



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II  
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE 35TH CONFERENCE  
OF THE CANON LAW SOCIETY OF GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND**

*Consistory Hall  
Friday, 22 May 1992*

*Dear Friends,*

1. I am pleased to welcome to the Vatican the members of the Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland on the occasion of your Thirty-fifth Annual Conference. You have wished to hold your meeting this year in Rome in order to express your closeness to the See of Peter, aware as you are of the fundamentally ecclesial nature of the various services which you provide in your work as canonists. I greet you all with affection in the Lord and I thank you for your committed and enlightened efforts to serve the Church through the study and application of her law.

In the thirty-five years since its foundation, your Society has sought to promote the study of Canon Law in both its theoretical aspects and its practical applications. By placing your scholarship and pastoral experience at the service of God's People, you have contributed notably to the renewal of ecclesial life mandated by the Second Vatican Council, and in particular to the revision of the Code of Canon Law. You have also been concerned to make the Church's law more accessible through the publication of a translation of the 1983 Code and the preparation of a commentary for the use of students, parish ministers, members of Religious Institutes and interested laity.

2. Among the most significant aspects of the renewal of Canon Law in the period since the Council has been a growing concern that *the letter and spirit of canonical legislation should reflect ever more fully the distinct nature of the Church* as the sacrament of union with God and the unity of the whole human race (Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 1). The Council, while recalling Christ's establishment of the Church as a visible society, insisted that the reality of this earthly society, endowed with hierarchical structures, may not be separated from her reality as a spiritual and heavenly

community of faith, hope and love, the Mystical Body of Christ (Cf. *ibid.* 8). Because the Church's social structure stands at the service of a deeper mystery of grace and communion, Canon Law – precisely as the law of the Church, *ius Ecclesiae* – must be acknowledged as unique in its means and in its ends. The canonical tradition was of course quite aware of the peculiar nature of the Church's legal discipline, as is evident from the history of such institutions as dispensation and canonical custom, and the development of the concept of "canonical equity". Nevertheless, as the history of your science demonstrates, canonical theory and practice always need to be informed by a sound ecclesiological understanding, and efforts must always be made to avoid any undue accommodation of ecclesial norms and structures to the prevailing ethos of civil society. Today as in the past, canonists are challenged never to lose sight of the mystery of grace and truth which their work is meant to serve and foster.

Only in the light of a sound appreciation of the mystery of the Church will Canon Law become, as it must be, *an effective instrument for the continuing renewal of ecclesial life*. Fruitful periods of renewal in the Church have often been accompanied by a desire to recover the authentic discipline of the Catholic tradition, as that tradition has been preserved and handed down in the "sacred canons". Familiarity with the results of the Church's long experience in adapting her laws to the changing needs of the People of God is in fact an indispensable reference point for her efforts to meet the challenges of the present time with wisdom and prudence. Today in particular, there is a need for a balanced appreciation of the constant dialectic in the Church's life between the unfailing guidance of the Holy Spirit and the demands of fidelity to the Law of the New Covenant, and for a deeper insight into the social purpose of that "diversity of gifts both hierarchical and charismatic" (*Lumen Gentium*, 4) which the Spirit has bestowed upon the Church. As canonists, your insights into these creative tensions within the Body of Christ can contribute not only to the development of sound ecclesiological reflection, but also, in a very practical way, to the good working of the various structures which enable the faithful to respond with fidelity to their supernatural calling and to share fully in the Church's mission.

3. In recent years, much of the work of your Society has been devoted to the correct interpretation and implementation of the norms contained in the 1983 Code of Canon Law. As I observed at the time of its promulgation, the new Code in a sense represents a great effort to translate the ecclesiological teaching of the Second Vatican Council into canonical terms, and consequently its norms must always be seen in relation to the image of the Church which the Council described (Cf. John Paul II, *Sacrae Disciplinae Leges*). The challenging task of correctly interpreting the legislation contained in the Code demands *a readiness to return frequently to the documents in which the teaching of the Council is authoritatively set forth*, so as to understand that teaching more deeply and to eliminate whatever false or unilateral interpretations may have arisen. The work of interpretation must always be governed by the principles set down in the Code itself, in harmony with the canonical tradition, (Cf. *Code of Canon Law, can. 6 § 2*) which attributes decisive importance to the "proper meaning of the words considered in their text and context", (*ibid. can. 17*) understood in view of the ratio legis and in relation to the mind of the legislator. In

the end, your concern for the faithful interpretation of the Code serves the Church by contributing to a better understanding of the Council itself, and thus to a more effective implementation of its teaching.

The work of interpretation demands by its very nature a solid acquaintance with the history of canonical doctrine, especially with regard to the evolution of the corresponding jurisprudence. Those who have been entrusted with the application of the Church's law will certainly need to be familiar with the various prescriptions of positive law, but they must also be able to appreciate the rich tradition from which the present law has developed. It is furthermore essential that they should clearly understand *the object and methods proper to Canon Law*, so as to be able to evaluate the relevance, as well as the limitations, of insights drawn from other, related sciences. I am grateful for the concern which your Society has shown for the proper training of future canonists and for the promotion of scholarly interest in the law: these concerns are an important aspect of your service to the Church.

4. Dear friends: you are engaged in *a service which is ultimately pastoral in nature*, for it seeks to strengthen the bonds of communion in the Church through fidelity to the Gospel and the promotion of justice. How often in this delicate and important task are you called upon to be heralds of the "message of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:19) and to bring healing and hope in fragile situations of human weakness and sin! Wherever you carry out your work—in classrooms, offices and tribunals—always keep in mind the eminently pastoral nature of all Church law, which, while never derogating from the demands of truth, has as its final aim the salvation of souls (Cf. *Code of Canon Law, can. 1752*). I pray that your work on behalf of God's People through the faithful application of Canon Law will always help to build up the communion of Christ's Body in faith, hope and love, and will contribute ever more effectively to the proclamation of the Gospel and its saving truth to the men and women of our time.

With these sentiments, I commend all of you to the loving intercession of Mary, Mirror of Justice, and I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of lasting joy and peace in Jesus Christ her Son.

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