



# The Holy See

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## ***LECTURE BY THE HOLY FATHER BENEDICT XVI AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ROME "LA SAPIENZA"***

*The following is the Address that the Holy Father intended to give during a Visit to La Sapienza University in Rome on Thursday, 17 January:*

*Magnificent Rector,  
Political and Civil Authorities,  
Distinguished Teachers, Technical and Administrative Staff,  
Dear Young Students,*

It is a cause of deep joy for me to meet the community of *La Sapienza*, the University of Rome, on the occasion of the inauguration of the academic year. For centuries this University has been a part of the story and the life of the city of Rome, harvesting the fruits of the best intellects in every field of knowledge. Both in the past, when the institution depended directly on ecclesiastical authority (having been founded at the behest of Pope Boniface VIII), and in its more recent history, when the *Studium Urbis* became an institution of the Italian State, your academic community has maintained a high scientific and cultural standard which places it among the world's most prestigious universities. The Church of Rome has always looked with affection and admiration at this university centre, recognizing its dedication, often arduous and demanding, to research and to the formation of generations of young people. There have been important instances of collaboration and dialogue in recent years. I would like to recall in particular the World Meeting of Rectors on the occasion of the Jubilee of Universities, when your community not only hosted and organized the event, but above all took responsibility for the prophetic and complex proposal to elaborate a "new humanism for the third millennium".

On this occasion, I am happy to express my gratitude to you for your invitation to give a lecture at your university. With this prospect in view, I first of all asked myself the question: what can and

should a Pope say on such an occasion? In my lecture at Regensburg I did indeed speak as Pope, but above all I spoke in my capacity as a former professor of my old university, seeking to link past memories with the present. However, it is as Bishop of Rome that I am invited to *La Sapienza*, Rome's ancient university, so it is as such that I must speak. Of course, *La Sapienza* was once the university of the Pope. Today, however, it is a secular university with that autonomy which, in keeping with the vision inspiring their foundation, has always been part of the nature of universities, which must be tied exclusively to the authority of the truth. It is in their freedom from political and ecclesiastical authorities that the particular function of universities lies – a function that serves modern society as well, which needs institutions of this kind.

To return to my initial question: what can and should the Pope say at a meeting with the university in his city? As I pondered this question, it seemed to me that it included two others, and the answer should follow naturally from an exploration of these. We need to ask ourselves this: What is the nature and mission of the Papacy? And what is the nature and mission of the university? I have no wish to detain you or myself with an extended discussion on the nature of the Papacy. Let a brief comment suffice. The Pope is first and foremost the Bishop of Rome and as such – as Successor to the Apostle Peter – he has an episcopal responsibility for the whole of the Catholic Church. In the New Testament, the word “bishop” – *episkopos* –, the immediate meaning of which indicates an “overseer”, had already been merged with the Biblical concept of Shepherd: the one who observes the whole landscape from above, ensuring that everything holds together and is moving in the right direction. Considered in such terms, this designation of the task focuses the attention first of all within the believing community. The Bishop – the Shepherd – is the one who cares for this community; he is the one who keeps it united on the way towards God, a way which, according to the Christian faith, has been indicated by Jesus – and not merely indicated: He himself is our way. Yet this community which the Bishop looks after – be it large or small – lives in the world; its circumstances, its history, its example and its message inevitably influence the entire human community. The larger it is, the greater the effect, for better or worse, on the rest of humanity. Today we see very clearly how the state of religions and the situation of the Church – her crises and her renewal – affect humanity in its entirety. Thus the Pope, in his capacity as Shepherd of his community, is also increasingly becoming a voice for the ethical reasoning of humanity.

