



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II  
FOR THE 7<sup>th</sup> CENTENARY  
OF LA SAPIENZA UNIVERSITY OF ROME**

*Saturday, 17 May 2003*

*Mr Prime Minister,  
Your Eminences and Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,  
Rector Magnificent,  
Dear Professors,  
Brothers and Sisters,*

1. Today, the visit you have wished to pay with special solemnity to the Successor of Peter on the seventh centenary of your prestigious university gives me great joy. Welcome to this house!

I offer my respectful greeting to the Hon. Prime Minister, Mr Silvio Berlusconi, to the Ministers of the Italian Government, to the Authorities present and to all who are gathered here. I thank Prof. Giuseppe D'Ascenzo, Rector Magnificent of La Sapienza University, Prof. Carlo Angelici, Head of the Faculty of Law, and Prof. Pietro Rescigno, Professor of Civil Law, for their courteous words to me on behalf of the university's Academic Staff, Students and Personnel.

I also express deep gratitude for the *honoris causa* degree in Jurisprudence which the Faculty Council has decided to confer on me. I gladly accept this recognition, which I consider as conferred upon the Church for her role as teacher in the sensitive context of the law, insofar as it concerns the basic principles on which orderly human coexistence is based.

As has been recalled, your distinguished Athenaeum *was founded by Pope Boniface VIII* with the Bull "*In Supremae*" of 20 April 1303, to support and promote study in the various branches of knowledge. That Pontiff's initiative was strengthened and developed by his Successors in the span of the past seven centuries. With further provisions, they gradually perfected the organization of the University, adapting its structures to keep pace with the progress in knowledge. In this regard, it is worth reading the directives of Pope Eugene IV, as well as those of Leo X, Alexander II and

Benedict XIV, until the Bull "*Quod Divina Sapiencia*" of Leo XII.

At your University, *countless men and women have been formed* who, in the various disciplines of knowledge, have brought honour to it, enabling knowledge to cover new ground, encouraging growth in the quality of life and deepening a serene and fruitful dialogue between lovers of science and of faith.

The cordial relations that existed in the past between your Athenaeum and the Church, thanks be to God, continue to exist today with full respect for their reciprocal provinces, but also conscious that each one carries out, at different levels, *an equally useful service for human progress*.

2. In my years of pastoral service to the Church, I have considered it part of my ministry to give ample space to the affirmation of *human rights* because of their close connection with two fundamental features of Christian morality: the dignity of the person and peace. Indeed, in creating man in his image and calling him to be his adoptive son, God conferred *an incomparable dignity* upon him; and God created men to *live together in harmony and peace*, providing them with an equal distribution of the necessary means in order to live and to develop. Awareness of this has motivated me to do my utmost to serve these values; but I could not carry out the mission required of me by my apostolic office without *having recourse to the categories of law*.

Although I dedicated myself in the years of my youth to studying philosophy and theology, I have always felt great admiration for the juridical science in its most elevated forms: the *Roman law of Ulpian, Gaius and Paul*, the *Corpus iuris civilis* of Justinian, the *Decretum* of Gratian, the *Magna Glossa* of Accursius, the *De iure belli et pacis* of Grotius, not to mention certain peaks reached by juridical science which have brought renown to Europe and particularly to Italy. With regard to the Church, I myself had the opportunity in 1983 to promulgate the new *Code of Canon Law* for the Latin Church, and in 1990, the *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*

3. The principle that has guided me in my commitment is the fact that the *human person* - as created by God - is *the foundation and the goal of social life*, which law must serve. In fact, "the centrality of the human person in law is effectively expressed by the classical aphorism: "*Hominum causa omne ius constitutum est*". This means that law is such if and to the extent to which it is based on man in his truth" (*Address to Symposium on "Evangelium Vitae" and Law*, 24 May 1996, n. 4: *ORE*, 29 May 1996, p. 3). And the truth about man consists in his being created in the image and likeness of God.

As a "person", man, according to a profound thought of St Thomas Aquinas, is "*id quod est perfectissimum in tota natura*" (what is most perfect in all nature) (S. Th., q. 29, a. 3). Setting out from this conviction, the Church has spelled out her doctrine on "human rights", which do not derive from the State or from any other human authority but from the person. Public authorities must therefore "[ensure that these rights are] recognized, respected, co-ordinated, defended and

promoted" (*Pacem in Terris*, n. 60): In fact these rights are "universal and inviolable, and therefore altogether inalienable" (*ibid.*, n. 9).

This is why Christians "should work ceaselessly and effectively to further the dignity which each person receives from the Creator and to join forces with those others to defend and promote this dignity" (*Address to the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Commission "Iustitia et Pax" and the Colloquium on "The Church and Human Rights"*, 15 November 1988, n. 4; *ORE*, 19/26 December 1988, p. 15). "The Church, in fact, can never abandon man, whose destiny is closely and indissolubly linked to Christ" (*Address to the World Congress on Pastoral Promotion of Human Rights*, 4 July 1998, n. 3; *ORE*, 29 July 1998, p. 3).

