



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

Address at Meeting with Rectors of Academic Institutions

Torun, Monday, 7 June 1999

*Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,
Rectors Magnificent, Deans and Professors,
Representatives of higher learning in Poland,*

1. I am very pleased that my pilgrimage through my native land affords me yet another opportunity to meet you, men and women of science, representatives of the academic institutions throughout Poland. The fact that these meetings with the world of science have already become an integral part of the Pope's journeys in every continent speaks for itself. These are moments of particular witness. They point to the profound and complex ties linking the vocation of men and women of learning and the ministry of the Church, which is essentially the "service of Truth".

With gratitude to Divine Providence for today's meeting, I cordially greet you all, the Rectors Magnificent and the representatives of the academic institutions of the entire country, and through you I embrace in mind and heart the entire world of higher learning in Poland. I greet in particular the Rector Magnificent of the University of Torun, which hosts us on this occasion. I thank him for the kind words of welcome which he addressed to me in the name of all present. I also greet the President of the Conference of Rectors Magnificent of the Polish Universities.

2. We are meeting within a University which, at least in terms of its date of establishment, is fairly young. Recently it celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of its foundation. Yet we know that the cultural and scientific traditions linked to this city are deeply rooted in the past and are bound to the figure of Nicholas Copernicus. The University of Torun, at the moment of its birth, was marked by the dramatic events which followed the Second World War. It is appropriate on this occasion to recall that the founders of this University were mostly scholars in exile from the Stefan Batory University in Vilnius and from the Jan Kazimierz University in Lviv. From Vilnius came the first

Rector, Professor Ludwik Kolankowski, the tireless organizer of the University. From Vilnius came Karol Górski, the historian and pioneer of studies on Polish religious spirituality, and many others. From Lviv came Professor Tadeusz Czezowski, a highly renowned philosopher. From Lviv too came Professor Artur Hutnikiewicz, the outstanding literary scholar. The circle of professors was reinforced also by scholars coming from the ruins of Warsaw; among them we cannot fail to mention Konrad Górski, an extraordinarily insightful literary scholar. They, and many others, made great efforts to organize this University. Those were difficult times but yet times of hope. And “hope is born of the truth”, as Cyprian Norwid wrote. In the extremely difficult conditions of the post-war period there was a testing of persons, a testing of their fidelity to truth. Today the University of Torun has its own specific character and makes a valuable contribution to the growth of Polish scholarship.

3. Our meeting is taking place in the final year of this century now drawing to a close. At the juncture of two centuries as we are, our thoughts turn alternately to the past and to the future. In the past we seek instruction and directions for our future. In this way we wish to clarify better and give a solid foundation to our hope. Today the world needs hope and is searching for hope! But does not the tragic history of our century, with its wars, its criminal totalitarian ideologies, its concentration camps and gulags, make it easy for us to yield to the temptation of discouragement and despair? Pascal once wrote that man’s knowledge of his own misery leads him to despair (cf. *Pensées*, 75). In order to discover hope, we need to lift our gaze on high. Only the knowledge of Christ, Pascal adds, sets us free from despair, since in him we realize not only our misery but also our grandeur (cf. *ibid.*, 690, 729, 730).

By his revelation of the Father who is “rich in mercy” (*Eph 2:4*), Christ has shown humanity the most profound truth about God, and at the same time about man. “God is love” (*1 Jn 4:8*). This is the theme of my present visit to my native Poland. I wrote in my Encyclical on the Holy Spirit: “In his intimate life, God 'is love', the essential love shared by the three Persons: personal love is the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of the Father and the Son. Therefore he 'searches even the depths of God', as uncreated gift-love. It can be said that in the Holy Spirit the intimate life of the Triune God becomes totally gift, an exchange of mutual love between the divine Persons, and that through the Holy Spirit God exists in the mode of gift” (*Dominum et Vivificantem*, 10). This Love which is Gift, is given to man through the act of creation and redemption. Consequently, “Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it” (*Redemptor Hominis*, 10).

Precisely this truth about “God-Love” becomes the source of the world’s hope and points out the path of our responsibility. Man is able to love, because he was first loved by God. Saint John teaches us that “we love God because God first loved us” (cf. *1 Jn 4:19*). The truth about God’s love sheds light also on our quest for truth, on our work, on the development of scholarship, on our whole culture. Our research and our work need a guiding idea, a fundamental value, in order to

give meaning to and to unite in one direction the efforts of scholars, the reflections of historians, the creativity of artists and the discoveries of scientists, which are all growing at a dizzying rate. Does there exist any other idea, any other value or any other light capable of giving meaning to the manifold commitment of people of science and culture, without at the same time limiting their creative freedom? This power is love, which does not impose itself on man from without, but is born deep within, in his heart, as his most personal property. Man is asked only to let it grow and to allow it to permeate his sensibility, his reflection in the laboratory, in the classroom and in seminars, and in the workshop.