Here, however, the objection immediately arises: surely the Pope does not really base his pronouncements on ethical reasoning, but draws his judgements from faith and hence cannot claim to speak on behalf of those who do not share this faith. We will have to return to this point later, because here the absolutely fundamental question must be asked: What is reason? How can one demonstrate that an assertion – especially a moral norm – is “reasonable”? At this point I would like to describe briefly how John Rawls, while denying that comprehensive religious doctrines have the character of “public” reason, nonetheless at least sees their “non-public” reason as one which cannot simply be dismissed by those who maintain a rigidly secularized rationality. Rawls perceives a criterion of this reasonableness among other things in the fact that such

doctrines derive from a responsible and well thought-out tradition in which, over lengthy periods, satisfactory arguments have been developed in support of the doctrines concerned. The important thing in this assertion, it seems to me, is the acknowledgment that down through the centuries, experience and demonstration – the historical source of human wisdom – are also a sign of its reasonableness and enduring significance. Faced with an a-historical form of reason that seeks to establish itself exclusively in terms of a-historical rationality, humanity's wisdom – the wisdom of the great religious traditions – should be valued as a heritage that cannot be cast with impunity into the dustbin of the history of ideas.

Let us go back to our initial question. The Pope speaks as the representative of a community of believers in which a particular wisdom about life has evolved in the course of the centuries of its existence. He speaks as the representative of a community that preserves within itself a treasury of ethical knowledge and experience important for all humanity: in this sense, he speaks as the representative of a form of ethical reasoning.

Now, however, we must ask ourselves: "What is the university? What is its task?" This is a vast question to which, once again, I can only endeavour to respond in an almost telegraphic style with one or two comments. I think one could say that at the most intimate level, the true origin of the university lies in the thirst for knowledge that is proper to man. The human being wants to know what everything around him is. He wants truth. In this perspective, one can see Socratic questioning as the impulse that gave birth to the western university. I am thinking, for example – to mention only one text – of the dispute with Euthyphro, who in debate with Socrates defended the mythical religion and cult. Socrates countered with a question: "Do you believe that the gods are really waging war against each other with terrible feuds and battles? ... Must we effectively say, Euthyphro, that all this is true?" (6 b-c). The Christians of the first centuries identified themselves and their journey with this question which seems not particularly devout – but which in Socrates' case derived from a deeper and purer religious sensibility, from the search for the true God. They received their faith not in a positivistic manner, nor as a way of escape from unfulfilled wishes; rather, they understood it as dispelling the mist of mythological religion in order to make way for the discovery of the God who is creative Reason, God who is Reason-Love. This is why reasoned enquiry concerning the truly great God, and concerning the true nature and meaning of the human being, did not strike them as problematic, as a lack of due religious sentiment: rather, it was an essential part of their way of being religious. Hence they did not need to abandon or set aside Socratic enquiry, but they could, indeed were bound to accept it, and recognize reason's laborious search to attain knowledge of the whole truth as part of their own identity. In this way, within the context of the Christian faith, in the Christian world, the university could come into being – indeed it was bound to do so.

Now it is necessary to take a further step. Man desires to know – he wants truth. Truth in the first instance is something discerned through seeing, understanding, what Greek tradition calls *theoría*. Yet truth is never purely theoretical. In drawing a parallel between the Beatitudes of the Sermon

on the Mount and the gifts of the Spirit listed in Isaiah 11, Saint Augustine argued that there is a reciprocity between *scientia* and *tristitia*: knowledge on its own, he said, causes sadness. And it is true to say that those who merely see and apprehend all that happens in the world end up being saddened. Yet truth means more than knowledge: the purpose of knowing the truth is to know the good. This is also the meaning of Socratic enquiry: What is the good which makes us true? The truth makes us good and the good is true: this is the optimism that shapes the Christian faith, because this faith has been granted the vision of the *Logos*, of creative Reason which, in God's incarnation, revealed itself as the Good, as Goodness itself.