4. For this reason, the Church accepted favourably the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* of the United Nations, approved at the General Assembly on 10 December 1948. This document marked "a step in the right direction, an approach toward the establishment of a juridical and political ordering of the world community. It is a solemn recognition of the personal dignity of every human being; an assertion of everyone's right to be free to seek out the truth, to follow moral principles, discharge the duties imposed by justice, and lead a fully human life. It also recognizes other rights connected with these" (*Pacem in Terris*, n. 144). Just as favourably the Church accepted the *European Convention for the Safeguard of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*, the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, and the *Declaration of the Rights of the Child and of the Unborn Child*.

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in 1948 does not, of course, present the anthropological and ethical foundations of human rights which it proclaims. In this domain "the Catholic Church... has an irreplaceable contribution to make, for she proclaims that *it is within the transcendent dimension of the person that the source of the person's dignity and inviolable rights is to be found*". Therefore, "the Church is convinced that she serves the cause of human rights when, with fidelity to her faith and mission, she proclaims that the dignity of the person has its foundation in the person's quality as a creature made in the image and likeness of God. (*Address to the Diplomatic Corps*, 9 January 1989, n. 7; *ORE*, 13 February 1989, p. 3). The Church is convinced that the most effective protection against any violation or abuse of human rights lies in recognition of their anthropological and ethical basis.

5. In the course of my service as Successor of Peter, I have felt it my duty to *insist forcefully on some of these rights* which, affirmed in theory, are often disregarded both in legislation and in practice. Thus, I have gone back several times to the first and most fundamental human right, the right to life. Indeed, "human life is sacred and inviolable from conception to its natural end.... A genuine culture of life, just as it guarantees to the unborn the right to come into the world, in the same way protects the newly born, especially girls, from the crime of infanticide. Equally, it assures the disabled that they can fully develop their capacities, and ensures adequate care for the sick and the elderly" (*Message for World Day of Peace 1999*, n. 4; *ORE*, 23/30 December

1998, p. 10).

In particular, I have insisted on the fact that *the embryo is a human individual* and, as such, possesses the inviolable rights of the human being. Juridical norms, therefore, are called to define *the legal status of the embryo* as a subject of rights who cannot be overlooked by either the moral or the juridical order.

Another fundamental right which I have had to go back to because of its frequent violation in the contemporary world is the right to *religious freedom*, recognized by the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (art. 18), the *Helsinki Final Act* (1 a, VII) and the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (art. 14). Indeed, I consider that the right to religious freedom is not merely *one among the many human rights*, but is *the one with which all the others are connected*, since the dignity of the human person originates in the essential relationship with God. Actually, the right to religious freedom "is so closely linked to the other fundamental rights that it can rightly be argued that respect for religious freedom is, as it were, a *touchstone* for the observance of the other fundamental rights" (*Address to the Diplomatic Corps*, 9 January 1989, n. 6; *ORE*, 13 February 1989, pp. 2-3).

6. Finally, asking that they be expressed in obligatory juridical norms, I have endeavoured to bring into the limelight *many other rights*, such as the right not to be discriminated against for reasons of race, language, religion or sex; the right to own private property, which is valid and necessary but should never be separated from the fundamental principle of the universal destination of goods (cf. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, n. 42; *Centesimus Annus*, n. 6); the right to freedom of association, expression and information, always with respect for the truth and the dignity of the person; the right - which today is a serious duty - to participate in political life, "intended to promote organically and institutionally the common good" (*Christifideles Laici*, n. 42); the right to economic initiative (cf. *Centesimus Annus*, n. 48; *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, n. 15); the right to housing, that is, "the right to housing for every person with his [own] family", which is closely connected "with the right to start a family and to have an adequately paid job" (*Angelus*, 16 June 1996, n. 1; *ORE*, 19 June 1996, p. 1); the right to education and culture, because "illiteracy is a great poverty; it is often synonymous with marginalization" (*Message to Secretary General of the United Nations for Literacy Year*, 3 March 1990; *ORE*, 9 April 1990, p. 11); the right of minorities "to exist" and "to preserve and develop their own culture" (*Message for World Day of Peace 1989*, nn. 5 and 7; *ORE*, 19/26 December 1988, p. 2); the right to work and the rights of workers: I dedicated to this topic the Encyclical *Laborem Exercens*.

Lastly, I have taken special care to proclaim and to defend "openly and strongly the rights of the family against the intolerable usurpations of society and the State" (*Familiaris Consortio*, n. 46), knowing well that the family is the primary place of "humanization for the person and society" (*Christifideles Laici*, n. 40), and that "the future of the world and of the Church passes" through the family (*Address to the Confederation of Christian Consultors*, n. 4; *Insegnamenti* III/2, 1980, p.

1454).

7. Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to end our meeting by expressing the sincere wish that humanity will make further progress in becoming aware of the fundamental rights that reflect its native dignity. May the new century which has inaugurated a new millennium record an increasingly conscious respect for the rights of man, of every man and of the whole man.

Sensitive to Dante's recommendation: "You were not born to live as brutes, but to follow virtue and knowledge (*Inferno*, XXVI, 119-120), may the men and women of the third millennium be able to incorporate in their laws and express in their behaviour the perennial values on which every authentic civilization is founded.

In my heart my greeting becomes a prayer to Almighty God to whom I entrust you, invoking from him an abundance of blessings upon you who are present here, upon your loved ones and upon the whole community of La Sapienza.