



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE RECTORS AND PROFESSORS  
OF THE POLISH UNIVERSITIES**

*Thursday 30 August 2001*

*Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,*

1. Welcome, and my cordial greetings to you! I am pleased to receive the Rectors of the Polish schools of higher education. I thank Professor Woznicki, President of the College of Academic Rectors of the Polish Schools, for his presentation and kind words.

Our meetings belong to what has now become a tradition and, in a certain way, are a sign of the dialogue that is going on between the worlds of science and faith. It seems that the times of the attempt to set them against each other are over. Thanks to the efforts sustained by the grace of the Holy Spirit, in many academic and theological groups, an awareness is maturing that science and faith are not opposed to each other, but, on the contrary, need and complete each other. It seems to me this growing awareness of the need for dialogue between rational intelligence and religious experience prompted the warm reception of the Encyclical *Fides et ratio*. We must be grateful to God for every inspiration that moves in this direction.

2. At our meetings I have brought up questions about universities, graduate schools of advanced studies and research institutes and the crucial role they play in the life of the human person, society and humanity. My constant awareness of the outstanding role of universities and graduate schools in society is the reason why I perceive the need to pay attention to their spiritual mentality, so that they may always be an influence for great good in the world and in everyone's life. Only then will the university and higher education bring true progress, rather than danger, for human beings.

I remember that when I wrote my first Encyclical *Redemptor hominis* more than 20 years ago,

along with my main consideration, there was the awareness of the *mystery of the anxiety* that people sense today. It seemed right to me to emphasize one of the sources of such anxiety: *the experience of being threatened by what man produces*, the result of the work of his hands and, even more so, of his mind and the energies of his will. Today, at the beginning of the third millennium, it seems that such anxiety is still widespread. Indeed, it happens all too often that what man succeeds in producing, thanks to the ever new possibilities offered by scientific theory and technology, becomes the subject of "alienation" - escaping the control of its author and turning against him if not completely, at least partially (cf. *Redemptor hominis*, n. 15). Examples of this situation abound. It is enough to mention the innovations in the fields of physics, especially nuclear physics, or information technology, the exploration of natural resources and, lastly, experimentation in the areas of genetics and biology. Unfortunately, this also concerns branches of science that are more closely associated with the development of ideas than with technology. We know the threats that were generated by the abuse of philosophy in certain kinds of ideology in the last century. We are aware of how easy it is to use discoveries in the field of psychology against the human being, his freedom and his personal integrity. Time and time again, we are reminded of the damage to the personality - especially young people's - by literature, art or music, if they are created with an inherent hostility to man.

Humanity has reached a turning point in dealing with the results of the "alienation" of the product from its producer at personal and social levels. On the one hand, it is clear that *the human person is called and equipped by his Creator to create* and subdue the earth. It is also clear that accomplishing this vocation has been the motor pushing forward a development in the sectors of human life where ongoing progress does serve the common good. On the other hand, *humanity is afraid that the results of the creative effort can be directed against itself* and can even become the means of its own destruction.

3. Keeping in mind this twofold interrogation, we all realize that universities and research institutes play a key role as groups of learned people wishing to develop every area of life. We must then ask what spiritual mindset steers the methods used by these institutions in order to continue a constant creative process whose results will not be subject to "alienation", or turned against their own creator, the human person.

It appears that *concern for the human person*, for his humanity, is at the root of the aspiration of the universities for such an orientation. Regardless of the area of the research, scientific or creative work, anyone who devotes his own knowledge, ability and efforts to it, must ask himself to what extent his work makes him more human, whether it renders every aspect of human life more human or more deserving of the human person; and lastly, whether in the context of the progress he has achieved, man "is becoming truly better, that is to say, more mature spiritually, more aware of his dignity as a human person, more responsible, more open to others, especially the neediest and the weakest, and readier to give and to aid all" (*Redemptor hominis*, n. 15).

This formulation of what science should be, understood in a broad sense, discloses the *property of science as a service*. In fact if science is not pursued with the motive of being a service to humanity, it can easily degenerate into an efficient financial enterprise with complete indifference to the common good, or - even worse - it can be used as a tool to dominate others or to realize the totalitarian aspirations of a few individuals and social groups. This is why mature scientists and beginning students should assess whether their legitimate wish to know more about the mysteries of knowledge can be reconciled with the basic principles of justice, solidarity, social love, and respect for the rights of the individual, people or nation.

