



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO CARDINAL GIANFRANCO RAVASI
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 16th PUBLIC MEETING
OF THE PONTIFICAL ACADEMIES**

*To my Venerable Brother
Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi
President of the Pontifical Council for Culture*

On the occasion of the 16th Public Session of the Pontifical Academies I am pleased to convey to you my cordial greeting, which I gladly extend to the Presidents and Academicians and in particular to you, Venerable Brother, as President of the Coordination Council. I likewise address my greeting to the Cardinals, Bishops, Priests, men and women Religious, Ambassadors and to all those who are taking part in this important event.

The annual Public Meeting of the Pontifical Academies has in fact become an established tradition which affords both the opportunity for members of the various Academies to gather in the Coordination Council and to evaluate through the *Pontifical Academies Prize* — set up on 23 November 1996 by my Venerable Predecessor, [Bl. John Paul II](#) — the contribution of young scholars, artists and institutions, with their research and cultural commitment, to promoting a new Christian humanism.

I therefore wish to thank you for the attention you pay to each and every one of the Academies, and for the impetus you have sought to give them so that they may truly be effective institutions of a high academic level at the service of the Holy See and of the whole Church.

The 16th Public Meeting was organized by the Pontifical Roman Academy for Archaeology and the Pontifical Academy “*Cultorum Martyrum*”, both of which boast a more than 100-year-old history, full of outstanding figures, archaeologists, scholars, and curators of Christian antiquities and of the martyrology.

The theme proposed for this Public Meeting, “Witness and Witnesses. The *Martyria* and the Champions of the faith”, gives us the opportunity to reflect on an element that is particularly dear to me: the historicity of Christianity, its continuous interweaving with history, to transform it in depth through the leaven of the Gospel and through holiness, lived and witnessed.

Historical and, especially, archaeological research aims to investigate the memorials and testimonies of the past ever more accurately and with increasingly sophisticated research instruments. Among these testimonies those of the ancient Christian communities are of particular interest to us.

They are, of course, material testimonies, constituted by all the elements – Church buildings, cemetery complexes, epigraphs and sculptures, frescos and decorations, artefacts of every kind which — if they are studied and understood in accordance with correct methodologies — enable us to rediscover many aspects of the life of the past generations, as well as of the faith experience of the ancient Christian communities that leaves ever more consistent traces in the milieu in which they were lived.

Today archaeological investigation can avail itself of extraordinary technological means at the different stages of the excavation and on-the-spot research, as well as for the recovery of artefacts that have deteriorated with time and with the poorest conditions of conservation. I am thinking, for example, of satellite images that can be used for many kinds of analysis, producing results that until a few decades ago were unimaginable; or of the application of laser techniques for the recovery of frescos covered with incrustations, as recently happened in the Catacomb of St Thecla in Rome where frescos of exceptional historical and artistic value came to light, including some very ancient images of the Apostles.

Yet, while technology is extremely useful, it is not enough on its own. Truly highly qualified, competent researchers are needed first of all, who have acquired experience through advanced studies and challenging apprenticeships, together with a genuine passion for research. This must be motivated by keen interest in human, hence also religious, experience that is hidden and is later revealed by material testimonies, including, as testimonies, that is as messages which reach us from the past and, by challenging our intelligence and our awareness, help to deepen our knowledge hence ultimately also our vision of the present and of our own existence.

If this can apply to every archaeological investigation, it especially applies when Christian monuments and in particular the *martyria* are studied, the archaeological and monumental evidence that testifies to the Christian communities’ religious devotion to *a champion of exemplary faith*: a martyr.

Among the many archaeological sites in which signs of the Christian presence emerge, one is pre-eminent and arouses a unique interest: the Holy Land, with the various places on which

archaeological research has focused. The territory, already strongly marked by the presence of the people of Israel, is also becoming the environment par excellence in which to seek signs of the historical presence of Christ and of the first community of his disciples. The archaeological investigations carried out in recent decades in the Holy Land, thanks to the dedication of great and enthusiastic researchers such as, for example, Fr Bagatti, Fr Corbo and Fr Piccirillo who died recently, has led to remarkable discoveries and acquisitions, thereby contributing to defining ever better the historical and geographical coordinates of both the Judaic and the Christian presence.

Another strategic pole of the archaeological investigations is without a doubt the City of Rome and its territory in which Christian memorials are superimposed and interspersed with those of the Roman civilization. Here in Rome, and also in many other localities where Christianity had already spread in the early centuries of our epoch, it is still possible to admire and examine numerous monumental elements, starting with the *martyria* themselves, which not only attest to a generic Christian presence, but above all to a strong witness borne by Christians and by those who gave their lives for Christ: the martyrs.

Architectural monuments, particularly solemn and intricately decorated tombs, restructured passages in catacombs and even in cities, along with a wealth of other artistic elements, attest that since its origins the Christian community has wanted to exalt *champions of the faith* as models and reference points for all the baptized.

The plethora of monumental and artistic works dedicated to martyrs, documented, precisely, by archaeological investigations and by all the other associated forms of research, stems from an ever-present conviction in the Christian community, of the past as of today: the Gospel speaks to the human heart and is communicated above all through the living witness of believers. The proclamation of Christian newness, of the beauty of faith in Christ, needs people who, with the consistence of their lives, with their fidelity, witnessed if necessary even to the supreme sacrifice, demonstrate the absolute primacy of Love over any other claim. If we take a close look at the example of martyrs, at the courageous witnesses in Christian antiquity, and likewise at the many witnesses of our times, we realize that they are people who are profoundly free. They are free from compromises and selfish ties, aware of the importance and beauty of their lives and for this very reason are capable of loving God and their brethren to the point of heroism, defining the high standard of Christian holiness.

Champions of faith, far from representing a model in conflict with the world and with human realities, on the contrary proclaim and bear witness to the love of God the Father, rich in mercy and indulgence, who in the crucified Christ, the “faithful witness” (Rev 1:5), entered our history and our humanity, not to oppose or subjugate it but to transform it deeply, hence to render it capable once again of responding fully to his plan of love.

Today too, if the Church wishes to speak effectively to the world, if she wants to continue to

proclaim the Gospel faithfully and to make her friendly presence felt to men and women who live their lives feeling that they are “pilgrims of truth and of peace”, even in contexts that seem more difficult or indifferent to the proclamation of the Gospel, the Church must make herself a witness of the credibility of the faith. This means that she must be able to offer concrete and prophetic testimonies through effective and transparent signs of consistence, fidelity and passionate, unconditional love for Christ, together with authentic charity, with love of neighbour.

In the past, as in our day, the blood of the martyrs, their tangible, eloquent testimony, touches human hearts. It makes them fertile, capable of bringing forth new life within them, of welcoming the life of the Risen One in order to take resurrection and hope to the surrounding world.

For the very purpose of encouraging those who wish to contribute to the promotion and realization of a new Christian humanism, through archaeological and historical research, accepting the proposal formulated by the Coordination Council, I am pleased to award *ex aequo* the Prize of the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academies to the *Studium Biblicum Franciscanum* of Jerusalem and to Dr Daria Mastrorilli.

Further, as a sign of appreciation and encouragement, I would like the Medal of the Pontificate to be awarded to Dr Cecilia Proverbio.

Lastly, I wish them an ever more enthusiastic commitment in their respective fields, as I entrust each one to the motherly protection of the Virgin Mary, Queen of Martyrs, and warmly impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you, Your Eminence, and to all those present.

From the Vatican, 30 November 2011

BENEDICTUS PP XVI