



The Holy See

***LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO H.E. MSGR. GIANFRANCO RAVASI
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 12th PUBLIC SESSION
OF THE PONTIFICAL ACADEMIES***

*To my Venerable Brother
Archbishop Gianfranco Ravasi
President of the Pontifical Council for Culture*

On the occasion of the 12th Public Session of the Pontifical Academies, over whose Coordination Council you preside, I am pleased to address to you, dear Brother, a special greeting together with the wish for a fruitful ministry aimed at promoting and increasing the Church's dialogue with contemporary culture. On this occasion I would also like to greatly thank Cardinal Paul Poupard for his generous and invaluable service offered to the Church during his 25 years of industrious work as President of the Pontifical Council for Culture, as well as for the impetus he gave to the same Pontifical Academies, by promoting its institutional renewal and encouraging its activity at the service of the entire Church. In line with this, my Venerable Predecessor, Pope John Paul II, instituted a special Award in 1996 to encourage and sustain the research and commitment of young scholars and particularly-worthy Institutions, which contribute in a significant way by their specific cultural or artistic activity to the promotion of Christian humanism at the beginning of the Third Millennium.

The annual celebration of this Public Session renews a specific occasion for the Pontifical Academies to meet and collaborate. Their Coordination Council has brought them together to harmonize their various initiatives, all aimed at a precise objective: to promote both in the Church and in the secular world a culture worthy of human dignity, enriched by faith, able to propose the beauty of Christian life and to adequately respond to the ever more numerous challenges of today's cultural and religious context.

I greet, therefore, together with you as the President, Their Eminences, the Confreres in the Episcopate, the Ambassadors, Priests, Representatives and Members of the Pontifical Academies

and all the participants at the meeting. This solemn Public Session has two Academic protagonists: the Pontifical Roman Academy of Archaeology and the Pontifical Academy *Cultorum Martyrum*, who have proposed the theme of today's meeting: "'Witnesses of his love' (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, n. 85). The love of God manifested by the Martyrs and the works of the Church".

I am very pleased by the choice of this theme, particularly dear to me, which refers to a significant chapter of the Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*. In it I wished to emphasize yet again the fundamental connection between the celebration of the divine Mysteries and the witness of life, between the experience of encounter with the Mystery of God, font of wonder and interior joy, and the dynamism of a renewed commitment that can bring us to be, exactly, "witnesses of his love". Recalling that Jesus himself is "the faithful and true witness" (cf. Rv 1: 5) sent by the Father into the world to bear witness to the truth (cf. Jn 18: 37), we must convince ourselves that the coherent and convinced witness of believers is precisely "the means by which the truth of God's love comes to men and women in history, inviting them to accept freely this radical newness" (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, n. 85).

In this regard, it is ever more necessary to repropose the example of the Christian Martyrs, both from ages past and from our own times, whose life and witness, culminated in the outpouring of blood, manifest the love of God in a supreme way. My Venerable Predecessor, the Servant of God John Paul II, also wished to propose to the whole Church, above all in the context of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, the example of the Martyrs, and in the Bull of Indiction of the Great Jubilee, *Incarnationis Mysterium*, he wrote: "A sign of the truth of Christian love, ageless but especially powerful today, is the *memory of the martyrs*. Their witness must not be forgotten. They are the ones who have proclaimed the Gospel by giving their lives for love. The martyr, especially in our own days, is a sign of that greater love which sums up all other values" (n. 13).

Also worthy of special mention are all the charitable works that flourished in the course of the centuries by the activity of the generous faithful. Driven by the interior fire of the love of Christ, a great many believers, pastors or faithful, have worked in these last 20 centuries of Christian history to create and promote charitable initiatives and beneficent institutions, to meet the needs of the poorest and to thus manifest concretely the tight, indissoluble bond between love of God and love of neighbour. Still today, many charitable works promoted by believers represent an extraordinary testimony of what the love of God can do when it is welcomed in the heart of man.

This glorious history has been the object of attentive analysis by some scholars. In line with the more than 10-year tradition, I now ask you, Your Excellency, to be so good as to confer the Pontifical Academies' Prize, which this year is awarded to Dr Antongiulio Granelli, on the recommendation of the Coordination Council of the Pontifical Academies, for his doctoral thesis entitled *Il Cimitero di Panfilo sulla via Salaria vetus a Roma*, defended at Rome's "La Sapienza" University. In it, through an in-depth study conducted via an interdisciplinary approach, he explains

the Panfilo Cemetery, previously little studied, placing it in the suggestive context of the Christian witness developed in the first treatise of *Salaria vetus*, which finds in the martyr Panfilo, documented in the cemetery by a graffito, its most eloquent symbol.

In addition to accepting the suggestion of the same Coordination Council, I would also ask you to offer, as a sign of appreciation and encouragement, the Pontifical Medal to the scholar, Dr Massimiliano Ghilardi, for his work *Gli arsenali della Fede. Tre saggi su apologia e propaganda delle catacombe romane*, Rome, 2006. The volume traces the events relative to the discovery of the Christian catacombs and "hypogea", emphasizing the apologetical use of these discoveries.

Lastly, I would like to express, Your Excellency, to all the Academicians and especially to the Members of the Pontifical Roman Academy of Archaeology and the Pontifical Academy *Cultorum Martyrum*, my lively encouragement to continue with ever renewed enthusiasm in their work, so that their commitment in the various cultural and artistic environments may truly become a luminous and beautiful witness that also shines before today's humanity, moving them to glorify the Father who is in the heavens (cf. Mt 5: 16).

With these sentiments, while I entrust each aspect of the Pontifical Academies to the heavenly intercession of the Holy Martyrs, witnesses of God's love, as well as to the maternal protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ and Queen of the Martyrs, I gladly impart to you, Your Excellency, and to all those present, a special Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 8 November 2007

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