



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE BIENNIAL PLENARY ASSEMBLY  
OF THE CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH**

*Friday, 6 February 2004*

*Your Eminences,  
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,  
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

1. I am once again delighted to meet you at the end of the Plenary Session of your Congregation. In addressing my cordial greeting to each one, I would like to thank Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in particular for the sentiments he has expressed on behalf of all, and for his concise summary of the many different tasks of the Dicastery.

This biennial appointment enables me to review the salient points of your work and likewise, to point out the challenges on the horizon that engage you in the delicate task of promoting and safeguarding the truth of the Catholic faith, at the service of the Magisterium of the Successor of Peter.

In this sense, your activity's special doctrinal profile could be described as truly "pastoral" since it is part of the universal mission of the Supreme Pastor (cf. *Pastor Bonus*, n. 33). Its mission is primarily the unity of faith and the communion of all believers, a unity that is essential to the fulfilment of the saving mission of the Church.

The wealth of this unity should be constantly rediscovered and appropriately defended as the challenges each epoch poses arise. The contemporary cultural context, marked both by widespread relativism and the temptation of a facile pragmatism, are more than ever in need of renewed evangelizing zeal and the courageous proclamation of the truth that saves man.

2. The *traditio evangelii* constitutes the first and fundamental task of the Church. All her activities must be inseparable from the commitment to help everyone meet Christ in the faith. This is the reason why I am especially eager to see that the evangelizing action of the whole Church should never weaken, either before a world that still does not know Christ or before the many who are distant from him, even after and in spite of having known him.

Witness of life, of course, has primary importance in the proclamation of the Gospel. Nevertheless, it will always be inadequate "if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, are not proclaimed" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 22).

This clear announcement is necessary to move hearts to adhere to the Good News of salvation. Those who proclaim it are rendering an immense service to men and women seeking the light of truth.

3. The Gospel naturally requires human beings to choose to adhere to it of their own free will. However, to enable them to express this adherence, the Gospel should be offered to them since "the multitudes have the right to know the riches of the mystery of Christ - riches in which we believe that the whole of humanity can find, in unsuspected fullness, everything that it is gropingly searching for concerning God, man and his destiny, life and death, and truth..." (*Redemptoris Missio*, n. 8). Full adherence to the Catholic truth does not curtail human freedom but exalts it and urges it towards fulfilment in freely given love, overflowing with tenderness for the good of all men and women.

This love is the precious seal of the Holy Spirit who leads the way in evangelization (cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 30), never ceases to move hearts at the proclamation of the Gospel and likewise opens them to accepting it. It is this horizon of love that motivates the *new evangelization* which I have invited the whole Church to embark on several times and would like to recall to her once again at the beginning of this third millennium.

4. Another theme that has been dealt with on various occasions is the reception of magisterial documents by Catholic faithful who are often bewildered rather than informed by the immediate reactions and interpretations of the social communications media.

In fact, the reception of a document must be regarded, apart from the media, above all as an ecclesial event that involves acceptance of the Magisterium in the most cordial communion and sharing of the Church's doctrine. Indeed, it is a matter of authoritative words that shed light on a truth of faith or on certain aspects of Catholic doctrine that may be contested or distorted by certain currents of thought and actions. Moreover, it is precisely in its doctrinal effectiveness that we discover the profoundly pastoral character of the document, whose acceptance thus becomes a favourable opportunity for formation, catechesis and evangelization.

For reception to become an authentic ecclesial event, appropriate provision should be made to transmit and disseminate the document itself, which will permit full knowledge of it first of all by the Pastors of the Church, who are principally responsible for welcoming and evaluating the Pontifical Magisterium as teaching that helps to form the Christian conscience of the faithful in the face of the challenges of the contemporary world.

5. Another important and urgent topic I would like to call to your attention is that of natural moral law. This law belongs to the great heritage of human wisdom. Revelation, with its light, has contributed to further purifying and developing it. Natural law, in itself accessible to every rational creature, points to the first essential norms that regulate moral life. On the basis of this law it is possible to construct a platform of shared values around which can be developed a constructive dialogue with all people of good will and, more generally, with secular society.

Today, as a result of the crisis of metaphysics, people in many spheres no longer recognize a truth engraved on every human heart. On the one hand, therefore, we are witnessing the spread of a fideistic morality among believers, and on the other, the lack of an objective reference point for legislation, which is often based merely on social consensus, making it more and more difficult to establish an ethical foundation common to all humanity.

My intention in the Encyclical Letters *Veritatis Splendor* and *Fides et Ratio* was to offer useful elements for rediscovering, among other things, the idea of natural moral law. Unfortunately, these teachings so far do not seem to have been accepted as widely as hoped and the complex problem deserves further study. I therefore ask you to encourage timely initiatives for the purpose of contributing to a constructive renewal of the teaching on natural moral law, seeking consensus with the representatives of the different confessions, religions and cultures.

6. Finally, I would like to mention a sensitive and timely matter. In the past two years your Congregation has witnessed a considerable increase in the number of disciplinary cases referred to it because of the competence the Dicastery possesses in *ratione materiae* on *delicta graviora*, including the *delicta contra mores*. The body of canonical norms that your Dicastery is called to apply with justice and equity strives to guarantee both the exercise of the right of defence of the accused and the demands of the common good. Once the offence has been proven, it is necessary in each case to assess carefully both the just principle of proportionality between fault and punishment, as well as the predominant need to protect the entire People of God.

This does not only depend on the application of canonical penal law. Its best guarantee is the correct and balanced formation of future priests who are explicitly called to embrace with joy and generosity that humble, modest and chaste lifestyle that is the practical basis of ecclesiastical celibacy. I therefore invite your Congregation to collaborate with the other Dicasteries of the Roman Curia qualified to form seminarians and the clergy, so that they may adopt the necessary measures to ensure that seminarians live a life in accordance with their vocation and their

commitment to perfect and perpetual chastity for the Kingdom of God.

7. Dear friends, I thank you for the precious service that you offer to the Holy See and to the entire Church. May your work bear the fruit that we are all desiring. To this end, I assure you of a special remembrance in prayer.

May you be accompanied by my Blessing, which I cordially impart with grateful affection to you all and to your loved ones in the Lord.