



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PARTICIPANTS
IN THE INTERNATIONAL THOMISTIC CONGRESS
ON "CHRISTIAN HUMANISM IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM"**

Dear Brothers and Sisters, 1. I am delighted to address this Message to you, distinguished theologians, philosophers and experts, participants in the International Thomistic Congress that is taking place in Rome in these days. I am grateful to the Pontifical Academy of St Thomas and to the International Society of Thomas Aquinas, Thomistic institutions well known in the scientific world, for organizing this meeting, as well as for the service they render to the Church by promoting deeper knowledge of the Angelic Doctor's teaching. I warmly greet everyone present, with a special thought for Cardinal Paul Poupard, President of the Pontifical Council for Culture, for Fr Abelardo Lobato, President of both the Academy and the International Society of Thomas Aquinas, and for the Secretary, Bishop Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo. To one and all I offer a most cordial welcome. 2. The theme of the Congress - "*Christian humanism in the third millennium*" - continues along the lines of the research on man that you began at your two previous Congresses. According to the perspective of St Thomas, the great theologian also described as *Doctor humanitatis*, human nature is in itself open and good. Man is naturally *capax Dei* (fit to receive God) (*Summa Theologiae*, I, II, 113, 10; St Augustine, *De Trinit.* XIV, 8; *PL* 42, 1044), created to live in communion with his Creator; he is a free and intelligent individual, integrated in the community with his own duties and rights; he is the connecting link between the two great spheres of reality, the material and the spiritual, and fully belongs to both. The soul is the unifying part of the person's being and makes him a person. In man, St Thomas observes, grace does not destroy nature but fulfils its potential: "*gratia non tollit naturam, sed perficit*" (*Summa Theologiae*, I, I, 8 *ad* 2). 3. The Second Vatican Council made room for Christian humanism in its documents, starting with the fundamental principle that "man, though made of body and soul, is a unity. Through his very bodily condition he sums up in himself the elements of the material world. Through him they are thus brought to their highest perfection and can raise their voice in praise freely given to the Creator" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 14). Yet another striking insight comes from Vatican II: "It is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear" (*ibid.*, n. 22). With profound anticipation, Aquinas had already placed himself in this perspective: from the very beginning of the *Summa Theologiae*, which focuses on the relationship between man and God, he sums up the plan of his future exposition in a concentrated but clear formula: "*primo tractabimus de Deo; secundo de motu rationalis creaturae in Deum; tertio de Cristo, qui secundum quod homo, via est nobis tendendi in Deum*" (*Summa Theologiae*, I, 2, Prologue). The Angelic Doctor probes reality from the point of view of God, the beginning and end of all things (cf. *ibid.*, I, 1, 7). This perspective is an unusually interesting one because it permits us to penetrate the depths of the human being in order to grasp the essential dimensions. It is here that we find the distinctive feature of Thomistic humanism which, in

the opinion of many scholars, assures the correct approach and consequently, the possibility for ever new developments. In fact, Aquinas' concept integrates and binds together the three dimensions of the problem: the anthropological, ontological and theological.⁴ Now you are asking - this is, distinguished participants, the theme of your Congress - what specific contribution can St Thomas make to the understanding and fulfilment of Christian humanism at the beginning of the new millennium. If it is true that the whole of the first part of his great work, the *Summa Theologiae*, focuses entirely on God, it is nonetheless also true that the second part, more innovative and longer, is directly concerned with man's long journey towards God. In it, the human person is considered the protagonist of a precise divine plan for whose implementation not only natural but also supernatural resources have been provided. Thanks to them, he is able to respond to the exalted vocation reserved for him in Jesus Christ, true man and true God. In the third part, St Thomas recalls that the incarnate Word, precisely because he is true man, reveals in himself the dignity of every human creature and constitutes for the whole cosmos the way back to its origin: God.Christ, therefore, is the true way of man. In the Prologue to Book III of the Sentences, St Thomas, summing up humanity's journey in three stages - origin, historical and eschatological - notes that each thing comes from the hands of God, from which rivers of goodness flow. All is concentrated in man, and in the first place in the God-man, who is Christ; all things must return to God through Christ and the Christians (cf. *In III Sent.*, Prol.).⁵ St Thomas' humanism thus rotates within this essential intuition: man comes from God and must return to him. Time is the context in which man can bring his noble mission to fulfilment, making the most of the opportunities offered to him by both nature and grace. Certainly, God alone is the Creator. He has deigned, however, to entrust to his rational and free creatures the task of completing his work with their labour. When man cooperates actively with grace he becomes "a new man" who, to better respond to God's plan, draws benefits from his supernatural vocation (cf. Gn 1: 26). St Thomas maintains rightly, therefore, that the truth of human nature finds total fulfilment through sanctifying grace, since this is "*perfectio naturae rationalis creatae*" (*Quodlib.*, 4, 6).⁶ How enlightening this truth is for the man of the third millennium, constantly in search of his own self-fulfilment! In the Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, I analyzed the factors that are obstacles in the process of humanism. Among the most common should be mentioned the loss of faith in reason and in its ability to arrive at the truth, the refusal of transcendence, nihilism, relativism, the forgetfulness of being, the denial of the soul, the prevalence of the irrational or feeling, the fear of the future and existential anxiety. To respond to this very serious challenge that affects the future prospects of humanism itself, I showed how the thought of St Thomas, with his strong faith in reason and clear explanation of the functions of nature and grace, can offer the rudiments of an effective response. Christian humanism, as St Thomas demonstrated, has an ability to preserve the meaning of man and his dignity. This is the exalting task entrusted to his disciples today! The Christian knows that the future of the human being and of the world is in the hands of divine Providence, and this provides a constant reason for hope and inner peace. However, the Christian also knows that God, moved by his love for man, asks him to collaborate in improving the world and in governing history's events. In this difficult beginning of the third millennium, many clearly perceive, even to the point of suffering, the need for teachers and witnesses who are able to demonstrate valid ways that lead to a world more worthy of man. It is the historical task of believers to propose Christ as "the way" by which to advance toward that new humanity which is in God's plan. It is clear, therefore, that one priority of the new evangelization consists precisely in helping the man of our time to encounter God personally and to live with him and for him.⁷ Although St Thomas was firmly rooted in his own day and in medieval culture, he developed a teaching that goes beyond the conditioning of the time in which he lived and can still offer today fundamental guidelines for contemporary reflection. His doctrine and example are a provident reminder of those unchanging, perennial truths that are indispensable if we are to foster an existence that is truly worthy of man. In the hope that your exchange of ideas in the course of the Congress sessions will be fruitful, I urge each of you who are taking part in it to persevere in your

reflection on the riches of Thomistic teaching, drawing from the example of the Gospel "scribe", "what is new and what is old" (Mt 13: 52). I entrust the results of your research and in particular, of your International Congress, to the Virgin Mary, *Sedes Sapientiae* who gave Christ, the "New Man" to the world, and I wholeheartedly send my Blessing to you all. *From Castel Gandolfo, 20 September 2003***JOHN PAUL II**

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