



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II TO THE MEMBERS, CONSULTORS AND STAFF OF THE PONTIFICAL COMMISSION FOR THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE CHURCH

Friday, 31 March 2000 *Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and the Priesthood,*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*1. I am pleased to welcome each of you, members of the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church, who are gathered in these days for your plenary assembly. I affectionately greet you all! In particular I greet your President, Archbishop Francesco Marchisano, and thank him for his courteous words presenting the Commission's work and viewpoints, mentioning among other things the Jubilee of Artists. Its preparation intensely involved this dicastery and its successful celebration gave me great joy. With the many artists who came to St Peter's Basilica, I was able in some way to continue with the spoken word that dialogue I began in the [*Letter to Artists*](#).2. Your plenary assembly, which has chosen as its theme "*The Cultural Heritage in the Context of the New Evangelization*", fits well into the framework of the Great Jubilee, in harmony with its primary purpose which is to proclaim Christ anew 2,000 years after his birth.

In your assembly's work, on the basis of the considerable efforts made by your Commission in recent years, you first sought to conform the concept of "cultural heritage" to the *mens* of the Church; you then focused your attention on the enormous artistic-historical patrimony in existence, identifying the state of protection and preservation with a view to its pastoral utilization; you were also concerned with training workers and making timely contacts with artists in their different fields. The path commendably undertaken must be continued, and today I would like to encourage you to spare no effort in ensuring that the examples of culture and art entrusted to the Church's care are ever better appreciated, at the service of true human progress and of spreading the Gospel.3. In fact, the cultural heritage in its multiple forms - from churches to the most varied monuments, from museums to archives and libraries - is a far from negligible component in the Church's mission of evangelization and human advancement. Christian art in particular, an extremely important "cultural asset", continues to render an extraordinary service by powerfully communicating the history of the Covenant between God and man and the wealth of the revealed message through the beauty of tangible forms. In the two millennia of the Christian era, it has marvellously depicted the fervour of so many confessors of the faith; it has expressed the awareness of God's presence among believers, and has supported the praise that the Church raises to her Lord from every corner of the earth. The cultural heritage has proven to be a remarkable record of the various moments in this great spiritual history. The Church, moreover, as an expert in humanity, uses the cultural heritage for the *promotion of an authentic humanism* modeled on Christ, the "new" man who reveals man to himself (cf. [*Gaudium et spes*](#), n. 22). Therefore it should not be surprising that the particular Churches are dedicated to *encouraging the preservation* of their artistic and

cultural heritage through ordinary and extraordinary interventions which enable them to be fully utilized.⁴ The Church *not only preserves her past; she above all offers inspiration for the present life of the human community*, with a view to building its future. She therefore continuously adds to her cultural patrimony in order to respond to the needs of every era and culture and is also concerned to hand on all that has been achieved to future generations, so that they too can drink deeply from the great river of the *traditio Ecclesiae*. *Precisely in this perspective, the multiple expressions of sacred art should be developed in harmony with the mens of the Church and at the service of her mission, using a language capable of proclaiming God's kingdom to everyone.* In planning their pastoral projects, therefore, the local Churches should not fail to make appropriate use of their own cultural heritage. Indeed, the latter has a unique capacity to spur people to a greater perception of spiritual values and, by testifying in various ways to God's presence in human history and the Church's life, they prepare souls to accept the newness of the Gospel. Moreover, by offering beauty, which by nature speaks a universal language, the Church is certainly helped in her task of reaching out to all people in a climate of respect and mutual tolerance, in accordance with the spirit of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue.⁵ The new evangelization requires a renewed commitment to liturgical worship, which is also a rich source of instruction for the faithful (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 33). As everyone knows, worship has always found a natural ally in art, because monuments of sacred art have a catechetical and cultic significance in addition to their intrinsic aesthetic value. It is therefore necessary to make the most of them, taking into account their liturgical "habitat", combining respect for history with attention to the current needs of the Christian community and ensuring that the artistic-historical patrimony at the service of the liturgy loses nothing of its eloquence.⁶ It will also be necessary to continue cultivating the *juridical preservation* of this patrimony among the different ecclesial institutions and civil bodies, by working in a spirit of collaboration with the various State authorities and maintaining contacts with those who manage cultural assets and with artists in various fields. A great help in this regard will be dialogue with associations that protect, preserve and enhance cultural assets, as well as with volunteer groups. It is the particular responsibility of your office to urge all who are directly or indirectly involved in this sector to *sentire cum Ecclesia*, so that each one can make his own specific work a precious contribution to the Church's evangelizing mission.⁷ Dear brothers and sisters, I cordially thank you for your work and for your contribution to the preservation and full utilization of the Church's artistic heritage. I ardently hope that it will be an ever more effective way to bring those who are still distant closer to the Gospel message and to foster in Christians that love of beauty which opens the spirit to truth and goodness. I invoke Mary's motherly protection on your efforts and gladly assure you of a remembrance to the Lord for all your intentions. I cordially bless you and everyone who generously works with you.

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