



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO LECTURERS AND STUDENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PARMA***

Hall of Blessings

Monday, 1 December 2008

Mr Rector,

Distinguished Professors,

Dear Students and Members of the Administrative and Technical Staff,

I am pleased to welcome you to this meeting with which you have wished to commemorate the ancient roots of the Athenaeum of Parma, and I am particularly pleased that, referring exactly to that period of your origins, you chose as a representative figure St Peter Damian, the 1,000th anniversary of whose birth we have just celebrated and who was first a student and then a teacher at schools in Parma. I cordially greet Prof. Gino Ferretti, and I thank him for his courteous words expressing the sentiments of all those present. I am delighted to see together with you Bishop Enrico Solmi of Parma, as well as the other political and military Authorities. My sincere welcome to you all, professors, students and members of the administrative and technical staff.

As you know, the university was my area of work for a number of years and even after leaving it I have never stopped keeping up with it and feeling spiritually attached to it. I have often had the opportunity to speak at various athenaeums, and I also clearly remember coming to Parma, in 1990, when I gave a reflection on the "ways of the faith" in the midst of the changes of the present time (cf. *Svolta per l'Europa?*, Pauline Press 1991, pp. 65-89). Today I would like briefly to consider with you the "lesson" that St Peter Damian has bequeathed to us, taking up several of his ideas that are particularly relevant to the university environment of our day.

Last year, on the occasion of the liturgical memorial of the Great Hermit, 20 February, I sent a Letter to the Order of Camaldolese Hermits in which I shed light on how especially applicable the central feature of his personality is to our time: in other words, the felicitous synthesis between the eremitical life and pastoral activity, the harmonious tension between the two fundamental poles of

human existence: solitude and communion (*Message to Fr Guido Innocenzo Gargano, o.s.b. cam., for the centenary of the Birth of St Peter Damian*, 20 February 2007). Those who, like you, dedicate their time to advanced studies for their whole life or in their youth cannot fail to be sensitive to this spiritual heritage of St Peter Damian. Due mainly to the spread of the new computer technologies the young generations are increasingly exposed to a double risk: on the one hand, there is the danger of seeing the capacity for concentration and mental application at the personal level progressively reduced; on the other, that of individual isolation into a reality that is increasingly virtual. Thus the social dimension has been shattered into smithereens while the personal dimension withdraws into the self and tends to be closed to constructive relations with others or with those who are different. Instead, the University, by its very nature, lives precisely the fine balance between the individual moment and that of the community, between the research and reflection of each one and sharing and exchange that is open to others in a tendentially universal dimension.

Like that of Peter Damian, our epoch is also marked by forms of particularism and uncertainty, by the lack of unifying principles (cf. *ibid.*). Academic studies must undoubtedly contribute to qualify the formative level of society, not only at the level of scientific research strictly speaking but also, more in general, offering youth the possibility to mature intellectually, morally and civilly with the important questions that challenge the conscience of contemporary man.

History lists Peter Damian among the great "reformers" of the Church after the year 1,000. We can call him the soul of the Gregorian Reform that took its name from Pope St Gregory vii, Hildebrand of Soana, whose close collaborator Peter Damian had been since the time when, before he was elected Bishop of Rome, he was Archdeacon of this Church (cf. *ibid.*, 20 February 2007). However, what is the genuine concept of reform? One fundamental aspect that we may find in the writings and, especially, in the personal witness of Peter Damian is that every authentic reform must first of all be spiritual and moral, in other words, it must be born in the conscience. Today, in Italy too, there is often talk of university reform. I think, having duly weighed the pros and cons, that this teaching always remains valid. Structural and technical modifications are effectively efficient if they are accompanied by a serious examination of conscience on the part of those in charge at all levels but more generally, of each teacher, each student, each member of the technical and administrative personnel. We know that Peter Damian was very strict with himself and his monks, very demanding in discipline. If one wants a human milieu to improve in quality and effectiveness, it is first necessary that each one start by reforming himself, correcting anything that may damage the common good or hinder it in some way.

Connected with the concept of reform, I would also like to highlight that of freedom. In fact, the goal of St Peter Damian and his contemporaries' reforming endeavours was to ensure that the Church might become freer, first of all at the spiritual level, but then also historically speaking. Likewise, the validity of a University reform can only be proven by its freedom: freedom in teaching, freedom in research, the academic institution's freedom from the economic and political

authorities. This does not imply the University's isolation from society, nor self-reference nor, even less, the use of public funds to pursue private interests. This is certainly not Christian freedom! Truly free, according to the Gospel and the tradition of the Church, is the person, community and institution that fully respond to their nature and aims, and the vocation of the University is people's scientific and cultural training for the development of the social and civil community as a whole.

Dear friends, I thank you because with your visit, in addition to the pleasure of meeting you, you have given me an opportunity to reflect on the timeliness of St Peter Damian at the end of the millennial celebrations in his honour. I wish you all the best for the scientific and pedagogical activities of your Athenaeum and I pray that despite its now considerable size it may always strive to be a *universitas studiorum* in which each one may recognize and express himself as a person, taking part in the "symphonic" search for the truth. To this end, I encourage the university's present pastoral initiatives, as they are always a precious service to the human and spiritual formation of youth. And in this context, I also hope that the historic Church of St Francesco al Prato may soon be re-opened for worship, for the benefit of the University and the whole city. May St Peter Damian and the Blessed Virgin Mary intercede for all these things and may you also be accompanied by my Blessing which I willingly impart to you, to all your colleagues and to your dear ones.

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