The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE MEETING PROMOTED BY THE
PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR PROMOTING THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

Synod Hall
Wednesday, 11 October 2017

[Multimedia]

Your Eminences,
venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,
dear Ambassadors,
distinguished professors,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I offer a warm greeting to all of you and I thank Archbishop Fisichella for his kind words of introduction.

The twenty-fifth anniversary of the Apostolic Constitution *Fidei Depositum*, by which Saint John Paul II, thirty years after the opening of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, promulgated the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, offers a significant opportunity for taking stock of the progress made in the meantime. It was the desire and will of Saint John XXIII to call the Council, not primarily to condemn error, but so that the Church could have an opportunity at last to present the beauty of her faith in Jesus Christ in language attuned to the times. "It is necessary," the Pope stated in his opening address, "that the Church should never depart from the sacred patrimony of truth received from the Fathers. But at the same time she must ever look to the present, to the new conditions and new forms of life introduced into the modern world which have opened new avenues to the Catholic apostolate" (11 October 1962). "It is our duty," he continued, "not only to guard this precious treasure, as if we were concerned only with antiquity, but to dedicate

ourselves, with an earnest will and without fear, to that work which our era demands of us, thus pursuing the path which the Church has followed for twenty centuries" (ibid.).

It is in the very nature of the Church to "guard" the deposit of faith and to "pursue" the Church's path, so that the truth present in Jesus' preaching of the Gospel may grow in fullness until the end of time. This is a grace granted to the People of God, but it is also a task and a mission for which we are responsible, that of proclaiming to our contemporaries in a new and fuller way the perennial Good News. With the joy born of Christian hope, and armed with the "medicine of mercy" (ibid.), we approach the men and women of our time to help them discover the inexhaustible richness contained in the person of Jesus Christ.

In presenting the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Saint John Paul II stated that it should "take into account the doctrinal statements which down the centuries the Holy Spirit has made known to his Church. It should also help illumine with the light of faith the new situations and problems which had not yet emerged in the past" (*Fidei Depositum*, 3). The *Catechism* is thus an important instrument. It presents the faithful with the perennial teaching of the Church so that they can grow in their understanding of the faith. But it especially seeks to draw our contemporaries – with their new and varied problems – to the Church, as she seeks to present the faith as the meaningful answer to human existence at this moment of history. It is not enough to find a new language in which to articulate our perennial faith; it is also urgent, in the light of the new challenges and prospects facing humanity, that the Church be able to express the "new things" of Christ's Gospel, that, albeit present in the word of God, have not yet come to light. This is the treasury of "things old and new" of which Jesus spoke when he invited his disciples to teach the newness that he had brought, without forsaking the old (cf. *Mt* 13:52).

One of the most beautiful pages in the Gospel of John is his account of the so-called "priestly prayer" of Jesus. Just before his passion and death, Jesus speaks to the Father of his obedience in having brought to fulfilment the mission entrusted to him. His words, a kind of hymn to love, also contain the request that the disciples be gathered and preserved in unity (cf. *Jn* 17:12-15). The words, "Now this is eternal life, that they should know you, the only true God, and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ" (*Jn* 17:3), represent the culmination of Jesus's mission.

To know God, as we are well aware, is not in the first place an abstract exercise of human reason, but an irrepressible desire present in the heart of every person. This knowledge comes from love, for we have encountered the Son of God on our journey (cf. *Lumen Fidei*, 28). Jesus of Nazareth walks at our side and introduces us, by his words and the signs he performs, to the great mystery of the Father's love. This knowledge is strengthened daily by faith's certainty that we are loved and, for this reason, part of a meaningful plan. Those who love long to know better the beloved, and therein to discover the hidden richness that appears each day as something completely new.

For this reason, our *Catechism* unfolds in the light of love, as an experience of knowledge, trust,

and abandonment to the mystery. In explaining its structure, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* borrows a phrase from the *Roman Catechism* and proposes it as the key to its reading and application: “The whole concern of doctrine and its teaching must be directed to the love that never ends. Whether something is proposed for belief, for hope or for action, the love of our Lord must always be made accessible, so that anyone can see that all the works of perfect Christian virtue spring from love and have no other objective than to arrive at love” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 25).

