



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI  
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE 56TH NATIONAL STUDY CONGRESS  
ORGANIZED BY THE UNION OF ITALIAN CATHOLIC JURISTS**

Hall of Blessings

Saturday, 9 December 2006

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Welcome to this meeting which is taking place in the context of your National Study Congress dedicated to the theme: *"The Secularization of the Laity"*.

I address my cordial greeting to each one of you, starting with Prof. Francesco D'Agostino, President of your praiseworthy Association. I am also grateful to him for expressing your common sentiments and for briefly describing the aims of your social and apostolic action.

The Congress is addressing the lay state, a theme of great interest because it highlights how secularity in the contemporary world may be understood in various ways: there is not only one lay state but there are several or rather many ways of understanding and living secularity that are sometimes in opposition to one another and even contradictory.

Dedicating these days to the examination of secularity and the different ways in which it may be understood and put into practice has led you into the heart of the discussion under way, which is proving particularly useful to the legal profession.

In order to understand the authentic meaning of the lay state and to explain how it is understood in our day, it is essential to keep in mind the historical development of this concept.

In the Middle Ages, "secularity", a term coined to describe the condition of the ordinary lay Christian who belonged neither to the clerical nor to the religious state, inferred opposition between the civil powers and the ecclesiastical hierarchies; in modern times, it has come to mean

the exclusion of religion and its symbols from public life by confining them to the private sphere and to the individual conscience.

So it is that an ideological understanding has come to be attributed to the term "secularity", which is the opposite of its original meaning.

Indeed, secularity is commonly perceived today as the exclusion of religion from social contexts and as the boundary of the individual conscience.

Secularity would be expressed in the total separation between the State and the Church, since the latter is in no way entitled to intervene in areas that concern the life and conduct of citizens; secularity would even entail the exclusion of religious symbols from public places designated for the proper functions of the political community: offices, schools, courts, hospitals, prisons, etc.

On the basis of these different ways of conceiving secularity, people today speak of secular thought, secular morals, secular knowledge and secular politics. Indeed, on the basis of such concepts, an a-religious vision of life, thought and morals exists: a vision in which there is no room for God, for a Mystery that transcends pure reason, for a moral law of absolute worth, in force in every time and every situation.

Only if we realize this can we assess the consequences of the problems inherent in a term such as "secularity", which seems almost to have become the qualifying emblem of post-modernity and especially of modern democracy.

It is therefore the task of all believers, particularly believers in Christ, to help formulate a concept of secularity which, on the one hand, acknowledges the place that is due to God and his moral law, to Christ and to his Church in human life, both individual and social; and on the other, affirms and respects the *"rightful autonomy of earthly affairs"*, if by this phrase, as the Second Vatican Council reaffirms, is meant man's *"gradual discovery, exploitation and ordering of the laws and values of matter and society"* (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 36).

Such autonomy is "perfectly in order: it is at once the claim of modern man and the desire of the Creator. By the very nature of creation, material being is endowed with its own stability, truth and excellence, its own order and laws. These man must respect as he recognizes the methods proper to every science and technique" (*ibid.*).

If, instead, the words *"rightful autonomy of earthly affairs"* mean that *"material being does not depend on God and that man can use it as if it had no relation to its Creator"*, then the fallacy of such a claim will be obvious to anyone who believes in God and his transcendent presence in the world he created (cf. *ibid.*).

This conciliar assertion constitutes the doctrinal basis for that "healthy secularity" which involves the effective autonomy of earthly realities, not indeed from the moral order but from the ecclesiastical sphere. Thus, the Church cannot point out the preferred political and social order; it is the people who must freely decide on the best and most suitable ways to organize political life.

Any direct intervention from the Church in this area would be undue interference. Moreover, "healthy secularism" implies that the State does not consider religion merely as an individual sentiment that may be confined to the private sphere alone.

On the contrary, since religion is also organized in visible structures, as is the case with the Church, it should be recognized as a form of public community presence. This also implies that every religious denomination (provided it is neither in opposition to the moral order nor a threat to public order) be guaranteed the free exercise of the activities of worship - spiritual, cultural, educational and charitable - of the believing community.

In the light of these considerations, this is certainly not an expression of secularity, but its degeneration into secularism, hostility to every important political and cultural form of religion; and especially to the presence of any religious symbol in public institutions.

Likewise, to refuse the Christian community and its legitimate representatives the right to speak on the moral problems that challenge all human consciences today, and especially those of legislators and jurists, is not a sign of a healthy secularity.

Thus, it is not a question of undue meddling by the Church in legislative activity that is proper and exclusive to the State but, rather, of the affirmation and defence of the important values that give meaning to the person's life and safeguard his or her dignity. These values are human before being Christian, such that they cannot leave the Church silent and indifferent. It is her duty to firmly proclaim the truth about man and his destiny.

Dear jurists, we are living in an exalted historical period because of the breakthroughs that humanity has achieved in many areas of law, culture, communications, science and technology. In this same period, however, there are attempts by some people to exclude God from every sphere of life and present him as man's enemy.

It is up to us as Christians to show, on the contrary, that God is love and wants the good and happiness of all human beings. It is our task to make people understand that the moral law given to us by him and manifested to us by the voice of our conscience does not aim to oppress us but rather to set us free from evil and make us happy.

It is a matter of showing that without God man is lost, and that the exclusion of religion from social life - and the marginalization of Christianity in particular - undermines the very foundations of

human coexistence. Indeed, before being social and political, these foundations are of a moral order.

As I thank you once again, dear friends, for your visit today, I invoke the motherly protection of Mary upon you and upon your Association.

With these sentiments, I warmly impart to you all a special Apostolic Blessing that I willingly extend to your families and your loved ones.

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