In medieval theology there was a detailed disputation on the relationship between theory and practice, on the proper relationship between knowledge and action – a disputation that we need not explore here. *De facto*, the medieval university with its four faculties expresses this correlation. Let us begin with the faculty which was understood at the time to rank as the fourth – the faculty of medicine. Even if it was considered more as an “art” than a science, the inclusion of medicine within the ambit of the *universitas* clearly indicated that it was placed within the realm of rationality, that the art of healing was under the guidance of reason and had been removed from the realm of magic. Healing is a task that always requires more than plain reason, but this is precisely why it depends on the connection between knowledge and power, it needs to belong to the sphere of *ratio*. Inevitably the question of the relationship between praxis and theory, between knowledge and action, also arose in the faculty of jurisprudence. Here it was a matter of giving the correct form to human freedom, which is always a freedom shared with others. Law is the presupposition of freedom, not its opponent. At this point, however, the question immediately arises: How is it possible to identify criteria of justice that make shared freedom possible and help man to be good? Here a leap into the present is necessary. The point in question is: how can a juridical body of norms be established that serves as an ordering of freedom, of human dignity and human rights? This is the issue with which we are grappling today in the democratic processes that form opinion, the issue which also causes us to be anxious about the future of humanity. In my opinion, Jürgen Habermas articulates a vast consensus of contemporary thought when he says that the legitimacy of a constitutional charter, as a basis for what is legal, derives from two sources: from the equal participation of all citizens in the political process and from the reasonable manner in which political disputes are resolved. With regard to this “reasonable manner”, he notes that it cannot simply be a fight for arithmetical majorities, but must have the character of a “process of argumentation sensitive to the truth” (*wahrheitssensibles Argumentationsverfahren*). The point is well made, but it is far from easy to put it into practice politically. The representatives of that public “process of argumentation” are – as we know – principally political parties, inasmuch as these are responsible for the formation of political will. *De facto*, they will always aim to achieve majorities and hence will almost inevitably attend to interests that they promise to satisfy, even though these interests are often particular and do not truly serve the whole. Sensibility to the truth is repeatedly subordinated to sensibility to interests. I find it significant that Habermas speaks of sensibility to the truth as a necessary element in the process of political argument, thereby reintroducing the concept of truth into philosophical and political debate.

At this point, though, Pilate's question becomes unavoidable: What is truth? And how can it be recognized? If in our search for an answer we have recourse to "public reason", as Rawls does, then further questions necessarily follow: What is reasonable? How is reason shown to be true? In any case, on this basis it becomes clear that in the search for a set of laws embodying freedom, in the search for the truth about a just polity, we must listen to claims other than those of parties and interest groups, without in any way wishing to deny the importance of the latter. Let us return now to the structure of the medieval university. Besides the faculty of jurisprudence, there were faculties of philosophy and theology, which were entrusted with the task of studying the human being in his totality, thus safeguarding sensibility to the truth. One might even say that this was the permanent and true purpose of both faculties: to be custodians of sensibility to the truth, not to allow man to be distracted from his search for the truth. Yet how could the faculties measure up to this task? This is a question which must be constantly worked at, and is never asked and answered once and for all. So, at this point, I cannot offer a satisfactory answer either, but only an invitation to continue exploring the question – exploring in company with the great minds throughout history that have grappled and researched, engaging with their answers and their passion for the truth that invariably points beyond each individual answer.

Theology and philosophy in this regard form a strange pair of twins, in which neither of the two can be totally separated from the other, and yet each must preserve its own task and its own identity. It is the historical merit of Saint Thomas Aquinas – in the face of the rather different answer offered by the Fathers, owing to their historical context – to have highlighted the autonomy of philosophy, and with it the laws and the responsibility proper to reason, which enquires on the basis of its own dynamic. Distancing themselves from neo-Platonic philosophies, in which religion and philosophy were inseparably interconnected, the Fathers had presented the Christian faith as the true philosophy, and had emphasized that this faith fulfils the demands of reason in search of truth; that faith is the "yes" to the truth, in comparison with the mythical religions that had become mere custom. By the time the university came to birth, though, those religions no longer existed in the West – there was only Christianity, and thus it was necessary to give new emphasis to the specific responsibility of reason, which is not absorbed by faith. Thomas was writing at a privileged moment: for the first time, the philosophical works of Aristotle were accessible in their entirety; the Jewish and Arab philosophies were available as specific appropriations and continuations of Greek philosophy. Christianity, in a new dialogue with the reasoning of the interlocutors it was now encountering, was thus obliged to argue a case for its own reasonableness. The faculty of philosophy, which as a so-called "arts faculty" had until then been no more than a preparation for theology, now became a faculty in its own right, an autonomous partner of theology and the faith on which theology reflected. We cannot digress to consider the fascinating consequences of this development. I would say that Saint Thomas's idea concerning the relationship between philosophy and theology could be expressed using the formula that the Council of Chalcedon adopted for Christology: philosophy and theology must be interrelated "without confusion and without separation". "Without confusion" means that each of the two must preserve its own identity. Philosophy must truly remain a quest conducted by reason with freedom and

responsibility; it must recognize its limits and likewise its greatness and immensity.