4. We are meeting today in Torun, in the “the City of Copernicus”, in the University named after him. The discovery made by Copernicus, and its importance for the history of science, remind us of the ever-present tension between reason and faith. Although Copernicus himself saw his discovery as giving rise to even greater amazement at the Creator of the world and the power of human reason, many people took it as a means of setting reason against faith. Which of these is the truth? Are reason and faith two realities which are necessarily mutually exclusive?

The split between reason and faith was the expression of one of humanity’s great tragedies. It has many causes. Particularly, beginning in the Enlightenment period, an extreme and one-sided rationalism led to the radicalization of positions in the realm of the natural sciences and in that of philosophy. The resulting split between faith and reason caused irreparable damage not only to religion but also to culture. In the heat of controversy it was often forgotten that faith “has no fear of reason, but seeks it out and has trust in it. Just as grace builds on nature and brings it to fulfilment, so faith builds upon and perfects reason” (*Fides et Ratio*, 43). Faith and reason are like “two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth” (*ibid.*, Proemium). Today we need to work for a reconciliation between faith and reason. As I wrote in the Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*: “Deprived of reason, faith has stressed feeling and experience, and so run the risk of no longer being a universal proposition. It is an illusion to think that faith, tied to weak reasoning, might be more penetrating; on the contrary, faith then runs the grave risk of withering into myth or superstition. By the same token, reason which is unrelated to an adult faith is not prompted to turn its gaze to the newness and radicality of being . . . The *parrhesia* of faith must be matched by the boldness of reason” (No. 48). Ultimately this is the problem of man’s inner unity, ever threatened by the division and the atomization of his consciousness, which lacks a unifying principle. In this area nowadays a special task awaits philosophical research.

5. The men and women of science and of culture have been entrusted with a special responsibility for truth - to strive for it, to defend it and to live in accordance with it. We are all familiar with the difficulties bound up with the human search for truth, chief of which are scepticism, agnosticism, relativism and nihilism. Attempts are often made to convince people that we have reached the twilight of the age of certitude in the knowledge of truth, and that we are irrevocably condemned to the total absence of meaning, the provisional nature of all knowledge, and to permanent instability and relativity. In this situation it appears imperative to reaffirm a basic confidence in human reason

and its capacity to know the truth, including absolute and definitive truth. Man is capable of elaborating a uniform and organic conception of knowledge. The fragmentation of knowledge destroys man's inner unity. Man aspires to the fullness of knowledge, since he is a being who by his very nature seeks the truth (cf. *Fides et Ratio*, 28) and cannot live without it. Contemporary scholarship, and especially present-day philosophy, each in its own sphere, needs to rediscover that sapiential dimension which consists in the search for the definitive and overall meaning of human existence.

The search for truth is carried on not only through the toil of individuals in libraries or laboratories, but it also has a community dimension. "Human perfection consists not simply in acquiring an abstract knowledge of the truth, but in a dynamic relationship of faithful self-giving with others. It is in this faithful self-giving that a person finds a fullness of certainty and security. At the same time, however, knowledge through belief, grounded as it is on trust between persons, is linked to truth: in the act of believing, men and women entrust themselves to the truth which the other declares to them" (*Fides et Ratio*, 32). This, certainly, is an experience which each of you appreciates. Truth is attained thanks also to others, in dialogue with others and on behalf of others. Seeking the truth and sharing it with others is an important service to society, a service which scholars in particular are called to render.

6. Scholarship today, including Polish scholarship, faces great challenges. The unprecedented development of the sciences and technological progress are raising fundamental questions about the limits of experimentation, the meaning and direction of technological development, the limits of man's tampering with nature and the natural environment. This progress gives rise to both wonderment and fear. Man is becoming ever more fearful of the products of his own intelligence and freedom. He feels endangered. Hence it is more important and timely than ever to recall the fundamental truth that the world is a gift of God the Creator, who is Love, and that man as a creature is called to a prudent and responsible dominion over the world of nature, and not its heedless destruction. We also need to remember that reason is God's gift, a mark of the likeness to God which every man bears within himself. Hence it is quite important to remember constantly that authentic freedom of scientific research cannot prescind from the criterion of truth and of goodness. Concern for the moral conscience and the sense of individual responsibility has today become a fundamental imperative for men and women of science. It is precisely here that both the future of contemporary science and, in some sense, the future of humanity are being decided. Finally we need to mention the need for constant gratitude for the gift which each human being is to others; it is thanks to others, with others and for others that one becomes part of the great adventure of the search for truth.

7. I am aware of the pressing difficulties which Polish academic institutions are facing today, affecting both their teaching faculties and their students. Polish scholarship, like our whole country, presently finds itself in a phase of profound transformation and reform. I also know that even so, Polish researchers are meeting with significant successes. I am pleased to know this, and I

congratulate all of you.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends, I wish once more to thank you for today's meeting. I assure you of my deep concern for the problems of Polish scholarship. I greet you cordially and through you I greet the academic communities in Poland which you represent, both the students and the professors, and all the administrative and technical personnel. To all of you I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.