



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE MEMBERS OF THE PLENARY MEETING  
OF THE PONTIFICAL COMMISSION  
FOR SACRED ARCHAEOLOGY**

*Saturday, 9 June 2001*

I wish to greet each one of you, who participate in the plenary meeting of the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology. Today you visit me at the end of two intense days dedicated to an in-depth study of your activity during the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000.

I affectionately greet Bishop Francesco Marchisano, your President, and thank him for his kind words on your behalf. I also thank him for having shown me the theme of your meeting: The Christian catacombs of Italy and the Holy Year: the balance of a pilgrimage.

You made a big contribution to the success of the Jubilee Year that has drawn so much attention in the world. Thank you for your service; thank you for the love and expertise with which you continue to work to make the Christian catacombs of Rome and Italy places of new evangelization, of prayer and cultural promotion for pilgrims of the whole world.

2. Faithful to the institutional goals of your Commission, on the occasion of the Holy Year you decided to facilitate the pilgrimage of the devoted and make the catacombs that are open to the public more welcoming.

These two objectives were kept present in the creation of various itineraries inside the Roman catacombs of St Callistus, St Sebastian, Domitilla, Priscilla and St Agnes, in the works of lighting and restoration done at Rome and in other catacombs of Italian territories. Almost at the end of the holy year there was the very important restoration of the exterior of the splendid Basilica of Sts Nero and Achilles in the catacombs of Domitilla. Here it is possible to relive the spiritual atmosphere that was breathed in the first centuries of the Christian era.

This event also enriches that monumental patrimony which represents the most concrete and tangible testimony of the world of the catacombs, where the first Christians set up a new funeral system, burying the faithful in tombs which were alike, humble and sober, to indicate equality and a sense of community.

3. Visiting the catacombs, the pilgrim can return in his mind to the acts of the first Christians, who organized a kind of "common fund" to assure a worthy burial to all the brethren, including widows, orphans and the poor. They based this choice on the value of solidarity and even more on charity.

The structure of the catacombs highlights the profound rootedness of those first brothers in the faith in these values: as the word *coemeteria* indicates, they are presented as great common dormitories, where all, independently of their status or profession, rest in a spiritual embrace, were awaiting the final Resurrection.

In the shadows of the catacombs, the visitors' attention is drawn to those simple tombs, all the same, closed with marble or stone pieces, which are only marked by the names of the deceased. In many cases, even this simple identification is absent, as if to underline, through anonymity, the equality of the *hospites*. This may also be shown with symbols: the anchor, which expresses the security of faith; the fish, that alludes to Christ the Saviour and the dove that recalls the simplicity and candour of the soul, expressions of the common faith.

4. Next to the simple faithful, in the catacombs there were many tombs of martyrs from the persecution of Decius, Valerian and Diocletian. These martyrs were immediately venerated by the first Christians. On their tombs, as on those of the Popes and saints of the first centuries, pilgrims coming from distant regions of the Mediterranean and Northern Europe left their names. These graffiti, extremely precious for the study of ecclesial prayer, certify the uninterrupted veneration to the present day.

Dear brothers and sisters! The rich patrimony of faith, art and culture, represented by the catacombs, finds in your Pontifical Commission of Sacred Archaeology an expert custodian, respectful of the goals of piety and zealous in facilitating knowledge and easy access. I am delighted by your efforts to open other catacombs, like those of St Lorenzo al Verano, and despite difficulties and a complex situation, of St Pancratius and Sts Marcellinus and Peter. In encouraging your valuable and generous work, I hope that these efforts will soon be crowned with success.

Besides giving the historian or student of ancient monuments a significant trace of the first Christian centuries, you offer a useful service to the new evangelization. The modern pilgrim, often bewildered and doubtful, in retracing the paths of the early Christians and experiencing their acts of devotion, can easily be led to rediscover his own religious identity and decide with renewed enthusiasm to follow Christ, as did many martyrs of the first Christian centuries.

Thank you for your collaboration in proclaiming Christ to the people of our time. May the Lord fill your hearts with the ardour of the saints and Martyrs, whom you contribute to making known and honoured.

As I entrust each of you and your dear ones to the heavenly protection of the Mother of God, I impart to you a special Apostolic Blessing.