



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER  
POPE JOHN PAUL II  
TO AN INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM  
ON THE INQUISITION**

*Saturday, 31 October 1998*

*Your Eminences,  
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,  
Ladies and Gentlemen!*

1. I am delighted to welcome you during the Study Conference on the Inquisition, sponsored and organized by the Historical-Theological Commission for the preparation of the Great Jubilee. I extend my cordial greeting to each of you. Thank you for your willingness to participate and for the contribution you have made to preparing for the forthcoming Jubilee by also addressing a theme which is certainly not easy, but of undoubted interest for our time.

I especially thank Cardinal Roger Etchegaray for the noble address he gave to open this meeting and for presenting the conference's objectives. At the same time I express my deep appreciation of the efforts taken by the Commission's members in preparing the symposium and by the speakers who conducted the study sessions.

The topic you have dwelt on, as you can easily see, calls for careful discernment and considerable knowledge of history. The indispensable contribution of historians will certainly be a help to theologians in making a more accurate evaluation of this phenomenon which, precisely because of its complexity, must be analyzed in a scrupulously objective way.

2. Your conference on the Inquisition is being held a few days after the publication of the Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, in which I wanted to remind the men and women of our time, who are tempted by scepticism and relativism, of the fundamental dignity of reason and its innate ability to

attain truth. The Church, whose mission is to proclaim the word of salvation received in divine Revelation, sees this yearning to know truth as an irrepressible prerogative of the human person, created in the image of God. She knows that a bond of mutual friendship unites knowledge through faith and natural knowledge, each with its specific object and its own rights (cf. Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, n. 57).

At the beginning of the Encyclical, I made reference to the inscription on the temple at Delphi, which inspired Socrates: know yourself. This is a fundamental truth: knowing oneself is something distinctively human. Man is distinguished from the other created beings on earth by his ability to ask questions about the meaning of his own existence. Because of what he knows about the world and about himself, man can respond to another command passed on to us by Greek thought: *become what you are*.

Knowledge, then, has vital importance for man as he advances towards the full realization of his humanity: this is particularly true as regards historical knowledge. Individuals, as well as society, become fully aware of themselves only when they know how to integrate their past.

3. In the Encyclical *Fides et ratio* I also expressed my concern about the phenomenon of the *fragmentation of knowledge*, which is one reason why knowledge loses its meaning and deviates from its true purpose. This phenomenon has a variety of causes. Progress itself has led to ever greater specialization, one consequence of which is the lack of communication between the various disciplines. For this reason I invited philosophers, men and women of learning to recover “the sapiential dimension as a search for the ultimate and overarching meaning of life” (cf. *ibid.*, n. 81), because the integration of knowledge and action is a requirement inscribed in our spirit.

In this regard, it seems essential to stress the role of *epistemological reflection* for the integration of the different elements of knowledge in a harmonious unity that respects the identity and autonomy of each discipline. This, moreover, is one of the most valuable achievements of contemporary thought (cf. *ibid.*, n. 21). Only if the scientist rigorously adheres to his field of research and to the methodology directing it, will he be a servant of the truth for that portion which is his concern.

Today, in fact, there is a widespread conviction that it is not possible to arrive at the whole of truth on the basis of a particular discipline. Collaboration between the representatives of different sciences, therefore, becomes a necessity. On the other hand, as soon as a complex matter is addressed, researchers feel the need for each other’s explanations, while obviously respecting one another’s expertise.

For this reason the Historical-Theological Commission for the preparation of the Great Jubilee rightly thought that it could not properly reflect on the phenomenon of the Inquisition without first hearing from universally recognized experts in the historical sciences.

4. Ladies and Gentlemen! The problem of the Inquisition belongs to a troubled period of the Church's history, which I have invited Christians to revisit with an open mind. As I wrote in the Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente*: "Another painful chapter of history to which the sons and daughters of the Church must return with a spirit of repentance is that of the acquiescence given, especially in certain centuries, to intolerance and even the use of violence in the service of the truth" (n. 35).

The question, which involves the cultural context and political ideas of the time, is precisely theological in origin and presupposes an outlook of faith regarding the essence of the Church and the Gospel requirements that govern her life. The Church's Magisterium certainly cannot perform an ethical act, such as asking for forgiveness, without first being accurately informed about the situation at the time. Nor can it be based on the images of the past spread by public opinion, since they are often charged with an intense emotionalism that prevents calm, objective analysis. If the Magisterium does not bear this in mind, it would fail in its fundamental duty of respecting the truth. That is why the first step is to question historians, who are not asked to make an ethical judgement, which would exceed their sphere of competence, but to help in the most precise reconstruction possible of the events, customs and mentality of the time, in the light of the era's historical context.

Only when historical science has been able to determine the true facts, will theologians and the Church's Magisterium itself be in a position to make an objectively well-founded judgement.

At this time I earnestly wish to thank you for the service you have offered in complete freedom, and I once again express all the Church's esteem for your work. I am convinced that it offers an outstanding contribution to the truth, and in this way makes an indirect contribution to the new evangelization.

5. In conclusion, I would like to share a thought with you that is particularly close to my heart. The request for forgiveness, which is much talked about at the time, primarily concerns the life of the Church, her mission of proclaiming salvation, her witness to Christ, her commitment to unity, in a word, the consistency which should distinguish Christian life. But the light and strength of the Gospel, by which the Church lives, can illumine and support more than abundantly the decisions and actions of civil society, with full respect for their autonomy. It is for this reason that the Church continually works in her own way for peace and the promotion of human rights. On the threshold of the third millennium, we may rightly hope that political leaders and peoples, especially those involved in tragic conflicts fueled by hatred and the memory of often ancient wounds, will be guided by the spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation exemplified by the Church and will make every effort to resolve their differences through open and honest dialogue.

I entrust this hope to your reflection and your prayer. And as I invoke God's constant protection on each of you, I assure you of a constant remembrance in prayer and am pleased to give you and

your loved ones a special Apostolic Blessing.

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