



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO ARCHBISHOP GIANFRANCO RAVASI,
PRESIDENT OF THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR CULTURE
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 13th PUBLIC CONFERENCE
OF THE PONTIFICAL ACADEMIES ON THE THEME:
"THE UNIVERSALITY OF BEAUTY:
A COMPARISON BETWEEN AESTHETICS AND ETHICS"**

*To my venerable Brother
Archbishop Gianfranco Ravasi
President of the Pontifical Council for Culture*

I am pleased to send you and the Coordinating Council of the Pontifical Academies my cordial greeting on the occasion of the annual Public Conference, a traditional event to highlight the activities promoted with commitment and generous dedication by each Academy and an opportunity for meeting and exchanges among different Institutions, motivated by a common objective: to serve the human person, to bring out his splendour and his responsibility, harmony and role. I am pleased to extend my greeting to the Cardinals, Bishops, Priests, Ambassadors and the Representatives of each Pontifical Academy who have gathered for this familiar, solemn event.

For this 13th Public Conference of the Pontifical Academies the distinguished Pontifical Academy of Fine Arts and Letters of the Virtuosi at the Pantheon, which has organized the event this year, has chosen as its theme: *"The universality of beauty: a comparison between aesthetics and ethics"*, an especially significant subject, in order to deepen the relationship or, rather, the dialogue between aesthetics and ethics, between beauty and human action, a dialogue that is especially necessary since it is sometimes forgotten or avoided.

The need and urgency for a renewed dialogue between aesthetics and ethics, between beauty, truth and goodness, is once again proposed to us not only by the current cultural and artistic debate but also by daily reality. In fact, the split emerges dramatically at different levels and at times there is a glaring contrast between the two dimensions: the search for beauty, understood

reductively as an external form, as appearance, to be sought at all costs, and that of the truth and goodness of actions carried out to achieve a specific goal. Indeed, a quest for beauty that was foreign or divorced from the human quest for truth and goodness would be transformed, as unfortunately happens, into mere aestheticism and above all, for the youngest, into an itinerary that focuses on what is transient, banal and superficial in appearance or even to an escape towards artificial paradises that mask and hide inner emptiness and inconsistency. Such an illusive and superficial search certainly would not have a universal breadth but would inevitably prove to be totally subjective if not actually individualistic and would sometimes even end in incommunicability.

I have often emphasized the need for and commitment to widening the horizons of reason, and in this perspective it is also necessary to again understand the close connection that binds the search for beauty with the search for truth and goodness. Reason that intended to strip itself of beauty would be halved, just as beauty without reason would be reduced to an empty and deceptive mask. At the [meeting with the Clergy of the Diocese of Bressanone last 6 August](#), in a dialogue precisely on the relationship between beauty and reason, I pointed out that we must seek to broaden reason, so that heart and reason encounter one another and beauty and truth meet. If this commitment is valid for all, then it is even more so for the believer, for the disciple of Christ, called by the Lord to "account for" the beauty and truth of his faith to all. We are reminded of this by Matthew's Gospel, in which we read the appeal that Jesus addressed to his disciples: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in Heaven" (Mt 5: 16). It should be noted that the Greek text speaks of *kalà erga*, of works that are good and beautiful at the same time, because the beauty of works manifests and expresses, in an excellent synthesis, the goodness and profound truth of the action, as well as the coherence and holiness of those who perform it. The beauty of the works of which the Gospel speaks, refers beyond them to another beauty, truth and goodness whose perfection and ultimate source is in God alone.

Our witness must therefore be nourished by this beauty, our proclamation of the Gospel must be perceived in its beauty and newness, and for this reason it is necessary to be able to communicate in the language of images and symbols. Our daily mission must become an eloquent transparency of the beauty of God's love to effectively reach our contemporaries who are often distracted and absorbed by a cultural milieu that is not always propitious for accepting a beauty in full harmony with truth and goodness, although it is always desirous of, and nostalgic for, a genuine beauty that is neither superficial nor ephemeral.

This also emerged during the [recent Synod of Bishops](#), convoked to reflect on the theme: "*The Word of God in the life and mission of the Church*". Various interventions have highlighted the perennial value of a "beautiful witness" for the proclamation of the Gospel, underlining the importance of being able to interpret and scrutinize beauty in art works, inspired by faith and encouraged by believers, to discover therein a unique itinerary that brings people closer to God

and to his Word.

Moreover, the conclusive Message that the Synod Fathers addressed to all believers stresses the goodness and effectiveness of the *via pulchritudinis*, one of the possible ways, perhaps the most attractive and fascinating on which to understand and reach God. The same Document mentions the Letter to Artists by my venerable Predecessor, the Servant of God John Paul ii, which invites reflection on the intimate and fruitful dialogue between Sacred Scripture and the different art forms which have produced numberless masterpieces. On this occasion I would like to suggest taking up that Letter, 10 years after its publication, to make it the subject of a renewed reflection on art, on the creativity of artists and on the fruitful yet problematic dialogue between the latter and the Christian faith, lived out in the community of believers. I address you in particular, dear Academicians and Artists, because precisely this is your task and your mission: to awaken wonder and the desire for the beautiful, to form the sensibility of souls and to nourish a passion for all that is an authentic expression of the human genius and a reflection of divine Beauty.

Dear brothers and sisters, the Award of the Pontifical Academies, instituted by my venerable Predecessor, Pope John Paul II, has its own particular aim: to awaken new talent in various fields of knowledge and to encourage the engagement of young scholars, artists and institutions that dedicate their activities to furthering Christian humanism. Therefore, in accepting the proposal formulated by the Coordinating Council of the Pontifical Academies, at this solemn Public Conference I am truly delighted that the Pontifical Academies Award has been presented to Dr Daniele Piccini, distinguished for his commitment both to the critical study of poetry and literature especially that of early Italian and Renaissance literature and his active militance in the field of poetry, expressed in several significant anthologies.

I am also happy that as a sign of appreciation and encouragement, a Medal of the Pontificate is being awarded to the young painter, Dr Giulio Catelli, for his research in art, already appreciated by art critics; as well as to the "Stauròs Italiana" Foundation, a non-profit organization, for establishing the Museum of Contemporary Sacred Art and for organizing the Biennial of Sacred Art, an event that has become a tradition for artists working in this field.

Lastly, I would like to express to all the Academicians, and especially to the Members of the distinguished Pontifical Academy of Fine Arts and Letters of the Virtuosi at the Pantheon, my deep appreciation for the activities it carries out, and my best wishes for an enthusiastic and creative commitment, especially in the field of art, to promote a new Christian humanism in contemporary culture that can advance with clarity and determination on the path of authentic beauty. With these sentiments, I entrust to each one of you, as well as your invaluable work of study and creative research, to the motherly protection of the Virgin Mary, whom with all the Church we invoke as the *Tota Pulchra*, the All Fair, and I cordially impart to you, Mr President, and to all those present, a special Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 24 November 2008

BENEDICTUS PP. XVI

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