



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI  
TO THE INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION  
ON THE OCCASION OF ITS ANNUAL PLENARY ASSEMBLY**

*Hall of the Popes  
Friday, 7 December 2012*

*Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,  
Distinguished Professors and Dear Collaborators,*

I welcome you with great joy at the end of the work of your Annual Plenary Assembly. I warmly greet your new President, [Archbishop Gerhard Ludwig Müller](#), whom I thank for the words he addressed to me on behalf of all, and likewise your new General Secretary, Fr Serge Thomas Bonino.

Your Plenary Session has taken place in the context of the [Year of Faith](#) and I am really glad that the [International Theological Commission](#) has wished to express its adherence to this ecclesial event through a pilgrimage to the Papal Basilica of St Mary Major, to entrust to the Virgin Mary, *Praesidium fidei*, the work of your Commission and to pray for all those who, *in medio Ecclesiae*, are dedicated to bringing the understanding of the faith to fruition for the benefit and spiritual joy of all believers. Thank you for this extraordinary gesture. I express my appreciation of the [Message](#) you have written on the occasion of the Year of Faith. It highlights effectively the specific way in which theologians, faithfully serving the truth of the faith, can participate in the evangelizing outreach of the Church.

This [Message](#) takes up the themes you have developed more broadly in the document "[Theology Today. Perspectives, Principles and Criteria](#)", published at the beginning of this year. Noting the vitality and variety of theology subsequent to the [Second Vatican Council](#), this document seeks to present, so to speak, the genetic code of Catholic theology, namely, the principles that define its identity and consequently guarantee its unity in the diversity of its achievements. To this end the

text clarifies the criteria for an authentically Catholic theology which is therefore capable of contributing to the Church's mission, to the proclamation of the Gospel to all people. In a cultural context in which some are tempted either to deprive theology of an academic status because of its intrinsic connection with the faith, or to disregard theology's believing and confessional dimension at the risk of confusing it with and reducing it to religious science, your document appropriately recalls that theology is inseparably both confessional and rational, and that its presence in the university institution guarantees, or should guarantee, a broad and integral vision of human reason itself.

Among the criteria of Catholic theology the document mentions the attention that theologians should pay to the *sensus fidelium*. It is most useful that your Commission has also focused on this topic which is of special importance for reflection on the faith and for the life of the Church. In reaffirming the specific and irreplaceable role that the Magisterium must play, the [Second Vatican Council](#) likewise stressed that the People of God, in its entirety, participate in the prophetic office of Christ, thereby fulfilling the inspired wish expressed by Moses: "would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!" (Num 11:29).

The Dogmatic Constitution [Lumen Gentium](#) teaches in this regard: "the whole body of the faithful who have an anointing that comes from the holy one (cf. 1 Jn 2:20,27), cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural appreciation of the faith (*sensus fidei*) of the whole people, when, 'from the bishops to the last of the faithful' they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals" (n. 12).

In the believer this gift, the *sensus fidei* constitutes a sort of supernatural instinct which has a vital co-naturality with the object of faith itself. We note that the simple faithful carry with them this certainty, this firm sense of faith. The *sensus fidei* is a criterion for discerning whether or not a truth belongs to the living deposit of the Apostolic Tradition. It also has a propositional value for the Holy Spirit never ceases to speak to the Churches and to guide them towards the whole truth. Today, however, it is particularly important to explain the criteria that make it possible to distinguish the authentic *sensus fidelium* from its counterfeit. It is certainly not a kind of public ecclesial opinion and invoking it in order to contest the teachings of the Magisterium would be unthinkable, since the *sensus fidei* cannot be authentically developed in believers, except to the extent in which they fully participate in the life of the Church, and this demands responsible adherence to the Magisterium, to the deposit of faith.

Today, this same supernatural sense of faith in believers also gives rise to vigorous reactions against the prejudice which holds that religions — and in particular the monotheistic religions — are intrinsically vehicles of violence, especially because they claim the existence of a universal truth. Some consider that the "polytheism of values" alone would guarantee tolerance and civil peace and would be in conformity with the spirit of a pluralistic democratic society. In this direction, your study on the theme, "God the Trinity, Unity of Human Beings. Christianity and Monotheism",

is particularly timely.

On the one hand, it is essential to remember that faith in the one God, Creator of heaven and earth, encounters the rational needs for metaphysical reflection, which is not weakened but reinforced and deepened by the Revelation of the mystery of God-Trinity. On the other hand, it is necessary to emphasize the form that the definitive Revelation of the mystery of the one God assumes in the life and death of Jesus Christ, who goes to the Cross like a “lamb that is led to the slaughter” (Is 53:7). The Lord testifies to a radical rejection of every form of hatred and violence in favour of the absolute primacy of *agape*. Hence, if in history there have been or are forms of violence perpetrated in God’s name, they must not be attributed to monotheism but rather to historical causes, and, principally, to the errors of men and women. Rather, it is forgetfulness of God itself that immerses human societies in a form of relativism which inevitably gives rise to violence. When the possibility for all to refer to an objective truth is denied, dialogue becomes impossible and violence, declared openly or hidden, becomes the rule of human relationships. Without openness to the transcendent, which enables us to find answers to the questions about the meaning of life and about the way in which to live in a moral way — without this openness human beings become incapable of acting justly and of committing themselves to peace.

While the rupture of the relationship of men and women with God brings with it a deep imbalance in relations among people themselves, reconciliation with God, brought about by the Cross of Christ, “our peace” (Eph 2:14) is the fundamental source of unity and brotherhood. Your reflection on the third theme, that of the social doctrine of the Church, in the doctrine of the faith as a whole, also fits into this perspective. It confirms that social doctrine is not an extrinsic addition, but without overlooking the contribution of a social philosophy, it draws its basic principles from the fount of faith itself. This doctrine seeks to make effective, in the vast diversity of social situations, the new Commandment that the Lord Jesus has bequeathed to us: “that you love one another; even as I have loved you” (Jn 13:34).

Let us pray to the Immaculate Virgin, a model for those who listen to and meditate on the word of God, that she may obtain for you the grace to always joyfully serve the understanding of the faith, for the benefit of the whole Church. Renewing the expression of my deep gratitude for your service to the Church, I assure you of my constant closeness in prayer and to you all I impart my heartfelt Apostolic Blessing.