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Audience with participants in the Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father received in audience the participants in the Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences.

The following is the Pope's address to those in attendance:

Address of the Holy Father

Your Eminences, Dear Brother Bishops,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen!

I welcome you on this occasion of the Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. I thank your President, Professor Joachim von Braun, for his kind words. I likewise express my gratitude to Archbishop Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, who has worked very hard as Chancellor in service of this Academy and that of the Social Sciences. May the Lord reward him and bestow upon him many blessings. We send him good wishes for his eightieth birthday and for a happy retirement! Now others can take charge. We also welcome the new Chancellor, Cardinal Peter Turkson: thank you for accepting, Your Eminence!

The theme of your Plenary Session, "Basic Science for Human Development, Peace, and Planetary Health", underlines the key issues facing our human family at this moment in history.

Yet first, I would like to answer a question that not a few people are asking: Why did the popes, beginning in 1603, wish to have an Academy of Sciences? As far as I am aware, no other religious institution has such an academy, and many religious leaders have expressed an interest in establishing one. Leaving historical hypotheses to others, I would interpret this decision today in the context of love and care for the common home that God has given us. The Church embraces and encourages a passion for scientific research as an expression of love for the truth and for knowledge about the world on both the macro and microcosmic levels, and about life in all its symphonic splendour. Saint Thomas Aquinas states that "the end of the whole universe is truth"

(*Summa contra Gentiles*, I,1). As part of this universe, we ourselves have a unique responsibility, which stems from our ability to wonder and ask “why?” when faced with reality as it is. At the heart of this, then, lies a contemplative attitude, and the complementary task of caring for creation. Dear friends, the theme of your Plenary Session is situated in this same perspective.

Looking back on recent years, I gratefully recall PAS’s declarations in the face of various emergencies, whether concerning food crises and the fight against hunger – in cooperation with the UN Food Summit – or to do with the health of the oceans and seas, or indeed with strengthening the resilience of the poor in the case of climate shocks. Important too were your efforts to help rebuild poor neighbourhoods in a sustainable way making use of the bioeconomy, as well as an equitable response to health problems caused by the Covid pandemic. No less relevant is the work to establish international standards for organ donation and organ transplants in the fight against human trafficking, as well as undertakings to promote a new science of medical rehabilitation for the elderly and the poor. Moreover, I particularly appreciate your efforts to engage science and politics in order to prevent nuclear war and war crimes against civilian populations. I congratulate all those who have actively participated in this, especially you, Professor von Braun, for the wisdom and commitment with which you have brought fresh ideas into the life of the Academy. You have taken up today’s challenges as concrete scientific opportunities, in order to address them by working with scientists who can help to resolve problems.

In this Plenary Session, you emphasize “basic science,” which makes available a great deal of new knowledge about the Earth, the universe and the place of human beings within it. I congratulate you because you maintain the goal of connecting basic science with resolving current challenges, of connecting astronomy, physics, mathematics, biochemistry and climate sciences with philosophy in the service of human development, peace and the health of our planet. This interconnected approach is very important because, as scientific achievements increase our awe at the beauty and complexity of nature, there is a growing need for interdisciplinary studies, linked to philosophical reflection, that can lead to new syntheses. This interdisciplinary vision, if it also takes stock of Revelation and theology, can help provide answers to humanity’s ultimate questions, which are also being asked by new, and sometimes disoriented, generations.

Indeed, this century’s scientific achievements must always be directed to the needs of fraternity, justice and peace, and help meet the great challenges facing our human family and our environment. In this sense, too, the Pontifical Academy of Sciences has a unique structure, composition and set of goals, which are always aimed at sharing the benefits of science and technology with the greatest number of people, especially those most disadvantaged and in need. In this way, it also strives to liberate people from various forms of slavery, such as forced labour, prostitution and organ trafficking. These crimes against humanity, which go hand in hand with poverty, also occur in developed countries, in our own cities. The human body, whether in part or in its entirety, can never be an object of trade! I am pleased that PAS is actively engaged in supporting these goals, and I trust it will continue to do so with ever greater intensity commensurate with growing needs.

In short, the positive results of science in the twenty-first century will depend, to a great extent, on the ability of scientists to seek the truth and apply discoveries in a way that develops in tandem with the search for what is right, noble, good and beautiful. I look forward to the results of your work, which will also be important for educational institutions and younger generations.

Dear Members of the Academy, at this moment in history, I ask you to promote knowledge with the aim of building peace. After two tragic world wars, it seemed that the world had learned to move progressively towards respect for human rights, international law and various forms of cooperation. Unfortunately, history shows signs of regression. Not only are anachronistic conflicts intensifying, but instances of a myopic, extremist, resentful and aggressive nationalism are re-emerging (cf. *Fratelli Tutti*, 11), and new wars of domination, affecting civilians, the elderly, children and the sick are causing destruction everywhere. The many ongoing armed conflicts are of serious concern. I have said that it was a third world war being fought “piecemeal” – perhaps we can now say that it is “all out” – putting people and the planet at ever greater risk. Saint John Paul II gave thanks to God that, through Mary’s intercession, the world had been preserved from atomic war. Unfortunately, we must continue to pray for protection against this danger, which should have been averted long ago.

All knowledge based on science and experience must be utilized to avoid wars and overcome suffering, poverty and new forms of slavery. By rejecting research that in the past has been destined for deadly ends, scientists around the world can unite in a common readiness to disarm science and thus become a force for peace. In the name of God, who created all human beings for a common destiny of happiness, we are called today to bear witness to our fraternal vocation to freedom, justice, dialogue, mutual encounter, love and peace, and avoid nurturing hatred, resentment, division, violence and war. In the name of the God, who gave us the planet to safeguard and develop, we are called today to ecological conversion, to save our common home and life, and that of future generations, rather than increasing inequality, exploitation and destruction.

Dear Members of the Academy, dear friends, I encourage you to continue working for truth, freedom, dialogue, justice and peace. Today more than ever – also thanks to you! – the Catholic Church is an ally of scientists who follow this aspiration. I assure you of my prayers and, respecting each one's beliefs, I invoke upon you God's blessing. And please, in your own way, also pray for me. Thank you!
