitution. May it continue to be a beacon of light for those who are laboring for religious and civil freedoms around the world.

Sincerely,

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SOURCES AND NOTES

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⁵ Curzio Maltese (in collaboration with Carlo Pontesilli and Dep. Maurizio Turco), *Scandali, affari e misteri. Tutti i segreti dello IOR* (La Repubblica, January 26, 2008)

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¹⁵ Giacomo Galeazzi and Filippo di Giacomo, *La Chiesa sfratta: "Danno i palazzi solo ai ricchi"* (La Stampa, October 29, 2007)

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¹⁷ Giacomo Galeazzi and Filippo di Giacomo, *La Chiesa sfratta: "Danno i palazzi solo ai ricchi"* (La Stampa, October 29, 2007)

¹⁸ Luigi Tosti, *Cronaca di una condanna annunciata* (Notizie Radicali, February 25, 2008)