



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI TO THE STAFF OF THE VATICAN MUSEUMS

Thursday, 23 November 2006

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I welcome you with great joy and address my cordial welcome to each one of you.

I first greet Archbishop Giovanni Lajolo, President of the Governorate, and thank him for his words expressing your affection and emphasizing the special interest the Supreme Pontiffs have taken in the Vatican Museums, which are celebrating their fifth centenary this year.

I also greet Bishop Renato Boccardo, the General Secretary, and Dr Francesco Buranelli, Director of the Museums.

Naturally, I had intended to meet you, who form the largest group of employees in Vatican City, and I am glad that it is taking place during these Jubilee celebrations.

I would also like to greet your relatives who are present and extend my thoughts to all your families.

Thousands of people visit the Vatican Museums every day. In 2005, they totalled over 3.8 million and this year, 2006, more than 4 million have already visited them. This is food for thought!

Who actually are these visitors?

They are a fairly heterogeneous representation of humanity. Many of them are not Catholic, a great many are not Christian and perhaps not even believers. A large number also visit St Peter's Basilica, but many of them, when they come to the Vatican, only visit the Museums.

All this prompts one to reflect on this institution's extraordinary responsibility from the viewpoint of the Christian message.

The inscription that Pope Benedict XIV had placed above the entrance to the so-called "Christian Museum" in the mid-18th century to indicate its purpose: "*Ad augendum Urbis splendorem / et asserendam Religionis veritatem*", springs to mind: "To add to the splendour of Rome and to assert the truth of the Christian Religion".

The approach to Christian truth mediated through the expression of art or of history and culture, has an extra chance of getting through to the intelligence and sensibility of people who do not belong to the Catholic Church and are sometimes prejudiced towards and diffident about her.

Those who visit the Vatican Museums have an opportunity to be "immersed" in a concentrated "theology through images" by pausing in this shrine of art and faith.

I realize how demanding the daily task of safeguarding, conserving and preserving these rooms is, and I am grateful for your efforts to make them eloquent to all in the best possible way.

Dear friends, this is a task in which all of you are involved and important: because, as you well know, the smooth functioning of the Museum depends on the contribution of each one of you.

May I now highlight a truth that is inscribed in the "genetic code" of the Vatican Museums: that is, that the great classical and Judeo-Christian civilizations are not in opposition to each other but converge in the one plan of God.

This is proven by the fact that the distant origins of this institution date back to a work we might well describe as "profane" - the magnificent sculptural group of the *Laocoon* - but which, in fact, acquires its fullest and most authentic light in the Vatican context. It is the light of the human creature shaped by God, of freedom in the drama of his redemption that extends between Heaven and earth, flesh and spirit. It is the light of a beauty that shines out from within the work of art and leads the mind to open itself to the sublime, where the Creator encounters the creature made in his image and likeness.

We can observe all this in a masterpiece such as the *Laocoon* itself, but this logic pertains to the whole of the Museum, which in this perspective truly seems a single unit in the complex sequence of its sections, even though they are so different from one another.

The synthesis between Gospel and culture appears even more explicit in certain sections and as if "materialized" in certain works: I am thinking of the sarcophagi in the Pio-Christian Museum, or the tombs of the Necropolis on the Via Trionfale - the area of whose museum premises has been doubled this year - and of the exceptional ethnological collection of missionary provenance.

The Museum truly displays a continuous interweaving between Christianity and culture, between faith and art, between the divine and the human. The Sistine Chapel, in this regard, is an unsurpassable peak.

Let us now return to you, dear friends. The Vatican Museums are your daily workplace. Many of you are in direct contact with the visitors: how important it is, therefore, that your approach and example offer to all a simple but effective witness of faith.

A temple of art and culture such as the Vatican Museums requires that the beauty of the works on display be accompanied by that of the people who work in them: a spiritual beauty, which truly makes the environment ecclesial and imbues it with a Christian spirit.

Working in the Vatican, therefore, is in itself an additional commitment to fostering one's own faith and Christian witness. In this regard, as well as active participation in the life of your parish communities, a useful aid is also offered to you by the moments of celebration and spiritual formation animated by your chaplains, whom I thank for their dedication.

I ask you especially to ensure that all your families are a "domestic Church", in which faith and life are interwoven in the joyful and sorrowful events of every day. And for this very reason I am glad that a large number of your relatives are here today.

May the Virgin Mary and St Joseph help you to live in perennial thanksgiving, savouring the simple joys of every day and increasing your good works. I assure you of my prayers for each one of you, especially the elderly, children and the sick, and as I thank you for your welcome visit, I bless you all with affection, together with your loved ones.

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