



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE MEMBERS
OF THE PONTIFICAL INSTITUTE FOR CHRISTIAN ARCHAEOLOGY**

Clementine Hall

Saturday, 20 December 2008

Your Eminence,

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

With true pleasure I welcome and greet each one of you who are members of the Pontifical Institute for Christian Archaeology. In the first place, I greet Cardinal Zenon Grocholewski, Grand Chancellor, and thank him for his courteous words interpreting your common sentiments. I greet the Rector, the teaching staff, the collaborators and the students. Today's pleasant meeting offers me the opportunity to express my keen appreciation of the precious and profitable cultural, literary and academic activity that your Institute carries out at the service of the Church, and more generally, of culture.

Indeed, I am aware of the considerable scientific importance in the traditional milieu of archaeology of the ordinary and specialized courses with which your Pontifical Institute for Christian Archaeology proposes to make known the palaeo-Christian monuments, especially those in Rome but also with ample references to the other regions of the *Orbis christianus antiquus*. The "Journal" and the scientific activity of the teachers and students, as well as the promotion of international congresses also aims, complying with your intentions, to respond to the expectations of all who have at heart the knowledge and study of the wealth of historical memorials of the Christian community. The principal aim of your Institute is precisely the study of the remains of ecclesial life down the centuries. You offer those who choose this discipline the opportunity to penetrate a complex reality, to be precise, that of the Church in the early centuries, in order "to understand" the past making it present to people today. For you, "understanding" the past is as it were identifying yourselves with the past that emerges through the typical contexts of Christian archaeology: iconography, architecture, epigraphy and topography. When it is a matter of

describing the history of the Church, which is "a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race" (*Lumen gentium*, 1), archaeologists, in their patient research, cannot dispense with penetrating supernatural realities too, without, however, renouncing the rigorous analysis of archaeological finds.

Indeed, as you well know, a complete vision of the reality of a Christian community, whether ancient or recent, is not possible unless one keeps in mind the fact that the Church is composed of both a human element and a divine element. Christ, her Lord, dwells within her and desires her as "the community of faith, hope and charity, as a visible organization through which he communicates truth and grace to all" (*ibid.*, n. 8). In this theological pre-understanding, the basic criterion can only be to let oneself be conquered by the truth sought in its authentic sources, with a soul free from passion and prejudice, since Christian archaeology is a historical science and as such is based on the methodical study of the sources.

The spread of the culture of art and history through all sectors of society provides the people of our time with the means to trace their own roots and to draw from them the cultural and spiritual elements that help them build a society with a truly human dimension. Every person and every society needs a culture open to the anthropological, moral and spiritual dimensions of existence. I therefore fervently hope, thanks also to the work of your praiseworthy Institute, that the search for the Christian roots of our society may continue and indeed may intensify. Your Institute's experience proves that the study of archaeology, especially of the palaeo-Christian monuments, enables us to deepen our knowledge of the evangelical truth that has been handed down to us and offers the opportunity to follow the teachers and witnesses of the faith who have preceded us. Knowing the heritage of the Christian generations of the past enables those that follow to remain faithful to the *depositum fidei* of the first Christian community, and following along the same path, continue to make the unchangeable Gospel of Christ resonate in every time and place. For this reason, alongside even the important results achieved in the scientific context, your Institute is rightly concerned to offer a fruitful contribution to the knowledge and deepening of the Christian faith. Drawing close to the "remains of the People of God" is a concrete way of certify how the content of the same unchangeable faith has been received and expressed in Christian life in accordance with the changing historical, social and cultural conditions through the span of many centuries.

Dear brothers and sisters, continue to promote the preservation and acquisition of a deeper knowledge of the immense archaeological heritage of Rome and of the various regions of the ancient world, aware of the proper mission of your Institute, that is, to serve history and art by appreciating the numerous testimonies of Western civilization, culture and Catholic spirituality that the "Eternal City" possesses. It is a valuable patrimony created in the course of these two millennia, a priceless treasure of which you are stewards and from which it is necessary, as the Gospel writer does, to draw ceaselessly from the new and the old (cf. Mt 13: 52). Together with these hopes, in the imminence of Holy Christmas, I express fervent good wishes for you and for

your loved ones, as I warmly bless you all.

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