Theology must continue to draw upon a treasury of knowledge that it did not invent, that always surpasses it, the depths of which can never be fully plumbed through reflection, and which for that reason constantly gives rise to new thinking. Balancing “without confusion”, there is always “without separation”: philosophy does not start again from zero with every thinking subject in total isolation, but takes its place within the great dialogue of historical wisdom, which it continually accepts and develops in a manner both critical and docile. It must not exclude what religions, and the Christian faith in particular, have received and have given to humanity as signposts for the journey. Various things said by theologians in the course of history, or even adopted in practice by ecclesiastical authorities, have been shown by history to be false, and today make us feel ashamed. Yet at the same time it has to be acknowledged that the history of the saints, the history of the humanism that has grown out of the Christian faith, demonstrates the truth of this faith in its essential nucleus, thereby giving it a claim upon public reason. Of course, much of the content of theology and faith can only be appropriated within the context of faith, and therefore cannot be demanded of those to whom this faith remains inaccessible. Yet at the same time it is true that the message of the Christian faith is never solely a “comprehensive religious doctrine” in Rawls’ sense, but is a purifying force for reason, helping it to be more fully itself. On the basis of its origin, the Christian message should always be an encouragement towards truth, and thus a force against the pressure exerted by power and interests.

Up to this point, I have spoken only of the medieval university, while seeking nonetheless to indicate the unchanging nature of the university and its task. In modern times, new dimensions of knowledge have opened up, which have been explored within the university under two broad headings: first, the natural sciences, which have developed on the basis of the connection between experimentation and the presumed rationality of matter; second, the historical and human sciences, in which man, contemplating his history as in a mirror and clarifying the dimensions of his nature, seeks to understand himself better. In this process, not only has an immense quantity of knowledge and power been made available to humanity, but knowledge and recognition of human rights and dignity have also evolved, and for this we can only be grateful. Yet the human journey never simply comes to an end; and the danger of falling into inhumanity is never totally overcome, as is only too evident from the panorama of recent history! The danger for the western world – to speak only of this – is that today, precisely because of the greatness of his knowledge and power, man will fail to face up to the question of the truth. This would mean at the same time that reason would ultimately bow to the pressure of interests and the attraction of utility, constrained to recognize this as the ultimate criterion. To put it from the point of view of the structure of the university: there is a danger that philosophy, no longer considering itself capable of its true task, will degenerate into positivism; and that theology, with its message addressed to reason, will be limited to the private sphere of a more or less numerous group. Yet if reason, out of concern for its alleged purity, becomes deaf to the great message that comes to it from Christian faith and wisdom, then it withers like a tree whose roots can no longer reach the waters that give it

life. It loses the courage for truth and thus becomes not greater but smaller. Applied to our European culture, this means: if our culture seeks only to build itself on the basis of the circle of its own argumentation, on what convinces it at the time, and if – anxious to preserve its secularism – it detaches itself from its life-giving roots, then it will not become more reasonable or purer, but will fall apart and disintegrate.

This brings me back to my starting-point. What should the Pope do or say at the university? Certainly, he must not seek to impose the faith upon others in an authoritarian manner – as faith can only be given in freedom. Over and above his ministry as Shepherd of the Church, and on the basis of the intrinsic nature of this pastoral ministry, it is the Pope's task to safeguard sensibility to the truth; to invite reason to set out ever anew in search of what is true and good, in search of God; to urge reason, in the course of this search, to discern the illuminating lights that have emerged during the history of the Christian faith, and thus to recognize Jesus Christ as the Light that illumines history and helps us find the path towards the future.

*From the Vatican, 17 January 2008.*

**BENEDICTUS PP. XVI**