The role of service of science not only gives rise to obligations to the human person and to society, but also, or perhaps especially, *to truth itself*. The scientist is not a creator of truth but its explorer. It is revealed to him to the extent that he is faithful to it. Respect for the truth obliges scientists and thinkers to do their utmost to learn more about it and, as far as possible, to be careful in presenting it to others. Of course - as the Council says, creation and society are endowed with their own laws and values which man must gradually discover and, in this regard, he must recognize the demands of the method that are proper to every science and art (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 36). Yet we realize that the only correct way to seek the truth is *to proceed according to a methodological inquiry in a truly scientific way while respecting moral norms*. The honest aspiration to know the truth can never ignore what belongs to its essence: the acceptance of good and evil.

The autonomy of science ends at the admission of evil in the research, the product or the effect. Here we touch on the issue of the autonomy of science. Today, the principle of the unlimited freedom of scientific research is regularly asserted. On the one hand - as I have said - it is necessary to admit the right of sciences to apply their own methods of research, but, on the other, one cannot agree with the declaration that the province of research is subject to no restrictions. The fundamental distinction between good and evil sets up one boundary. This distinction is known by the human conscience. One can say that *the autonomy of science ends where the honest conscience of the scientist admits evil* - evil in method, product or effect. This is why it is so important that the universities and institutes for scientific research not be limited to imparting knowledge, but *be groups of persons who form ethical consciences*. The mystery of wisdom resides in the ethically formed conscience and not just in the breadth of knowledge. "Our age", as the Council says, "needs such wisdom more than bygone ages if the discoveries made by man are to be further humanized. For the future of the world stands in danger if wiser men are not forthcoming" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 15).

4. Today much is said about globalization. It seems that this process also affects science and does not always entail a positive influence. One of the threats connected with globalization is unhealthy competition. It can seem to researchers, indeed to an entire scientific mindset, that in order to survive the competition of the world market, reflection, research and experimentation cannot be conducted only by applying just methods; these must be adjusted to predetermined

goals and to the interests of public demand, even if this were to require the violation of inalienable human rights. In this perspective, the demands of truth give way to the so-called "law of the market-place". This can easily lead to silence on certain aspects of the truth or even to the manipulation of the truth, if only to make it more acceptable to public opinion. This acceptability in turn becomes sufficient proof for the validity of unjustifiable methods. In this situation it is difficult to maintain the routine norms of basic ethics. *Therefore, even if the competition between scientific centres is profitable, it cannot exist at the cost of the truth, of the good or of the beautiful, at the cost of values such as human life from conception to natural death, or of natural resources.* The universities and scientific centres, as well as transmitting knowledge, clearly have to teach how to distinguish honest methods of scientific research, and how to act with courage to reject what is scientifically feasible but not morally licit.

One can achieve this on the basis of a principle of *prevision*, that is, *the capacity to anticipate the effects of human acts and to be responsible for man's situation, not only here and now, but also in the most remote corner of the world and in the indefinite future.* Scientists and students alike should always learn to foresee the direction of progress and the effects on human persons that might ensue from the results of their scientific research.

5. Here are a few suggestions that are born of my concern for the human arrangement of our universities. It might be easier to fulfil these postulates if there were *close collaboration and an exchange of experiences between representatives of the technical and the human sciences, including theology.* There are many opportunities for contact within the framework of existing university structures. I think that meetings such as this can pave the way for new prospects of cooperation for the development of science and for the good of man and of entire societies.

If I am speaking of this, I do so because, "inspired by eschatological faith, the Church considers an essential, indissolubly united element of her mission this solicitude for man, for his humanity, for the future of people on earth, and the concern for the course set for the greatest part of development and progress, as an essential element of her mission. She finds the principle of this solicitude in Jesus Christ himself, as the Gospels witness. This is why she wishes to make it grow continually through her relationship with Christ, reading man's situation in the modern world in accordance with the most important signs of our time" (*Redemptor hominis*, n. 15).

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your visit and for your strong desire for far-reaching collaboration to assure the development of science in Poland and throughout the world, which you show not only on these solemn occasions but also in your daily university life. You form a special group of experts which - I hope - will find its counterpart in the structures of a united Europe.

I ask you to convey my cordial greeting and the assurance of my constant remembrance in prayer to your colleagues, to the distinguished professors, to the scientific and administrative personnel

and to your students. May the Holy Spirit enlighten the whole world of scientists, academics and people of culture in Poland! May God's blessing sustain you always!

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