



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE DELEGATES OF THE INTER AGENCY CONSULTATIVE GROUP

7 November 1986

Distinguished Men and Women of Science,

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*1. It is my great pleasure to extend a cordial welcome to all of you this morning. I am honoured first of all by the presence of the distinguished Delegates of the Inter Agency Consultative Group who are meeting in Rome at the invitation of the President of the International Center for Relativistic Astrophysics. I am also pleased to greet the esteemed experts engaged in the study of this scientific undertaking. My respectful greeting also goes to the Cardinals here present and to the members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, who have joined us and who give this occasion a special solemnity. I wish to commend this splendid initiative which brings you together and which seeks to foster ever more effective international collaboration in the space sciences. It is indeed a kind of celebration of scientific cooperation, a celebration which can offer hope to men and women of science, as well as to all people of good will, as they seek to identify those areas of knowledge and concern which unite the human family rather than divide it. The participation of the Vatican Observatory serves to illustrate the desire of the Church to encourage these worthy endeavours and to contribute, as far as possible, to the realization of the noble goal of harmonious human coexistence, in the achieving of which science can play an active and vital part.2. Many means have been employed in the search for lasting peace in our world. These include negotiations, political compromise and economic bargaining. Recently at Assisi I proposed to the world that peace must be sought through another means, namely through prayer, "which, in a diversity of religions, expresses a relationship with a supreme power that surpasses our human capacities alone". There is yet another way, one that we commemorate today, namely, that collaboration in a scientific endeavour which transcends all national boundaries and requires knowledge and dedication to science and technology by men and women of many nations, races and creeds. Last week, in commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, I spoke of the great esteem which the Church has for scientists, not only for their intellectual prowess, but also for their moral character, their intellectual honesty and objectivity, their self-disciplined search for truth, their desire to serve mankind, and their respect for the mysteries of the universe which they explore. As an example of this kind of scientist I would like to recall today the late Giuseppe Colombo, beloved member of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, who encouraged a unique way of exploring the material from which our own solar system was formed: a space mission to Halley's Comet at its approach to the Earth earlier this year. He proposed this project from one of the world's oldest universities, located in the city of Padua, where the modern scientific era had its beginning through the research and

teaching of such great scientists as Galileo Galilei and Giovan Battista Morgagni. Near that University – in the Cappella degli Scrovegni – Giotto, from his vivid memory of an early passage of the comet, depicted it as the star of Bethlehem in his painting of the Adoration of the Magi. It was in this setting that your Inter Agency Consultative Group was formed in 1981 and began the planning of the now famous space mission to Halley's Comet. This "Padua Group" made the dream of Giuseppe Colombo come true. I congratulate you not only for the progress you have thus made in the understanding of the physical, chemical, and astrophysical, aspects of this comet, but also for the example you have set by this dedicated collaboration. It is an impressive achievement that so many scientists and so many means have been employed in a realtime collaboration over the whole surface of the earth in order to obtain scientific results from space.³

It is a source of pride for all of us to realize that in just four decades, with the collaboration of government leaders and politicians, scientists have redirected the space technologies, which saw their first rudimentary steps in the horrors of the Second World War, towards the exploration of God's universe. Through your dedicated efforts, based on high moral standards, you have brought space science from systems carrying death to systems designed for the peaceful pursuit of knowledge: on issues ranging from the largescale structures of the universe, to the life and death of stars, to the analysis of our own planet Earth. As part of your collaboration, from Kagoshima, in Japan, only a short distance from Nagasaki, the world witnessed the beautiful lift-off into space of the two satellites "Sakigake" and "Suisei". Through the efforts of the people of the Soviet Union, which also had been sorely tested by the horrors of World War II, there were developed and launched the "Vega I" and "Vega II" satellites, first directed to Venus and then deployed in your comet mission. In a truly remarkable collaboration of your agencies, the Deep Space Network of the United States of America was then able to use those four satellites in order to direct the course of the European space probe "Giotto" to be aimed very accurately at its encounter with the comet. This is one example among many in which you and your colleagues, through your talent and courage, have shown the way to the collaborative exploration of the marvels of the universe. I hope and pray that all of the scientists and engineers in your space agencies will continue to work together in your explorations and thus merit to be called peacemakers, in addition to your other worthy titles. As we celebrate this day of achievement, let us all remember the brave men and women who have courageously given their lives for the conquest of space, in an effort to reach beyond the horizon.⁴

I take the opportunity of this solemn occasion, when you are all gathered here together, to beg you to continue in the direction of peace and harmony which has characterized the progress of the space mission which we commemorate today, and to renew your efforts to avoid any possibility that space technology would ever become any type of hostile endeavour. The pictures which space missions have transmitted back to earth, some examples of which we have seen today, show us how small and delicate the planet Earth is, and indeed how tiny the planetary system itself is, in comparison with our galaxy and with the immensity of the universe. Yet we live in a very special moment. Using the talents given by God, people of science have been able to develop unprecedented means of obtaining knowledge. Extraordinary means of transportation and communication have been developed. Computers have reached capacities and speeds previously unimaginable. Serious plans can now be made for space stations, space colonies, and for manned missions to planets as far away as Mars. Scientists and technologists are developing the possibilities of making the whole planetary system a home for the human family. But all of these developments will lead to truly significant results only if they are employed within the frame-work of a new humanism, where spiritual, moral, philosophical, aesthetic, and scientific values are developed in harmony, and where there is a profound respect for the freedom and rights of the human person. May your work continue to be an inspiration for all humanity and may governments devote their political power to guarantee that the new era of the "planetary system as the house of man" will be for the spiritual and material well-being of all humanity.⁵

I wish to express my gratitude to you for the book "Encounter '86", which you have presented to me and for the explanation which you have given of the photographs which it contains.

I compliment you on this achievement and thank you for sharing it with me. I also wish you to know how much I appreciate your field of science, and how much I admire the contribution that you are making to it. Your science opens up to man so many of the wonders of the universe, and leads him in a new and deeper way to be aware of its greatness. Your scientific research and discoveries are likewise capable of becoming effective instruments for a more profound understanding of man, for whose well-being the whole adventure of science is conducted. In penetrating the depths of the universe with its laws and marvellous secrets, science leads man to understand the incomparable level of his own greatness. And it is precisely at this point that man can perceive ever more dearly his dependence on the Creator and the centrality of his own role in relation to the universe. The greatest glory of the universe is to lead man to a true perception of himself as he grasps the reflection at the Creator in nature. And in this perception of himself, he is led to acknowledge and adore the glory and majesty of God. The majesty of God, the dignity of man and the beauty and order of the universe are all linked in the discoveries of science. May the Lord of heaven and earth bless you and strengthen you in all your work for the good of man, who is made in his own image and likeness. © Copyright 1986 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

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