



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE MEMBERS OF THE PONTIFICAL COMMITTEE
FOR HISTORICAL SCIENCES***

*Hall of Popes
Friday, 7 March 2008*

*Reverend Monsignor,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,*

I am pleased to address a special word of greeting and appreciation to you for the work you do in an area of great importance for the life of the Church. I congratulate your President and each one of you on the progress made these years.

As you well know, it was Leo XIII who, faced with a historiography influenced by the spirit of his time and hostile to the Church, pronounced this famous phrase: "We do not fear the publication of documents", and made the Archives of the Holy See accessible for research. At the same time he created a commission of Cardinals for the promotion of historical studies that you, professors, can consider as a forerunner of the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences, of which you are members. Leo XIII was convinced of the fact that the study and presentation of the Church's authentic history could only prove favourable to her.

Since then, the cultural context has undergone a profound change. It is not concerned solely in facing a historiography hostile to Christianity and the Church. Today, it is historiography itself that is undergoing the most serious crisis, having to fight for its very existence in a society shaped by positivism and materialism. Both of these ideologies have led to an unrestrained enthusiasm for progress which, animated by spectacular discoveries and technological success notwithstanding the disastrous experiences of the last century, determines the concept of life in vast sectors of society. Thus, the past appears only as a dark background against which the present and the future shine with alluring promises. Still linked to this is the utopia of a paradise on earth,

notwithstanding the fact that such a utopia has proved fallacious.

Disinterest in history is typical of this mentality, which turns into the marginalization of historical sciences. Where these strong ideologies are active, historical research and the teaching of history in universities and at every grade and level of education are neglected. This produces a society that, forgetful of its own past and therefore unequipped with criteria acquired through experience, is unable to programme a harmonious coexistence and a common commitment in accomplishing future objectives. Such a society is particularly vulnerable to ideological manipulation.

The danger increases in proportion to the excessive emphasis given to contemporary history, above all when research in this area is conditioned by a methodology inspired by positivism and sociology. Likewise, important areas of historic reality and even entire epochs are ignored. In many fields of study, for example, history is taught only beginning with the events of the French Revolution. This development inevitably produces a society ignorant of its own past and therefore deprived of historical memory. No one can fail to see the grave consequence of this: as the loss of memory provokes a loss of identity in the individual, this phenomenon analogously occurs for society as a whole.

Thus, it is evident how historical oblivion bears a danger for the integrity of human nature in all its dimensions. The Church, called by God the Creator to fulfil the duty of defending mankind and its humanity, has at heart an authentic historical culture, the effective progress of historical sciences. Indeed, high-level historical research also concerns the specific interest of the Church in a strict sense. Even when it does not precisely concern Church history, historical analysis commonly concurs with the description of that vital space in which the Church has carried out, and carries out, her mission down the ages. Undoubtedly, her life and ecclesial activity have always been determined, facilitated or made more difficult by the various historical contexts. The Church is not of this world, but lives in it and by means of it.

Now let us take into consideration Church history from the theological viewpoint, highlighting another important aspect. Its essential duty, in fact, turns out to be the complex mission to investigate and clarify that process of reception and transmission, of *paralépsis* and of *paràdosis*, through which was substantiated, in the course of the ages, the Church's *raison d'être*. Indeed, it is beyond a doubt that the Church can draw inspiration for her choices by drawing on her centuries-old treasury of experience and memory.

Therefore, distinguished Members of the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences, I wholeheartedly wish to encourage you to commit yourselves as you have done up to the present to the Holy See's service in reaching these objectives, persevering in your daily and meritorious commitment to research and teaching. My hope is that, in harmony with the activities of other serious and expert colleagues, you will be able to effectively carry out the difficult objectives that you have set for yourselves and work for an ever more authentic historical science.

With these sentiments and the assurance of a remembrance of you and your delicate task in my prayer, I impart a special Apostolic Blessing to all.