



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
ON THE OCCASION OF
THE 17TH PUBLIC MEETING OF THE PONTIFICAL ACADEMIES**

*To my Venerable Brother
Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi
President of the Pontifical Council for Culture,*

On the occasion of the annual Public Meeting of the Pontifical Academies, I am pleased to send you my cordial greeting, which I willingly extend to the Council for Coordination, to the Cardinals, Bishops, Priests and Religious, to the Ambassadors and to all the Participants.

I address a special thought to the Authorities and Academicians of the Pontificia Academia Latinitatis, [Pontifical Academy for Latin], which I recently established with the Motu Proprio Latina Lingua to give fresh vigour to the knowledge, study and use of Latin, both in the Church and at universities and schools. I warmly wish that the activity of this new Academy, under the guidance of Prof. Ivano Dionigi, be worthwhile and fruitful in promoting the Latin language, a precious legacy of Tradition and a privileged testimony of a cultural heritage, that must be handed down for generations to come.

The theme of the Public Meeting of the Pontifical Academies, organized this year by the Distinguished Pontifical Academy of Fine Arts and Letters of the “Virtuosi al Pantheon”, is: “*Pulchritudinis Fidei Testis. The Artist, Like the Church, a Witness to the Beauty of Faith*”, which recalls the *incipit* of the Motu Proprio with which I recently chose to unite the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church with the Pontifical Council for Culture, to ensure that in a broad and well-structured vision of the world of culture, the important milieu of the cultural goods of the Church would receive proper attention and their rightful place. A more organic integration of this context in the mission of the Dicastery will certainly produce fertile results, also with a view to an ever more adequate conservation and conscious appreciation of the Church’s extraordinary patrimony of history and art, an eloquent testimony of the fruitfulness of the

encounter of the Christian faith with human genius.

With such a theme this 17th Public Meeting fits perfectly into the Year of Faith whose purpose is to propose anew to all the faithful the strength and beauty of faith. As I myself have been able to experience, this was the great aspiration of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council.

During the Eucharistic Celebration for the opening of the Year of Faith I once again consigned the *Messages of the Council* to representatives of the various categories, including artists. The Council's concentrated and profound Message to Artists wonderfully sums up the path the Church embarked upon in the 20th century — especially through the constant and targeted action of the Servant of God Paul VI— to revive dialogue with the world of the arts, ever more distant from the horizon of meaning and the experience of faith proposed by the Church.

The impetus that the Second Vatican Council gave to dialogue was later expressed in other forms and actions, as meaningful as they were crucial. Blessed John Paul II chose to write the Letter to Artists on the eve of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, entrusting to the Church and to artists a milestone on the journey of dialogue and collaboration. I would like to take only one idea from that famous text: “Every genuine art form in its own way is a path to the inmost reality of man and of the world. It is therefore a wholly valid approach to the realm of faith, which gives human experience its ultimate meaning. That is why the Gospel fullness of truth was bound from the beginning to stir the interest of artists, who by their very nature are alert to every ‘epiphany’ of the inner beauty of things”.

Wishing once again to solicit this necessary and vital dialogue, I myself met with a large group of artists in the Sistine Chapel on 21 November 2009, to address an intense appeal to them. In it I affirmed the Church's desire to rediscover the joy of common reflection and harmonious action in order to put the theme of beauty back at the centre of the attention of both the ecclesial community and civil society. As I said on that deeply evocative occasion, beauty must once again be reasserted and demonstrated in all expressions of art. However, it must not overlook the experience of faith but indeed must confront it freely and openly, to find in it inspiration and content. The beauty of faith, in fact, can never be an obstacle to the creation of artistic beauty, because, in a certain way, it is its lifeblood and its ultimate realm. In fact true artists, described by the conciliar Message as “the guardians of beauty in the world”, thanks to their special aesthetic sensitivity and their intuition can grasp and understand more profoundly than others the beauty proper to the faith, and thus express it anew and communicate it in their own language.

In this regard we can therefore speak of artists as privileged witnesses to the beauty of faith. Thus they can take part, with their specific and original contribution, in the very vocation and mission of the Church, particularly when, in the various expressions of their art, they wish or are commissioned, to produce works of art directly linked to the experience of faith and worship, to the liturgical action of the Church whose centrality is defined by the Second Vatican Council in the

well-known phrase “*fons et culmen*” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10).

In this regard, the young priest Giovanni Battista Montini wrote an essay for the first issue of the nascent review *Arte Sacra*, dated July-September 1931, with the emblematic title “On sacred art of the future”, in which he analysed, with great lucidity and clarity, the panorama of sacred art of the early 20th century, with its trends, its qualities and its limitations. Decades later, for us too this analysis proves to be of extraordinary timeliness and depth.

He states, first of all, that “sacred art faces the supreme problem of expressing the ineffable”, which is why it is necessary “to initiate oneself into mysticism, and to reach with the experience of the senses a reverberation, a flutter of the invisible Light”. Then, addressing the figure of the Christian artist, who tries his hand in particular at sacred art he writes: “one can also see how and where true sacred art is born: from the devout and believing, prayerful, wishful artist who watches in silence and goodness, awaiting his Pentecost.... I think it is the task of our Christian artists to prepare with their works a state of mind in which our spiritual unity, now torn apart, is pieced together in Christ; unity, I say, that reconciles in due harmony the impression and the expression; the interior and the exterior world; spirit and matter; the soul and the flesh; God and man” (*Arte Sacra*, a. 1, n. 1, July-September 1931, p. 16).

At the beginning of the Year of Faith I therefore address a warm invitation to all Christian artists, as well as to those who are open to the dialogue with faith, to take the path so perspicaciously marked out by the future Paul VI and to ensure that their artistic track may become and reveal itself ever more brightly as an integral itinerary in which all the dimensions of human life are involved, so that it witnesses effectively to the beauty of faith in Jesus Christ, an image of the glory of God that illuminates the history of humanity (cf. 2 Cor 4; Col 1:15).

To encourage all the younger artists who wish to make their own contribution to promoting and bringing about a new Christian humanism through their research in art, accepting the proposal formulated by the Council for Coordination between the Academies, I am pleased to award *ex aequo* the Prize of the Pontifical Academies, dedicated this year to the arts and in particular to the spheres of painting and sculpture, to a Polish sculptor, Anna Gulak and to a Spanish painter, David Ribes Lopez.

I would also like to offer the Medal of the Pontificate to the young Italian sculptor, Jacopo Cardillo, as a sign of appreciation and encouragement.

Lastly, I express my hope that the commitment of all the Academicians in their respective fields will be ever more enthusiastic, and that they will also welcome the valuable opportunity offered them by the Year of Faith. And as I entrust each one to the motherly protection of the Virgin Mary, the *Tota Pulchra*, the model of the faith of believers, I cordially impart to you, Your Eminence, and to everyone present a special Apostolic Blessing.

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