



# The Holy See

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**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE PONTIFICAL COMMITTEE  
FOR HISTORICAL SCIENCES FOR THE 14th CENTENARY  
OF THE DEATH OF POPE ST GREGORY THE GREAT**

*To Reverend Mons. Walter Brandmüller*

*President of the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences*<sup>1</sup>. With a view to the 14th centenary of the death of my Predecessor, St Gregory the Great, the "Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei" [the Italian Academy] and the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences intend to commemorate together this eminent figure, a Successor of Peter to whom the title "the Great" has rightly been attributed. In recalling figures and events of the past that made a deep mark on their time, historiography renders a valid service to future generations because it brings into the limelight human models who transmitted values that are universal and, as such, valid for every epoch. This is the case of St Gregory the Great; I would like here to emphasize certain aspects of his personality that I consider particularly important.<sup>2</sup> Gregory was the son of an old Roman family which had long been Christian. The atmosphere of his home and the education he received enabled him to become familiar with the heritage of the different branches of knowledge and of classical literature. As an attentive researcher of the truth, he realized that the patrimony of classical antiquity, in addition to that of the Christian heritage, was a valuable basis for subsequent scientific and human development. Still today, his insight has retained its full value for the future of humanity and, especially, of Europe. Indeed, it is impossible to build the future by ignoring the past. That is why, on various occasions, I have urged the competent Authorities to appreciate the rich classical and Christian "roots" of European civilization as they deserve, to pass on their sap to the new generations. Another significant feature of St Gregory the Great was his commitment to shedding light on the primacy of the human person, considered not only in his physical, psychological and social dimensions but also in constant reference to his eternal destiny. This is a truth on which today's world should focus greater attention if it wishes to build a world with deeper respect for the multiple needs of every human being.<sup>3</sup> St Gregory the Great has often been called "the last of the Romans". Indeed, he had deep roots in the city of Rome, its people and its traditions. As Supreme Pontiff, he never lost sight of the *Orbis Romanus*. Not only did he take care of the part of the Roman Empire, Byzantium, that he knew well due to his long stay in Constantinople, but he extended his pastoral care to *Spain, Gaul, Germany and Britain*, all of which were then part of the Roman Empire. Motivated by exemplary zeal to spread the Gospel, he encouraged an intense missionary activity which expressed a Roman spirit purified and inspired by the Gospel, no longer concerned with asserting political power but keen to bring the saving message of Christ to all peoples. The great Pontiff's inner disposition is evident in the

directions he carefully imparted to the Abbot Augustine, whom he sent to Britain: he explicitly asked him to respect the customs of those peoples, as long as they did not conflict with the Christian faith. Thus, Gregory the Great, in addition to fostering the missionary concern that was inherent in his ministry, made a crucial contribution to the harmonious integration of the various peoples of Western Christendom. Consequently, the witness of this distinguished Pontiff lives on as an example for us too, Christians of today who have only recently crossed the threshold of the third millennium and look confidently to the future. To build a future of serenity and solidarity, it is right to turn our gaze to this true disciple of Christ and to follow his teaching, courageously presenting anew to the contemporary world the saving message of the Gospel. Indeed, it is only in Christ and in him alone that human beings of every epoch can find the secret to the total fulfilment of their most essential aspirations. I warmly hope that you too, eminent Professors, through the fruitful collaboration between the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences and the "Accademia dei Lincei", may make a significant contribution to building a new civilization that is truly worthy of man by acquiring a deeper knowledge of the thought and action of this great Pontiff. With these sentiments, as I assure you of my remembrance in prayer, I cordially bless you all. *From the Vatican, 22 October 2003* **JOHN PAUL II**

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