



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE GRAND CHANCELLOR OF THE PONTIFICAL INSTITUTE
OF CHRISTIAN ARCHAEOLOGY**

To my Venerable Brother Zeno Grocholewski

Grand Chancellor of the Pontifical Institute of Christian Archaeology

1. The happy occurrence of the 75th anniversary of the Pontifical Institute of Christian Archaeology gives me the pleasant opportunity to extend a cordial greeting to you, to the teaching staff, to the collaborators and to the students. I would also like to express my keen appreciation of the precious cultural activity the Institute has carried out over the past decades; and which it is continuing to carry out through numerous studies, meetings, discussions and publications.

Today you are solemnly commemorating the *Motu proprio "I primitivi cemeteri"*, with which Pope Pius XI, of venerable memory, established this research and formation centre. I would like to extend to you all the assurance of my spiritual closeness and my warmest encouragement to continue in your service to all who have at heart the knowledge and study of the Christian community's wealth of historical memorials.

The caring concern with which my venerable Predecessor, Pius XI, following in the footsteps of so many other Popes, wished to promote the preservation and knowledge of the vast archaeological heritage of the Church of Rome, fits in well with the sacred Pastors' duty to gather with the greatest of care the testimonies of faith and the riches of art, liturgy and theology which flow from the great river of Revelation like countless rivulets through the history of Christianity. This task acquires a special value at the beginning of this new millennium. The celebration of the Great Jubilee of the Incarnation of the Son of God has given new strength to the community of believers that is determined to continue with renewed faith its work of evangelization for all humanity.

2. "*Sanguis martyrum, semen christianorum*" Tertullian affirmed (*Apol.* 50, 13), to show how the fruitfulness of unconditional adherence to Christ had contributed to the construction of that magnificent living building which is, precisely, the Church. This testimony, also expressed through the multiform variety of literary, architectural and pictorial monuments, created in so many centuries, is an eloquent vestige of the countless "unknown militants" of God's great

cause. The community of the faithful cannot allow this rich spiritual heritage to be lost.

I am pleased to recall in this regard what my Predecessor, St Damasus, whose liturgical commemoration we are celebrating today, recommended to the faithful: he urged them to revere those places which preserved the relics of those who "*Christum per astra secuti ... aetherios petiere sinus et regna piorum*" (*Carm. IX, PL 13, 382-383*). Knowledge of the heritage of past Christian generations enables those who follow to remain faithful to the *depositum* received, so that the one saving and life-giving Gospel can ring out in every time and place.

The vast literary, cultural and academic activity which your praiseworthy institute has been carrying out for 75 years, as well as its intense work of conservation and making known the monuments of Christian Rome, have made valuable contributions to the Church in the liturgical, patristic, hagiographical, canonical, and theological fields, as well as in the context of sacred building.

3. If the principal purpose of the Institute of Christian Archaeology is the study of the remains of ecclesial life down the centuries, we should not forget its beneficial influence in the investigation of the traces left by other ancient cultures, which contributed to the birth and development of expressive Christian forms from its beginning. The institute's academic activity thus entered into close scientific dialogue with those who study the civilizations of the first Christian millennium, contributing further knowledge and receiving from it valuable instruction, in a relationship of cordial and fruitful osmosis. I fervently hope that the atmosphere of serene comparison of the past decades will continue and will help to develop an attitude of sincere seeking for the truth. Indeed, it is possible to attain precious scientific and human goals, overcoming a superficial attitude in the approach to events and deeds which certainly bear in the depths of their structure traces of the passions, ideals, errors and concepts of those who made them. And thanks to the freedom, honesty, perseverance and humility of today's researchers, an investigation can be undertaken which is capable of attaining ever deeper knowledge of what antiquity has bequeathed to us.

4. Next to the scientific results which are also important, your institute can likewise make a useful contribution to the knowledge and deepening of the faith. Indeed, the study of the "traces of the People of God" facilitates reflection on the contents of faith and on the lively process of their inculturation spanning many centuries. From this it can be seen that the Church is truly held up as a sign among the nations, made up of those "whom the Lord has blessed" (*Is 61: 9*).

I offer you my best wishes that the timely celebration of the anniversary of the Institute of Christian Archaeology, an effective academic instrument which supports the work of the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archeology, may be for the young generation a cause of renewed interest in the study of the noble tradition which so many Christians have left us as a testament of their adherence to Christ.

As I wish every success to the organizers, relators and participants of this significant event, I entrust each one to Mary, Mother of the Church, and cordially impart, as a pledge of my constant good wishes, a special Apostolic Blessing to you, venerable Brother, to the Prelates, to the scholars and to all who will be taking part in the commemorative event.

From the Vatican, 11 December 2000, memorial of Pope St Damasus.

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