



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II
FOR THE 50th ANNIVERSARY OF THE PONTIFICAL
COMMITTEE FOR HISTORICAL SCIENCES**

To Rev. Mons. Walter Brandmüller

President of the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences

1. The Church of Christ has a responsibility towards men and women which, in a certain way, extends to every dimension of their lives. Therefore, she has always felt committed to fostering the development of human culture, encouraging the search for the true, the good and the beautiful, so that human beings may correspond ever more to God's creative inspiration.

To this end, it is also important to cultivate a sound historical knowledge of the various areas in which individuals or communities live their lives. Nothing is more incongruous for people or groups than to have no history. Ignorance of one's own past leads fatally to a crisis and the loss of identity of individuals and communities.

2. Moreover, scholars who are believers know that in the Sacred Scriptures of the Old and New Covenants they have an additional key to acquiring a proper knowledge of mankind and the world. It is through the biblical message, in fact, that we learn about the most hidden aspects of the human condition: creation, the tragedy of sin, redemption. In this way are defined the true horizons for interpretation within which we can understand even the most hidden meaning of the events, processes and figures of history.

In this context, it is also necessary to note the possibilities for a harmonious coexistence of peoples that a renewed historical context can open up, sustained by mutual understanding and a reciprocal exchange of each one's respective cultural achievements. Historical investigation, free of prejudice and guided by scientific documentation, has played an irreplaceable role in pulling down the barriers between peoples. Indeed, as centuries passed, strong walls were frequently built by biased historiography and mutual resentment. As a result, misunderstandings still persist

today which hinder peace and brotherhood between individuals and peoples.

The most recent aspiration to overcome the boundaries of national historiography in order to expand our vision to broader geographical and cultural contexts could also prove to be most useful, for it would guarantee a comparative view of events, allowing for a more balanced assessment.

3. God's revelation to human beings happened in space and in time. Its crowning moment, the Incarnation of the divine Word, his birth from the Virgin Mary in the city of David during the reign of Herod the Great, was a historical event: God entered human history. We therefore start to count the years of our history from Christ's birth.

The foundation of the Church, through which Christ wanted to pass on to humanity the fruit of the Redemption after his Resurrection and Ascension, is a historical phenomenon. The Church herself is a historical event and thus a priority subject for historical science. Many scholars, some of whom do not even belong to the Catholic Church, have devoted their interest to her, making an important contribution to working out her earthly events.

4. The essential goal of the Church, in addition to the glorification of the Triune God, consists in transmitting the goods of salvation that Jesus Christ entrusted to the Apostles - his Gospel and his sacraments - to every generation of humanity in need of truth and salvation. The salvation she receives from the Lord and transmits to men and women is precisely how the Church fulfils herself and matures throughout history.

When this process of transmission is developed through the legitimate bodies it is guided by the Holy Spirit in conformity with Jesus Christ's promise, so that it acquires a theological and supernatural significance. Therefore, all the developments of doctrine, sacramental life and the order of the Church that have taken place in harmony with apostolic tradition must be seen as her organic evolution. The history of the Church has thus proven to be an appropriate area from which to draw for a better knowledge of the truth about faith itself.

5. As for the Holy See, it has always encouraged the historical sciences through its scientific institutions. This is borne out, among other things, by Pope Pius XII's foundation of this Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences 50 years ago.

In fact, the Church is eagerly interested in knowing more and more about her own history. To this end, especially today, a meticulous teaching of the historic and ecclesiastical disciplines is vital, especially for candidates to the priesthood, as the decree *Optatam Totius* of the Second Vatican Council recommends (cf. n. 16). However, if studying ecclesiastical tradition is to be worthwhile, a sound knowledge of Latin and Greek is absolutely indispensable. The lack of it bars access to the sources of ecclesiastical tradition. It is only with the help of these languages that it will also be

possible to rediscover in our day the experience of life and faith that the Church has accumulated in 2,000 years of existence under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

6. History teaches that in the past, every time new knowledge of the sources was acquired, the foundations were laid for a new flourishing of ecclesial life. If "*historia magistra vitae*" [history is the teacher of life], as the ancient Latin saying affirms, then the history of the Church can certainly be described as "*magistra vitae christianae*" [the teacher of Christian life].

I therefore hope that this Congress will give a new impetus to historical studies. This will assure the new generations of an ever deeper knowledge of the mystery of salvation, active in time, and inspire in an ever greater number of the faithful the desire to draw copiously from the sources of Christ's grace.

With this wish, Monsignor, I impart my affectionate Blessing to you, to the Relators and to the participants in the Congress.

From the Vatican, 16 April 2004

JOHN PAUL II