Along these same lines, I would like now to bring up a subject that ought to find in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* a more adequate and coherent treatment in the light of these expressed aims. I am speaking of the *death penalty.* This issue cannot be reduced to a mere résumé of traditional teaching without taking into account not only the doctrine as it has developed in the teaching of recent Popes, but also the change in the awareness of the Christian people which rejects an attitude of complacency before a punishment deeply injurious of human dignity. It must be clearly stated that the death penalty is an inhumane measure that, regardless of how it is carried out, abases human dignity. It is per se contrary to the Gospel, because it entails the willful suppression of a human life that never ceases to be sacred in the eyes of its Creator and of which – ultimately – only God is the true judge and guarantor. No man, “not even a murderer, loses his personal dignity” (*Letter to the President of the International Commission against the Death Penalty*, 20 March 2015), because God is a Father who always awaits the return of his children who, knowing that they have made mistakes, ask for forgiveness and begin a new life. No one ought to be deprived not only of life, but also of the chance for a moral and existential redemption that in turn can benefit the community.

In past centuries, when means of defence were scarce and society had yet to develop and mature as it has, recourse to the death penalty appeared to be the logical consequence of the correct application of justice. Sadly, even in the Papal States recourse was had to this extreme and inhumane remedy that ignored the primacy of mercy over justice. Let us take responsibility for the past and recognize that the imposition of the death penalty was dictated by a mentality more legalistic than Christian. Concern for preserving power and material wealth led to an over-estimation of the value of the law and prevented a deeper understanding of the Gospel. Nowadays, however, were we to remain neutral before the new demands of upholding personal dignity, we would be even more guilty.

Here we are not in any way contradicting past teaching, for the defence of the dignity of human life from the first moment of conception to natural death has been taught by the Church consistently and authoritatively. Yet the harmonious development of doctrine demands that we cease to defend arguments that now appear clearly contrary to the new understanding of Christian truth. Indeed, as Saint Vincent of Lérins pointed out, “Some may say: Shall there be no progress of religion in Christ’s Church? Certainly; all possible progress. For who is there, so envious of men, so full of hatred to God, who would seek to forbid it?” (*Commonitorium*, 23.1; *PL* 50). It is

necessary, therefore, to reaffirm that no matter how serious the crime that has been committed, the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and the dignity of the person.

“The Church, in her teaching, life and worship, perpetuates and hands on to all generations all that she herself is, all that she believes” (*Dei Verbum*, 8). The Council Fathers could not have found a finer and more synthetic way of expressing the nature and mission of the Church. Not only in “teaching”, but also in “life” and “worship”, are the faithful able to be God’s People. Through a series of verbs the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation expresses the dynamic nature of this process: “This Tradition *develops* […] *grows* […] and *constantly moves forward* toward the fullness of divine truth, until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her” (ibid.)

Tradition is a living reality and only a partial vision regards the “deposit of faith” as something static. The word of God cannot be moth-balled like some old blanket in an attempt to keep insects at bay! No. The word of God is a dynamic and living reality that develops and grows because it is aimed at a fulfilment that none can halt. This law of progress, in the happy formulation of Saint Vincent of Lérins, “consolidated by years, enlarged by time, refined by age” (*Commonitorium*, 23.9: *PL* 50), is a distinguishing mark of revealed truth as it is handed down by the Church, and in no way represents a change in doctrine.

Doctrine cannot be preserved without allowing it to develop, nor can it be tied to an interpretation that is rigid and immutable without demeaning the working of the Holy Spirit. “God, who in many and various ways spoke of old to our fathers” (*Heb* 1:1), “uninterruptedly converses with the bride of his beloved Son” (*Dei Verbum*, 8). We are called to make this voice our own by “reverently hearing the word of God” (ibid., 1), so that our life as a Church may progress with the same enthusiasm as in the beginning, towards those new horizons to which the Lord wishes to guide us.

I thank you for this meeting and for your work; I ask you to pray for me, and to all of you I cordially impart my blessing. Thank you.

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