



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE CONGRESS ORGANIZED
AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE FIFTH CENTENARY
OF THE VATICAN MUSEUMS**

Clementine Hall

Saturday, 16 December 2006

*Your Eminence,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

It is an honour and a pleasure for me to greet such a highly-qualified representation of museum directors from the most important museums around the world. My cordial greetings go to each one of you, accompanied by deep gratitude for your visit today.

In the first place, I greet Archbishop Giovanni Lajolo, President of the Governorate of Vatican City State, whom I also thank for expressing the sentiments of everyone present. I greet the Cardinal, the Bishops, the dignitaries and the experts from every continent.

My special thanks go to the Director of the Vatican Museums and his collaborators, as well as to those who prepared and organized the Congress, which brings to a close the full programme of events to commemorate the fifth centenary of the Vatican Museums.

The many initiatives organized throughout the year have not only attempted to commemorate events of the past, but also to create new opportunities for the throngs of visitors who come to the Museums every day to deepen their knowledge. Thus, the great interest sparked by a museum complex with so many successive layers over time has been highlighted.

I congratulate you on this Symposium that has focused on a theme of indisputable interest: the

museum's identity and role today and its future prospects.

Precisely because it was dedicated to examining the role and objectives of the "museum" as an institution in contemporary society, the Congress did not merely provide for a review of reports by experts.

Rather, you chose to compare one another's theoretical studies, specific interventions, the exchange of experiences and frank dialogue in order to bring forth elements that would make possible a clearer definition of the role of museums, which we might describe in the context of today's globalized society as "educational".

The Church has always supported and upheld the world of art, in the conviction that art is an eloquent expression of human and spiritual progress.

On this occasion, it is also worth remembering the inscription that my venerable Predecessor, Benedict XIV, had engraved over the entrance to the Christian Museum: "*Ad augendum Urbis splendorem et asserendam Religionis veritatem* - To add to the splendour of Rome and to assert the truth of the Christian Religion".

The development of the Vatican Museums through time shows that these aims have always remained very present in the Pontiffs' endeavours. When I received the staff of this important Institution last month, I noted that this truth is inscribed in its "genetic code": the great classical and Judeo-Christian civilizations are not in opposition to one another but converge in the one plan of God.

Moreover, I added that this logic is proper to the whole Museum, which truly appears in such a perspective as a single unit in the complex sequence of its sections (cf. [*Address to Vatican Museums Staff*](#), 23 November 2006; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 6 December 2006, p. 14).

In short, one might say that the Vatican Museums can be an extraordinary opportunity for evangelization because, through the various works displayed, they offer visitors an eloquent testimony of the continuous interweaving of the divine and the human in the life and history of peoples. The huge number of persons who visit them every day demonstrate the increasing interest in these masterful works of art and historical testimonies which form a wonderful synthesis of the Gospel and culture.

On the basis of the actual experience of the Vatican Museums, the decision made by the Congress organizers, who proposed not to limit themselves to analyzing the way in which museum institutions are currently arranged, has proven most appropriate.

They asked the participants instead to examine the role that museums can play in the future and the function demanded of them in our time, marked by rapid social changes and in which the communications network connects the whole fabric of humanity.

There is no doubt, as was noted at the Congress, that the role of the museum in our time has changed tangibly. From being a privilege, the museum has become a right, from being a centre reserved for artists, specialists and cultured people, it has increasingly become today a "home" for everyone, thereby responding to a widespread need in society for education. Special attention is thus rightly given to the young generations, who can discover at museums the roots of their history and culture.

Every opportunity to encourage integration and encounter between individuals and peoples should certainly be fostered. In this perspective, despite the changed social conditions, museums can also become places of artistic mediation, links in a chain between the past, present and future, the crossroads of men and women from various continents, let alone research laboratories and seedbeds of cultural and spiritual enrichment.

Thanks be to God, the ever more desirable dialogue between cultures and religions cannot but facilitate reciprocal knowledge and make more fruitful the efforts to build a common future of progress in solidarity and peace for all humanity. Museums will be able to help spread the culture of peace if, preserving their nature as temples of historical memory, they are also places of dialogue and friendship among all.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, to each one of you I renew my cordial thanks for your visit today and I hope that your daily work will contribute to passing on to the future generations a love for that beauty which, as Dostoyevsky writes, "will save the world" (*The Idiot*, Part III, chap. V).

With these sentiments, as I express fervent good wishes to you for the upcoming Christmas festivities, I invoke an abundance of God's Blessings upon you all and upon your families.

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